



From Magna Carta to Harmondsworth

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The contradiction of celebrating the 800th Anniversary of Magna Carta in an era where the UK is the only country in Europe not to have an upper time limit on detention.

Runnymede, seen by many as the birthplace of modern democracy, was witness to King John's historic sealing of Magna Carta 800 years ago. Today, together with its commemorative monuments, it serves as a reflection on the history of the struggle for freedom.

Coincidentally, found just a few miles away, Harmondsworth, Europe's biggest detention facility, represents a business model, financially flawed, that sustains itself with the imprisonment of innocent people who are held in indefinite detention.

As part of this and previous Government's immigration policies, nearly 30,000 people are detained for varying lengths of time each year in the UK, pregnant women and those suffering from mental health problems. The toll this system takes on the people contained within it is demonstrated by the fact that there have been 1,486 attempted suicides in asylum detention in the UK since January 2007. Lack of access to adequate healthcare is illustrated by the 22 deaths that have occurred in immigration detention centres across the UK since 1989.

Contradictions aside, multiple inquiries have found the system to be 'ineffective, expensive and unjust'.¹ A system governed by uncertainty can only lead to negative consequences. Detention has been shown to cause as well as exacerbate mental illness.² Furthermore, those who were raped, tortured and imprisoned by repressive regimes in their home countries are exposed to traumatic environments of imprisonment once more. The Home Office's own rules state that torture survivors are

¹ Detention has an approximate cost of £76 million per year (Matrix Evidence, *An economic analysis of alternatives to long-term detention*, January 2012).

² R(on the application of MD) v. Secretary for the Home Department, [2014] EWHC2249 (Admin); The State of Detention, Immigration detention in the UK in 2014, Detention Action, October 2014.

only supposed to be detained in exceptional circumstances, but this rule is continuously flouted.³ Incidents of self-harm among those who are placed on suicide watch are not uncommon. Finally, LGBTI asylum-seekers in detention centres are often subject to a high degree of isolation, threats of violence and homophobic harassment and abuse by both facility staff and other detainees.

Indefinite detention is like imprisonment; except for many people it is worse. Detainees, who have not committed any crime, are not given certainty of the time they will be locked up behind bars. It's time to question the reality these people are facing: Is it acceptable for an innocent vulnerable person to be locked up indefinitely?

In a moment of commemoration and celebration of a document that symbolises freedom and acknowledgement of fundamental rights, the Government should remember that the UK has evolved over the last 800 years. Every human being deserves to be treated with basic human dignity. Magna Carta is where we began, so as we stand here today, principles of empathy and equal treatment should be applicable to every case. The Government has the duty to examine international best practice and introduce alternative immigration systems that cost the taxpayer less and better uphold the principles that many are celebrating on this commemorative day.

³ Detention Centre Rules 2001, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2001/238/contents/made#35>; see also: Natasha Tsangarides, *The Second Torture: The immigration detention of torture survivors*, Medical Justice, May 2012.