

## **(RE)IMAGINING MAGNA CARTA: MYTH, METAPHOR AND THE RHETORIC OF BRITISHNESS**

The 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Magna Carta came at a time of growing uncertainty about what it means to be British. Contemporary politicians have responded by articulating visions of Britishness, through which they seek to unite citizens behind a common identity. Taking as its focus the myth of Magna Carta, this article examines the rhetoric of Britishness of Gordon Brown and David Cameron. It shows that although both link Magna Carta to the myth of British exceptionalism, Cameron alone defines Britishness against an external 'Other'. The article also demonstrates that Magna Carta acts as a 'founding myth', and that its emergence as such is indicative of a change in Britain's 'rhetorical culture'.

Keywords: Britishness; British political speech; *epideictic* rhetoric; exceptionalism; myth; national identity

On 15 June 1215, King John sealed Magna Carta or, as it is more properly called, the 'Great Charter of Liberty', at Runnymede. Although its original purpose was to resolve a dispute between the monarch and a small group of barons, Magna Carta has since come to symbolise the rule of law and its guarantee of individual freedom (Magna Carta 800<sup>th</sup>, 2011). The Great Charter's totemic status is reflected in the celebrations held to mark its 800th anniversary, the centrepiece of which was a ceremony led by the Queen and attended by dignitaries from around the world. However, these commemorations were clouded by uncertainty over the long-term future of the Union, following the Scottish National Party's landslide general election victory in Scotland and the Conservative government's subsequent proposals for 'English votes for English laws'. They also coincided with an increasing insecurity about

what it means to be British, which stems from such changes as globalisation, multiculturalism and the erosion of traditional social ties – all of which have placed long standing loyalties and attachments under strain (Gamble and Wright, 2007, p. 5).

Contemporary politicians have responded to these anxieties by articulating their visions of Britain and Britishness, through which they seek to unite the citizenry around a set of shared ideals and a common identity. The salience of the so-called ‘British Question’ is equally evident in a growing body of academic literature, which explores issues ranging from the future of the Union (e.g. Hazell, 2007) to Britain’s troubled relationship not only with its imperial past (e.g. Marquand, 2007; Mycock, 2010), but also with Europe (e.g. Gifford, 2010). Other scholars, meanwhile, have analysed Gordon Brown’s conception of Britishness, paying particular attention to his definition of, and rationale for, the ‘British Way’ (Lee, 2006) and to its relationship to his wider political philosophy (Hassan, 2007). While these contributions recognise the role of narrative and myth in conceptualising Britain and British identity, the rhetoric of Britishness remains under-theorised. This omission is important because a rhetorical analysis can shed valuable light on how political actors use these tools to construct and promote a particular vision of Britain, the relation between such conceptions and party ideology, and why some articulations of ‘the nation’ gain traction with the public whereas others do not. The present article begins to address this oversight, and so will make a contribution to scholarship on both Britishness and British political speech (e.g. Atkins, 2011; Atkins and Finlayson, 2014; Finlayson, 2014; Martin, 2015).

The article begins with an overview of the rhetorical techniques that may be employed to construct a collective self-image and reinforce a shared identity. Here, it pays particular attention to cultural symbols and political myths, the latter of which may be activated through

metaphor. Taking Gordon Brown and David Cameron as case studies, the article then examines the ways in which their rhetoric of Britishness appeals to a mythologised historical event, namely Magna Carta. This analysis reveals that although both leaders link the Great Charter to the myth of British exceptionalism, Brown advances an inward-looking account whereas Cameron defines Britishness against the European ‘Other’. Finally, the article argues that Magna Carta functions as a ‘founding myth’, as the purported origin of core British values and institutions, and that its emergence as such is indicative of a change in Britain’s ‘rhetorical culture’. It concludes by reflecting on the utility of the myth of Magna Carta in contemporary political communication.

### **I. Rhetoric, myth and community**

Aristotle identifies three genres of rhetoric – deliberative, forensic and *epideictic* – which, respectively, are concerned with persuading or deterring an audience from a specified course of action, prosecution or defence, and praise or blame (2004, p. 80).<sup>1</sup> For our purposes the most important of these is *epideictic* rhetoric, as its use can

Increase the intensity of adherence to certain values, which might not be contested when considered on their own but may nevertheless not prevail against other values that might come into conflict with them (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, p. 51).

This amplification of shared values and identity creates a sense of belonging in an audience, and so unites them in the pursuit of a common goal. It is therefore unsurprising that *epideictic* rhetoric features heavily in set-piece political occasions, such as the leader’s party conference speech in the UK and the State of the Union address in the USA. A typical example is present in Barack Obama’s speech to the Democratic National Convention in 2004, where he told his

audience that: ‘We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America’. By using the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’, Obama sought to bring himself and his audience together, while the appeal to shared cultural symbols reinforced identification with the national political community.

