The Conference, entitled ‘The Allure of Magna Carta: Freedom, Democracy and Reconciliation’, was the contribution of the Diocese of Coventry and Coventry Cathedral in celebration the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta. Fifty participants drawn from across the region, including the Bishop of Coventry, the Dean of Coventry Cathedral, the High Sheriff of Warwickshire and Sir William Gage, gathered at St. Michael’s House to listen, and respond, to five distinguished speakers. These were David Carpenter, Professor of Medieval History at King's College London, John McEldowney, Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Warwick, the Reverend Robin Griffith Jones, Master of the Temple, London, Chris Bryant, M.P., author of Parliament: The Biography (Doubleday, 2014) and Professor Neil Renwick who is Professor of Global Security at the University of Coventry.

The meeting began with a welcome from the Bishop of Coventry, the Dean of Coventry Cathedral and the Revd Dr Mark Bratton, the Conference Organiser.

In the morning, the speakers focused on Magna Carta’s historical context.

David Carpenter began the day with a brilliant and witty description of the location and context within which Magna Carta arose. He affirmed that Magna Carta represented a pivotal moment in English constitutional history because it established for the first time in writing the principle that the king was subject to law and that he was accountable for the way he raised taxes indirectly leading to the modern parliamentary system. It also famously affirmed the proposition that all people deserved justice and had the right not to be imprisoned arbitrarily underpinning the concept of “due process”. However, David pointed out that Magna Carta was a “hierarchical” document, designed to keep the lower orders in their place. David also shared some of his recent discoveries regarding the “transmission history” of Magna Carta. He demonstrated that the text of the Magna Carta changed during the five days of negotiation at Runnymede with reference to drafts of the Charter, which were originally thought to be copies of the final version sealed at Runnymede. In a particularly riveting part of the lecture, Professor Carpenter showed how the discovery of the clear decorative divisions into ‘chapters’ in 13th century copies of Magna, unlike the original ‘engrossments’, and variations in the text, led him to conclude that they preserve drafts of what occurred at Runnymede.

David believes that the Church played an important role in disseminating the “Great Charter” (It was called Magna Carta by later scribes to distinguish it from the “Charter of the Forest” with which it was juxtaposed). He contended that one of the original versions of Magna Carta preserved in the British Library was originally sent to Canterbury Cathedral.

Robin Griffith Jones, in a noteless bravura performance, vividly brought to life the events in 1214-15, which led up to Runnymede. He began by giving an account of the recent anniversary celebration at Runnymede, which he wittily described as “Glastonbury for the
Establishment”. He observed that the anniversary celebrations have met most enthusiasm amongst members of what he described as “the National Trust Constituency”. However, outside this constituency, the anniversary has been me with a good deal ambivalence, despite the best efforts of the Magna Carta project.

Many of the key events leading up to Runnymede took place in the Temple Church, King John’s London headquarters. It was there at Epiphany 1215 that the barons - driven to revolt by the draconian taxation that King John imposed in order to finance his continental wars - for the first time rallied around a Charter, defining demands to which the King would be subordinate. The King refused and the events were set in train that would lead up to Runnymede. Three key figures were on the king’s side during the negotiations: Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury; William Marshall, the Earl of Pembroke, and Robin’s predecessor as Master of the Temple Church, Aymeric de St. Maur.

Of utmost importance to Langton were the story and covenant of Deuteronomy that underlay his desire to create a biblical, covenantal kingship in England. The checks and balances on the king’s power contained in the Great Charter were hundreds of years ahead of their time. They survived the failure of the Charter as a peace-making instrument between the king and the barons. Magna Carta provides a historical precedent that has endured to the present day.

After lunch, in a stimulating, but intellectually demanding, talk, John McEldowney argued that the political circumstances from which Magna Carta emerged has resonances with the current period of unprecedented constitutional change. Magna was, and remains, integral to how law and legal authority is understood. Its genius was to present the law as something handed down from King to King since time immemorial and thus, in some sense, ‘above’ the King. The fact that the provisions of Magna Carta are ambiguous has proved to be strength because it has lent itself to different interpretations throughout the centuries. The great jurist Sir Edward Coke was primarily responsible for reading the values of liberty and freedom into the text. Coke and others have contributed to the myth of an ancient constitution that might stand against the unreasonable and arbitrary power of the king.

The UK’s unwritten constitution is in a state of flux with potential for instability and an air of uncertainty as well as little direction to chart our constitutional future. There are profoundly important consequences in the role of the UK Supreme Court in respect of devolution issues. Plans to amend/abolish the Human Rights Act 1998 and the question of holding a referendum on membership of the European Union are important policy decisions that have major constitutional implications. The absence of any effective UK parliamentary scrutiny or indeed relevant knowledge of the workings of the devolved nations raises serious issues for the UK Parliament. Devolution is raising difficult and challenging constitutional issues that suggest that the United Kingdom is at a constitutional crossroads.

Neil Renwick considered the relevance of Magna Carta in the context of international relations today, with particular relevance to the Far East, especially China, the area of his expertise. Western traditions of liberty and freedom, he contended, are alien to many parts of
Asia. He memorably described on a long haul flight the odd juxtaposition on the TV screen of an item about the Magna Carta celebrations followed by an account of a recent visit by the Burmese Aung San Suu Kyi to the leader of China. The power of Magna Carta, Neil argued, lies not in what it meant when it was first drafted, but rather in its ability to generate a ‘story’ about liberty with reference to which global claims to justice, peace, democracy and reconciliation can be made.

**Chris Bryant** ended the day with a *tour de force* with an astonishingly detailed mastery of Parliamentary *arcana*. Chris argued that our nation has a penchant for myth making and that Magna Carta for much of our political history has been honoured more in the breach than the observance. Chris was also insistent that history is not inevitable and that pivotal political shifts occur because of many contingencies. This history of Magna Carta demonstrates both these propositions. Interfering politicians have repeatedly compromised the freedom of the English Church enshrined in the very first chapter of the Charter e.g. Winston Churchill overruling George Bell, the Bishop of Winchester’s elevation to the rank of Archbishop of Canterbury. Since Magna Carta, summary executions and parliamentary acts of attainder have made a mockery of the principles of access to justice and due process. Shortsighted politicians have trumpeted the principle of ‘no taxation without representation’ without recognising the implications of wider extensions of this principle to subject peoples abroad. While it is right to celebrate Magna Carta, it is important to understand that its principles were context-dependent and tenuous, and still are.

The Conference concluded with a service of Evensong in the Cathedral at which The Revd Dr Nicholas Sagovsky preached. His sermon is available on the Cathedral website.

Revd Dr Mark Bratton
Conference Organiser.