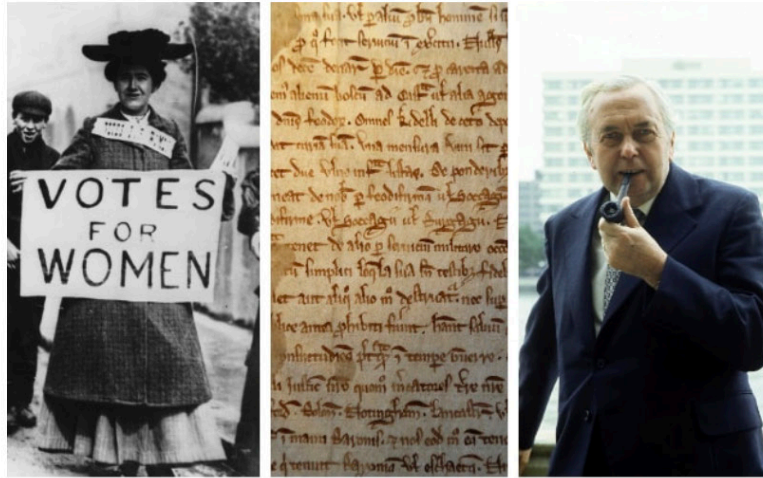


From Magna Carta to universal suffrage, the 1000-year history of British democracy

5 Comments



Universal suffrage, the Magna Carta and Harold Wilson

Tom Chivers

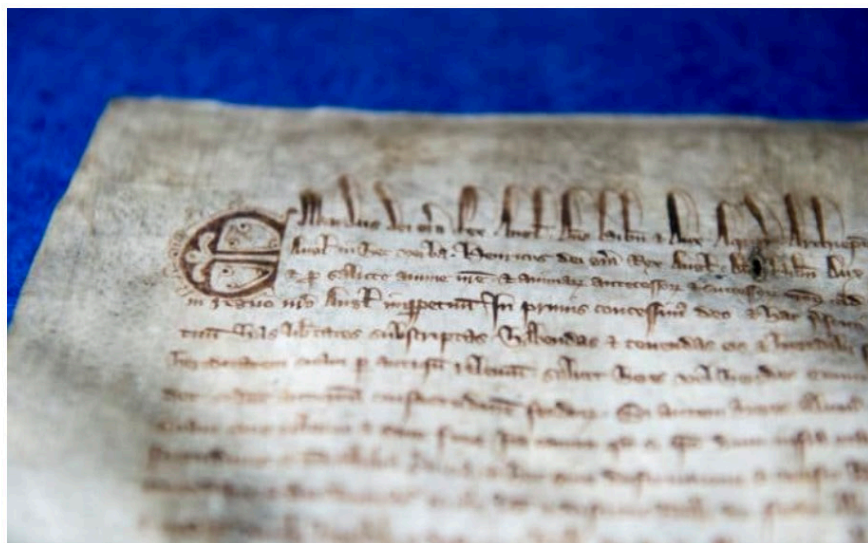
1 June 2017

The Telegraph

1215: Magna Carta

The Great Charter is most famous for consolidating judicial rights, notably habeas corpus, the right not to be unlawfully imprisoned.

However, it was also an important first step in removing power from the central authority - King John - and spreading it wider.



Westminster Abbey's copy of Magna Carta (1300) Credit: Paul Grover

Its 61st clause, known as the Security Clause, declared that a council of 25 barons be created with the power to overrule the will of the King, by force if necessary.

This was repealed angrily by the King shortly afterwards, and mediaeval rulers largely ignored the document altogether, but it became an early foundation of England's - and later the United Kingdom's - unwritten constitution.

1376: The first Speaker of the House of Commons is appointed

An English Parliament had existed since late in the 13th century, and had been divided into two houses since 1341, with knights and burgesses sitting in what became known as the House of Commons while clergy and nobility sat in the House of Lords.



Commons Speaker John Bercow Credit: PA

However, its duties largely consisted of ratifying taxes for the Crown. In 1376, Peter de la Mare was appointed to go to the King with complaints about taxation, and the Commons for the first time impeached some of the King's ministers.