As James Jasinski observes, *epideictic* rhetoric also permits a speaker to ‘create an identity for [their] community through a process of exclusion’ (2001, p. 213). This is achieved by extolling the virtues of ‘our’ community, while setting ‘us’ against an ‘enemy’ who does not share our values or world-view. In Murray Edelman’s words:

Enemies are characterised by an inherent trait or set of traits that marks them as evil, immoral, warped, or pathological and therefore a continuing threat regardless of what course of action they pursue ... and even if they take no political action at all (1988, p. 67).

We find an example of this rhetoric of division in Ronald Reagan’s speech at a meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida. Here, he constituted the United States as a nation built on the principles of ‘freedom and personal liberty’, and the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire’ whose policy of state atheism had imprisoned its people in a ‘totalitarian darkness’ (1983). Reagan thus established a sense of communion in his listeners by reaffirming America’s self-understanding as a ‘righteous people’ (Jasinski, 2001, p. 212) in opposition to the Soviet ‘Other’ whose values were antithetical to their own.

Similarly, Reinhold Niebuhr contends that each nation develops a ‘social myth’, through which it ‘defends itself and justifies its interests’ while undermining the moral credibility of its enemies. To this end, historical events are framed in a way that portrays the nation in a favourable light, thereby constructing a collective self-image that underpins claims to

national superiority on the world stage (1967, p. 40). These myths also contribute to a shared sense of belonging among the citizenry. In Michael C. McGee's words, 'so long as "the people" believe basic myths, there is unity and collective identity' (1975, p. 245). It is important to recognise that several competing myths will be present within a society, on the ground that each generation of 'the people' will have its own system of myths. Consequently, any new myth will be in competition not only with 'objective' reality, but with the already-existing myths that seek to interpret this reality (McGee, 1975, pp. 245-46).

On McGee's view, 'political myths are purely rhetorical phenomena, ontological appeals constructed from artistic proofs and intended to redefine an uncomfortable and oppressive reality' (1975, p. 247). A case in point is the myth of the American Dream, which originated with the Founding Fathers and promises that, through hard work, anyone can succeed in life regardless of their background. Here, individualism is fused with capitalism to unite the citizenry behind the ideals of freedom and opportunity for all. Although rendered increasingly illusory by high levels of economic and social inequality, the American Dream remains 'one of the most revered mythologies in the United States' (Beasley, 2011, p. 38). Its outward-facing appeal is equally undiminished, and the US maintains its image as a 'New World where individuals, freed from ancient constraints, can make their fortunes according to their own spirit, determination, and belief in an American Dream' (Beasley, 2011, p. 69).

Myths and cultural symbols play a central role in *epideictic* speeches about the nation and national identity. Here they form part of an argument, where they support – and indeed are supported by – appeals to the character of the speaker (*ethos*), the emotions of an audience (*pathos*) and factual evidence (*logos*). These three appeals can enhance the persuasive power of a speech by, for instance, demonstrating a leader's patriotism, stirring feelings of national

pride, and invoking significant events from the nation's history. Also important is metaphor, through which political actors may incite an emotional response in hearers and activate political myths. As Jonathan Charteris-Black explains, ideology 'appeals through *consciously* formed sets of beliefs, attitudes and values while myth appeals to our emotions... through *unconsciously* formed sets of beliefs, attitudes and values' (2005, p. 13, emphasis in original). The role of metaphor is to mediate between these cognitive and emotional modes of persuasion, and thus to generate a moral viewpoint on life. In addition, it can help a social group to use a particular belief system to create the meanings through which it can justify its own existence to itself, and so promote cohesion.

Having outlined the rhetorical techniques that may be used to affirm a common national identity, the article now turns to the language of Britishness. In particular, it considers how a pivotal event in British history – Magna Carta – is mythologised and articulated in the rhetoric of two prominent contemporary advocates of Britishness, namely Gordon Brown and David Cameron. These case studies are chosen because they permit examination of how a specific myth can be linked to the values and policy positions of different parties, giving rise to distinct narratives and visions of Britain. A total of seven texts contain arguments about Britishness that include appeals to Magna Carta, and these form the basis of the analysis presented here. The discussion of Brown focuses on three speeches from 2006 and 2007, which coincided with his transition from Chancellor to Prime Minister. At this time, a major concern for Brown was a resurgence of the 'English Question' which, if left unchecked, could destabilise the already-fragile devolution settlement and challenge his right, 'as an MP for a Scottish constituency, to govern England' (Lee, 2006, p. 374; see also Hassan, 2009, pp. 92-93; Marquand, 2007, pp. 18-19). Meanwhile, the analysis of Cameron draws on four texts from the period 2012-2015, during which he faced increasing pressure from Conservative

backbenchers to repeal the Human Rights Act and to hold an in/out referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union. The rhetoric of Britishness afforded Cameron a means of placating his parliamentary party and, more broadly, of addressing public anxieties over Islamic extremism through the promotion of shared values and a common national identity.

## **II. Gordon Brown: Magna Carta and the 'British Way'**

According to Brown, the core values of the British Way are liberty, fairness and responsibility (2006). He identifies liberty as a 'founding value of our country' and argues that it runs throughout British history like a 'golden thread' – from the sealing of Magna Carta in 1215 to the passage of the Bill of Rights in 1689, then to the Reform Acts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that extended the franchise far beyond the landowning elite and, more recently, to 'the idea of government accountable to the people, evolving into the exciting idea of empowering citizens to control their own lives' (2007a; see also Brown, 2007b). Here, Brown uses Magna Carta to naturalise a teleological narrative of history, in which an abstract notion of 'liberty' gradually becomes manifested across Britain. In turn, this narrative confers justification on Labour's proposals for constitutional reform by portraying them as the latest stage in an ongoing evolutionary process, as the direct descendants of Magna Carta.

Brown conveys the importance of Magna Carta through textile metaphors. Thus, the Great Charter is depicted as the knot that anchors this 'golden thread' of liberty, which shines out unbroken through 800 years of British history and whose preciousness is conveyed through the conceptual metaphor GOLD IS A TREASURE.<sup>2</sup> The textile metaphor, meanwhile, evokes the collectivist notion of the 'social fabric', the idea that human beings are interdependent. These themes recur in Brown's account of Britishness, and indeed he

employs another textile metaphor to describe the values of the British Way as ‘not only *the ties that bind us*, but also give us patriotic purpose as a nation and a sense of direction and destiny’ (2006). At one level, it seems Brown is primarily addressing his immediate audience – the Fabian New Year Conference – on the ground that the interdependence he praises is a core tenet of social democratic ideology. However, his acclaim for ‘shared civic values’ (2006) gives his words wider appeal and is intended to create a sense of communion among his listeners. This effect is amplified by the pronoun ‘us’, which links members of the national audience both to Brown and to each other while uniting them in a shared future. Hence Magna Carta is mythologised as the foundation of liberty, a value which, on Brown’s view, lies at the very heart of the British people’s collective identity.

In a bid to inspire a sense of national pride in his listeners, Brown links the Great Charter to the myth of British exceptionalism:

But first with the Magna Carta and then through Milton and Locke to more recent writers as diverse as Orwell and Churchill, philosophers and politicians have extolled the virtues of a Britain that, in the words of the American revolutionary Patrick Henry, ‘made liberty the foundation of everything’, and ‘became a great, mighty and splendid nation because liberty is its direct end and foundation’ (2007a).<sup>3</sup>

Here, Brown cultivates an *ethos* of erudition by ‘indicating [his] familiarity with a specific canon of reference points’, which in turn reinforces his identification with the (imagined) national community. Moreover, by showing that he is ‘part of, and able to show fidelity to, a larger cultural tradition’ (Atkins and Finlayson, 2014, p. 8), Brown is perhaps seeking to demonstrate his fitness to speak on behalf of ‘the British people’, and so to act as their representative.



Although Brown positions himself as the latest in a long line of politicians to praise British values, he goes beyond this with the assertion that ‘Even before America made it its own, I think Britain can lay claim to the idea of liberty’ (2006; see also Brown, 2007b). Similarly, he spoke of the British tradition of liberty as ‘what one writer has called our “gift to the world”’ (2007a)<sup>4</sup>. These are strong statements and they tap into the deeply held belief that Britain is an exceptional – perhaps even providential – nation (Marquand, 2007, p. 16). This myth of Britain’s inherent superiority masks the uncomfortable reality that its global influence has declined since 1945, and it is noteworthy that Brown harks back to past glories (as opposed to present day achievements) in his efforts to sustain it. Indeed, Brown invokes this notion of uniqueness to establish communion with his audience, telling them that ‘Now is the time to reaffirm our distinctive British story of liberty – to show it is as rich, powerful and relevant to the life of the nation today as ever’ (2007b).