While de la Mare was imprisoned for his actions, the House created the position of Speaker to represent the Commons permanently.

1688: The Great Revolution

The Civil War a few years before had removed the monarchy, and then reinstated it in a weakened form, setting the stage for the attenuated 'constitutional monarchy' that we have today.



The Prince of Orange, William III, embarked from Holland and landed at Torbay in 1688 Credit: Alamy

But it was the arrival of William of Orange from Holland to take the throne from James II which led to the creation of the Bill of Rights, constitutionally preventing absolute rule by the Kings and Queens of Great Britain to this day, and leaving Parliament as the true seat of power in the country.

1832: The Reform Act



Democracy of sorts had existed in England for centuries - as far back as 1432, Henry VI passed statues declaring who was eligible to vote (male owners of land worth at least 40 shillings, or a freehold property - perhaps half a million people nationwide).

However, the counties and boroughs that sent Members to Parliament were of wildly differing size.

The county of Yorkshire had more than 20,000 people, and the borough of Westminster had around 12,000, but they only sent one representative to the Commons - as did, for example, Dunwich, which had 32 voters, or Gatton, which had seven.

The Reform Act increased enfranchisement to over a million, or about one in six of all adult males, by allowing men who rented property above a certain value to vote too.

It also tore up the mediaeval boundaries of counties and boroughs, giving more equitable representation for the cities that had sprung up since the Industrial Revolution. A second Act, in 1837, enfranchised all male householders, regardless of value.

1913: Emily Davison's 'Derby' death



Campaigns for women's suffrage go as far back as 1817, when the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham wrote Plan of Parliamentary Reform in the form of a Catechism.

William Thompson and Anna Wheeler also published a pamphlet in 1825 on the subject.

However, despite these green shoots of support, the 1832 Act for the first time explicitly limited suffrage to "male persons".

It was not until 1861, when John Stuart Mill published *The Subjection of Women*, that the movement began to gain momentum.

In 1893, New Zealand became the first self-governing country to allow women to vote. In Britain, progress was slower, and in the early 20th century women took to direct and sometimes violent action: chaining themselves to railings, arson attacks, and even bombings.

Many were imprisoned, and some went on hunger strike. Emily Davison died at the Epsom Derby in 1913, when she ran out in front of the King's horse, Anmer, clutching the banner of the Women's Social and Political Union. It was around this time that the originally derogatory word 'suffragette' was coined, in a Daily Mail article.

1918: The Representation of the People Act

World War I could not be said to have had many silver linings, but it gave British women - who had spent the last four years, in a country shorn of young men, keeping the war effort running in munition factories and farms - a newfound political confidence.



Nancy Astor in 1908 Credit: Library of Congress

The 1918 Act recognised that not only these women, but many soldiers who had supposedly fought for British democracy, were still unable to vote.

It removed all property restrictions from male voters, and allowed women to vote for the first time - although not those under 30, and with property restrictions - and to stand for election. The first woman, Nancy Astor, was elected to Parliament just 18 months later, in Plymouth Sutton. Ten years later, the restrictions on women were lifted, allowing them to vote at 21 whether or not they held property.

1969: The Representation of the People Act

After one final loophole was closed in 1948 - weirdly, up until that point, some seven per cent of the electorate had two votes per person - voting in the United Kingdom reached essentially its modern state in 1969, when Harold Wilson's government dropped the voting age for all citizens from 21 to 18.



Sir Harold Wilson Credit: Rex

Further acts in 1983, 1985 and 2000 changed the laws on prisoners and overseas voters (essentially, convicted criminals may not vote while in prison; expatriates can still vote in their last constituency for 15 years after they left the country; and holidaymakers can vote by postal ballot or proxy).

In 2000, a hoary constitutional prejudice against "lunatics" was weakened when psychiatric hospitals were allowed to be designated as registration addresses.

From Magna Carta to universal suffrage, the 1000-year history of British democracy