Despite this diminishing international prestige, the Labour Party has maintained a belief in Britain’s capacity to provide moral leadership to the world (Vickers, 2004). Brown links this commitment to Magna Carta and the British tradition of liberty, on which basis ‘*Britain led the way in the battle* for freedom from hierarchical rule, for human rights and for the rule of law’ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, he continues, in 1941:

Churchill and Roosevelt together drew up the Atlantic Charter, and by beginning the system of international law based on the fundamental rights of all human beings, *Britain led the way* in asserting the inviolability of individual rights, irrespective of race or nationality, and made the freedoms so dear to Britain the cornerstone of a new international order (2007a).

Here, the narrative of moral leadership and the myth of British exceptionalism act as mutually reinforcing causes for national pride. Such positive portrayals of the nation and its

role in key historical events strengthen feelings of collective identity, an effect that is enhanced through the use of personification. This rhetorical technique is founded on the conceptual metaphor THE NATION IS A PERSON which, as Charteris-Black explains, ‘permits the actions of nations to be represented as if they were either the actions of heroes or villains’ (2005, p. 43). In the above extract, Brown personifies Britain by depicting it as a trailblazer, a crusader (for want of a better word) in the ‘battle’ for liberty and fundamental rights. He thus combines personification and a combat metaphor to activate the myth of BRITAIN IS A HERO (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 42), in which Britain is portrayed as a heroic leader willing to fight for the values they believe in.

In addition to liberty, Brown identifies responsibility as a core value of the British Way. Again using textile metaphors, he explains that ‘woven ... into that *golden thread* of liberty are countless *strands* of common, continuing endeavour ... the efforts and popular achievements of ordinary men and women, with one sentiment in common – a strong sense of duty and responsibility’ (2006; see also Brown, 2007b). For Brown, this sentiment finds expression in an active civil society – in voluntary associations, faith groups and craft unions – as well as in public service. It is also captured in concepts such as co-operation, mutuality and social responsibility which, Brown claims, ‘we see clearly have always owed most to progressive opinion in British life and thought’ (2006). This explicitly partisan assertion is again targeted at the Fabians, with whom Brown seeks to achieve communion by inspiring a sense of pride in their shared ideological tradition. Indeed, it is worth noting its absence from Brown’s speech to a non-partisan seminar on Britishness, which took place the following year (see Brown, 2007b).

However, Brown continues, ‘liberty and responsibility can only fully come alive if there is a Britain not just of liberty for all, and responsibility from all, but fairness to all’ (2006). In other words, the ‘golden thread’ of liberty that originated in Magna Carta is strengthened by numerous strands of civic duty and given shine, so to speak, by the value of fairness. This latter commitment has a long heritage, which Brown traces from the ‘early opposition to the first poll tax in 1381 to the second’, through to the Putney Debates of 1647 and then to the 1940s, when George Orwell wrote of a Britain that was world-renowned for its ‘decency’ (2006). In constructing this Whig-like narrative of history, Brown again draws on the myth of British exceptionalism, which also underpins his claim that the value of fairness is ‘expressed most of all in Britain’s unique National Health Service, healthcare free of charge to all who need it, founded not on ability to pay but on need’ (2007b). The NHS has great symbolic importance and, by linking it to his belief in fairness, Brown sought to strengthen adherence to this value and so reinforce identification with the national political community.

Although Brown describes the NHS as ‘like the monarchy, the army, the BBC – one of the great British institutions’ (2006), his account of Britishness is primarily based on values. After all, he claims, it is these ‘enduring ideals which shape our view of ourselves and our communities’, and in turn ‘influence the way our institutions evolve’ (2006). However, in marginalising institutions, as well as our common interests and shared experience, Brown’s account of Britishness is rendered strangely abstract (Hazell, 2007, p. 105). As Catherine McGlynn and Andrew Mycock explain,

Institutions continue to be of huge importance when it comes to shaping and expressing national pride or identity. Older ties and modes of Britishness are yet to be transcended while new programmes of inculcation merely sidestep the ways in which loyalty and belonging continue to be reproduced (2010, p. 225).

In other words, the continuity afforded by existing institutions is vital for maintaining identification even as a new social myth is being developed. That Brown's efforts to reimagine Britishness for the 21<sup>st</sup> century gained limited currency may be partly attributable to his failure to incorporate sufficient appeals to these important cultural symbols.

A more serious difficulty is Brown's use of England as a 'part' that stands for the 'whole' of Britain. From the perspective of rhetorical analysis, it functions like a synecdoche – literally, 'understanding one thing with another' (Lanham, 1991, p. 148) – though not on a terminological level. This is clear from Brown's narrative of 'British' history, in which the events linked by the 'golden thread' of liberty are – without exception – examples from *English* history (Lee, 2006, pp. 375-76; Hassan, 2007, p. 94). Thus, events that are central to Scottish mythology, such as the Battle of Bannockburn and the Declaration of Arbroath, do not warrant a mention (Crick, 2007, p. 152), while England 'seems forever silenced and forbidden to speak in its own collective national voice' (Hassan, 2007, p. 94). Given the 2011 census revealed that a majority of people in England, Scotland and Wales identify solely as English (60%), Scottish (62%) or Welsh (58%) (Easton, 2013), Brown's failure to incorporate elements from – and so give due recognition to – these distinct national identities reduced the likelihood that his vision of an overarching 'British Way' would achieve widespread acceptance.

Brown's construction of Britishness is further distorted by its neglect of Britain's external relationships. As Mycock puts it,

The former empire or the modern Commonwealth have proven largely absent in the re-imagining of Britishness, with scant regard for their possible contribution in shaping contemporary British national values or identity(ies) (2010, p. 340).

It is striking that the European Union is similarly marginalised, and it may be the case that these oversights reflect Britain's self-image as an exceptional nation, along with its 'island mentality'. This interpretation recalls Brown's representation of Britain as a lone, heroic leader – as opposed to a partner – in his narrative of British history. It also ensures that Brown's account of Britishness is rendered a 'strangely insular creation which tries to ignore that national identity is never just about internal characteristics and relationships, but external relationships as well' (Hassan, 2007, p. 95; see also Mycock, 2010). By contrast, and as we will see next, Cameron's vision of Britishness is more outward-facing and, specifically, is defined against the European 'Other'.

### **III. David Cameron: Magna Carta, human rights and British exceptionalism**

Like Brown, Cameron situates Magna Carta within a narrative of British history, but he identifies it instead as the source of human rights. He explains that:

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Magna Carta set down specific rights for citizens, including the right to freedom from unlawful detention. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Petition of Right gave new authority to Parliament; and the Bill of Rights set limits on the power of the monarchy (2012).

This narrative then encompasses the abolition of slavery, the two World Wars, and Churchill's subsequent commitment to the 'enthronement of human rights' (quoted in Cameron, 2012). More recently, in a speech to commemorate the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Magna Carta, Cameron praises this document for 'inspiring those who fought in the English Civil War, giving fuel to the Chartists, succour to the Suffragettes and ammunition to anyone challenging injustice or checking arbitrary power' (2015). Many of these events appear in Brown's narrative, and indeed Cameron also advances a Whig-like interpretation of the past.

Crucially, he likewise misrepresents English history as British history, thereby silencing England while overlooking the rich heritage of Wales and Scotland. In so doing, Cameron advances an unduly restrictive conception of Britain, which limits the possibilities for identification and belonging.

It is noteworthy that Cameron makes frequent use of nature metaphors in his account of Magna Carta as the origin of human rights. For instance, he describes Runnymede as the place where the law of the land – ‘and the rights that *flow* from it – *took root*’, and poses the rhetorical question of whether the barons of 1215 knew that ‘the *seeds sown* here would *grow* throughout the world’ (2015). Cameron also quotes Sir William Blackstone, the English judge and Tory politician, who spoke of how ‘This spirit of liberty is so deeply implanted in our constitution, and *rooted in our very soil*’ (2012). Whereas Brown’s ‘golden thread’ is man-made, Cameron is perhaps seeking to confer a positive evaluation on the values associated with Magna Carta as natural phenomena. In turn, these nature metaphors activate the idea of the ‘organic society’ propounded by traditional Conservatives, which enables Cameron to display his ideological credentials to the party faithful (see Atkins and Finlayson, 2014, p. 11). He can thus demonstrate his fitness to represent his party, while the pronoun ‘our’ puts him in communion with a wider, non-partisan audience.

According to Cameron, Magna Carta is ‘a great document in our history – what my favourite book, *Our Island Story*, describes as “foundation of all our laws and liberties”’ (2014a). This statement contains an appeal to *ethos*, in that Cameron’s choice of ‘favourite book’ enables him to present himself as a patriot, as a leader who loves his country and can therefore speak and act on behalf of its people. He also mythologises Magna Carta as the source of liberty, democracy, justice and the rule of law – values that Cameron views as central to his

conception of Britishness and as a source of national pride. On this basis, he sought to unite his listeners behind a common goal, urging: 'let's pledge to keep those principles alight. Let's keep Magna Carta alive' (2015). This is an example of personification, which communicates a positive evaluation by representing the Great Charter as a living being (see Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 204). It also heightens *pathos* through the portrayal of Magna Carta as a 'good person' who is deserving of sustenance, thereby increasing adherence to the values it is said to have engendered.

To reinforce identification with these values, Cameron links them to shared cultural symbols by claiming they are 'as British as the Union Flag, as football, as fish and chips'. Likewise, he recalls key national events and ceremonies, such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, and the D-Day commemorations – all of which, he says, brought the nation together and 'exemplified our national pride' (2014a). Here, Cameron appeals to a range of symbols and shared experiences, and so grounds his vision of Britishness in the lived reality of ordinary citizens. To strengthen further his audience's sense of national identity, Cameron then links his account of British values to institutions. Again using nature metaphors, he asserts that freedom is '*rooted* in our parliamentary democracy and free press', while the rule of law is connected to the courts and tolerance to churches and faith groups. These institutions, he continues, 'help to enforce our values, keep them in check and make sure they apply to everyone equally'. And it is this blend of values, history and institutions that, for Cameron, 'forms the *bedrock* of Britishness' (2014a). By incorporating these three factors into his account, Cameron offers a conception of Britishness that is 'thicker' and more culturally and historically specific than that espoused by Brown. Indeed, his invocation of the ways in which 'Britishness is represented and how it is felt in our

everyday lives' (Hazell, 2007, p. 105) is more likely to resonate with a public audience, and so to achieve wider acceptance.

On Cameron's view, the relevance of Magna Carta extends far beyond Britain, as the principle of fundamental human rights guides his government's approach to global issues.

Using *logos* he explains that:

When the Arab Spring erupted, the UK was a principal supporter of resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council. We are leading EU partners in maintaining pressure on Syria. We have played a key role in securing EU sanctions against Iran (2012).

Here, Cameron offers proof of Britain's high moral standards and international importance to members of the Council of Europe. He then presents its actions as consistent with Conservative traditions, firstly by recalling Margaret Thatcher's statement that 'the spirit of freedom is too strong to be crushed by the tanks of tyrants', and secondly by appealing to the realist idea of the national interest – defined here as being able to 'live, travel and trade in a more open, secure world' (2012). By articulating an explicitly Conservative position in an address to a European audience, Cameron perhaps sought to project an image of strong leadership to his supporters at home. More broadly, his claims highlight Britain's continued involvement in international politics, thus reinforcing its self-image as a leading global power and inspiring feelings of national pride among British listeners.

While Cameron's *logos*-based argument acknowledges Britain's role as a partner as well as a leader, he nonetheless follows Brown in representing it as an exceptional nation. To this end, he points out that, in addition to being a defender of freedom, Britain 'gave so much of the world the way of life that they hold so dear' – notably parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and a free press (2014a). Given his stated concern for human rights, it is somewhat



surprising that Cameron fuses the myths of Magna Carta and Britain's exceptionalism in his argument for the repeal of the Human Rights Act. As he told his party conference in 2014:

This is the country that wrote Magna Carta. The country that time and again has stood up for human rights, whether liberating Europe from fascism or leading the charge today against sexual violence in war. Let me put this very clearly: We do not require instruction on this from judges in Strasbourg (2014b).

For his supporters, Cameron's position can be interpreted as a challenge to arbitrary power, and hence as consistent with the spirit of Magna Carta. However, it can also be construed as an attempt to define British identity in opposition to the European Union, as we will see next.

The Conservative Party has a longstanding commitment to the ideals of sovereignty and national self-determination. From this starting point, it has constructed a narrative in which European integration is presented as a 'chronic threat to national identity and has been entered into by political elites without the consent of the British people' (Gifford, 2010, p. 332). Underpinning this narrative is the myth of British exceptionalism, according to which:

*We* are oceanic and freedom-loving. *They* are landlocked, and torn between anarchy and despotism. *We* belong to the world-wide family of English-speaking peoples and therefore enjoy a special relationship with the United States. *They* are incorrigibly inward-looking. Above all, *we* are moral, while *they* are cynical (Marquand, 2007, p. 16, emphasis in original).

These antagonisms enable Conservative Eurosceptics to claim they are standing up for Britishness and for the 'popular sovereignty of the British people' (Gifford, 2010, p. 332) against an 'alien', unaccountable and arbitrary power. Indeed, the divisive rhetoric of 'us' and 'them' is implicit in Cameron's 2014 conference speech, where he invokes the myth of Magna Carta to reaffirm Britain's self-understanding as a strong, principled leader in contrast

with a European ‘Other’ that lacks these exceptional qualities. This in turn amplifies sentiments of national pride and belonging, and so unites his listeners against a common adversary.

As Celeste Michelle Condit observes, ‘it is through “appraisal” of the events, persons, and objects in our lives that we define ourselves. We constitute ourselves as good (necessarily) by ranging ourselves against “the bad”’ (1985, p. 291). Such appraisals may involve misrepresentation, and hence are not always grounded in fact. This is certainly true of Cameron’s depiction of Europe’s human rights regime as somehow ‘alien’ (c.f. ‘judges from Strasbourg’), which airbrushes out Britain’s central role in establishing the European Convention on Human Rights in 1950 (Atkins, 2011, p. 118). Interestingly it also conflicts with his earlier praise for Churchill’s commitment to the enshrinement of human rights in law. While this tension may be attributable to a desire to appeal to different audiences – the Conservative Party conference and the Council of Europe respectively – Cameron’s ‘Othering’ of Europe is nonetheless a distortion of reality. In David Marquand’s words, ‘The truth is that British history has been part of European history since the Romans, and arguably for much longer’ (2007, p. 16). By ignoring this common heritage and failing to consolidate ‘a degree of banal UK Europeanism’, there is a risk that Cameron’s efforts to promote Britishness will only reinforce public hostility towards the EU (Gifford, 2010, p. 331); they are unlikely to create a positive sense of ‘British’ identity.

#### **IV. British politics and the myth of Magna Carta**

According to Lothar Probst, founding myths have a capacity to ‘create a common ... identity, to give meaning to the past and the future of a polity and to promise temporal continuity

instead of the contingency of human existence and life'. Consequently, they possess considerable symbolic power, which in turn shapes the consciousness and collective memory of the citizenry (2003, p. 46). The above analysis demonstrates that Magna Carta acts as a 'founding myth' in Brown's rhetoric, where it is portrayed as the origin of an abstract ideal of liberty that is gradually manifested in Britain over time. Similarly, Cameron depicts the Charter as the source of human rights, and hence as 'a document that would change the world' (2015). For both figures, the myth of Magna Carta also grounds claims concerning British exceptionalism, the idea that Britain is unique among nations and continues to play a key role in international affairs.

It is important to note that founding myths contain elements of both fact and fiction. Despite the far-reaching legacy that has been claimed for it, Magna Carta was 'annulled by the pope within three months, on the grounds that it was enacted under duress' (Norman, 2015, p. 25). It also makes no mention of democracy, and in reality was a peace treaty between King John and the English nobility; its impact on ordinary people was negligible at best (Magna Carta 800<sup>th</sup>, 2011). Nevertheless, the myths that have built up around Magna Carta, in conjunction with our temporal distance from 1215, ensure that the Charter can be imagined in a variety of ways (while remaining within the bounds of plausibility) and its complexities and ambivalences ignored. Magna Carta therefore has considerable rhetorical utility, as it can be invoked to support arguments not only about Britain and Britishness, but also about such values as liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Despite its obvious versatility, the myth of Magna Carta is a relatively recent addition to the rhetorical arsenal of British party leaders. A search of the archive [margaretthatcher.org](http://margaretthatcher.org) reveals that Mrs Thatcher referred to the Charter only once, in her famous 'Bruges speech' of

1988. Here, she asserted that, since 1215, Britain has ‘pioneered and developed representative institutions to stand as bulwarks against tyranny and bastions of freedom’. Thatcher then presented this institutional legacy as a cause for national pride (1988). More recently, in 1997, both Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown employed the Great Charter as a proof in their arguments that Britain needed to change in response to the challenges of globalisation.<sup>5</sup> In none of these speeches is Magna Carta represented as foundational, as the origin of Britain’s values and its way of life. Its recent emergence as such may be indicative of a shift in Britain’s ‘rhetorical culture’. As McGlynn and Mycock explain, ‘empire and the institutions that shaped imperial Britishness have declined as a means of mobilising [national] pride’ (2010, p. 226; also see Mycock, 2010), a development that is indicative of the negative connotations now carried by Britain’s colonial past. Given the current salience of British identity, therefore, new myths and cultural symbols were required for its articulation.

It is here that values come to the fore, as their lack of fixed definitions ensures they can be adapted to suit different visions of Britishness. A politician’s chosen values are more likely to capture the public imagination if they are articulated in *epideictic* speeches as part of a wider story of Britain – of its history, its culture and its place in the world. The construction of such a narrative demands that some events are identified as pivotal, whereas others are omitted altogether. This in turn depends on how the nation is to be represented, and in Brown’s account Britain is portrayed as exceptional, as the originator of liberty. However, the purported emergence of this ideal from Magna Carta pre-dates imperialism, which for Mycock suggests that liberty ‘both facilitated the expansion of the English and British Empires and its slave trade as well as providing the motivations for its demise’ (2010, p. 348). Indeed, it is revealing that Brown only acknowledges the latter, claiming that ‘it was in the name of liberty that in the 1800s *Britain led the world* in abolishing the slave trade’

(2007a). While this praise for Britain's 'heroism' and leadership is consistent with the requirements of *epideictic* rhetoric, its neglect of the darker aspects of the past is deeply problematic. In Marquand's words, 'we cannot converse honestly about Britishness without coming to terms with the shameful episodes in our history. And a dishonest conversation would do more harm than good' (2007, p. 15).

## **V. Conclusion**

This article has explored the ways in which Magna Carta is mythologised and articulated in the rhetoric of Britishness. It shows that Brown and Cameron employ the Great Charter as a 'founding myth', which grounds their conceptions of British values and provides a starting point for their narratives of Britain's history and its unique role in the world. Interestingly, both figures treat England as a 'part' that stands for the 'whole', and so offer an unduly narrow vision of Britain as a political community. The article also highlights some important differences between them, notably that Brown assigns priority to values over interests and institutions, whereas Cameron appeals to a broader range of national symbols. In the international arena, meanwhile, Brown emphasises Britain's heroic leadership as a cause for national pride, while Cameron recognises that Britain may sometimes act as a partner as well as a leader. This appears to indicate that Cameron's rhetoric of Britishness is more inclusive and outward-facing than that of Brown, and hence is likely to have wider appeal. However, it is Cameron alone who defines Britain in opposition to the European 'Other'. While this approach reflects his party's deep-seated attachment to the principle of national sovereignty, it risks creating a British identity that is based more on antagonism than on a positive appraisal of Britain itself.

The emergence of Britishness as a political concern comes at a time when it is increasingly difficult to appeal to ‘the nation’ as a unified entity. In a culturally diverse society such as Britain, there is no single common opinion, or *doxa* (Atkins and Finlayson, 2014, p. 1; see also Finlayson, 2014, p. 434), and so politicians must draw on an ever wider range of myths, values, cultural symbols and institutions in articulating their visions of Britishness. After all, an overly restrictive definition of Britishness risks being exclusionary and thus is unlikely to attract widespread support. Equally, political actors who seek to develop a new social myth must ensure sufficient continuity with existing cultural symbols if they are to maintain loyalty, while also recognising the need for flexibility. As Andrew Gamble and Tony Wright put it, Britishness is ‘the product and expression of common experience, but of an experience that is forever on the move’ (2007, p. 6).

In contemporary arguments about Britishness, the myth of Magna Carta has considerable rhetorical utility. It is untainted by the legacy of imperialism and, as the present article demonstrates, it can be mobilised to support a range of claims and ideological positions. This opens up avenues for further research into the role played by Magna Carta in political speech. Such research might explore the rhetorical functions of this myth in addresses given by figures at the intersection of politics and law – the Attorney General, for instance, or the Secretary of State for Justice. Additionally, scholars might examine the uses of Magna Carta by political figures in the USA, where the Great Charter is venerated as the foundation of the Constitution and the legal system, and so pave the way for comparative research. By virtue of its versatility and symbolic power, it is likely that the myth of Magna Carta will have a continued presence in political rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic for many years to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, deliberative rhetoric predominates in parliamentary speech, while forensic rhetoric is primarily employed in a court of law. The respective functions of these forms of rhetoric are argumentative and decision oriented and – crucially – both set two sides against each other. As such, the focus of deliberative and legislative addresses is on division, whereas *epideictic* rhetoric is concerned with identification and unity (Condit, 1985, pp. 288-89). Given this article's concern with national identity and belonging, an examination of *epideictic* addresses is therefore appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> Following Charteris-Black (2005), and in accordance with the convention in cognitive linguistics, I use upper case to distinguish the underlying conceptual metaphors from 'surface' metaphors. The latter are indicated using italics.

<sup>3</sup> Brown also quotes Alexis de Tocqueville and George Orwell in this speech, as well as the patriotic anthems *Land of Hope and Glory* and *Rule Britannia*. Although he acknowledges that *Rule Britannia* was 'written in England by a Scot' (2007a), it is important to note that both writers were praising 'England', rather than 'Britain'. For further discussion of Brown's misrepresentation and misquotation of English literature, see Lee (2006, p. 377).

<sup>4</sup> The writer referred to here is Alfred Milner, the British colonial administrator who, according to Elaine Rocha, 'strongly believed that English people belonged to a superior race, and that this justified Britain's imperial policy towards Africa, Asia and Middle East' (2010, p. 48). With this in mind, it is not surprising that Brown did not mention Milner by name.

<sup>5</sup> More specifically, Blair used Magna Carta to support his claim that 'The British don't fear change. We are one of the great innovative peoples' (1997), while for Ashdown it provided

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an example of how, when ‘power breaks free from the structures created to control it, change becomes inevitable – often violent – change’ (1997).