



A drama for Disability Sunday 2015

**Magna Carta 800 years on.**

**Cast:**

(note: these are suggestions. As long as you have 3 or more people – one to be Steve, one to be Dave and one or more to read the rest of the dialogue, you'll be able to perform this)

Steve

Jenny

Mike

Paula

Maria

Dave, a vicar (needs to wear a dog collar or clerical garb for identification)

**Steve:** Welcome to this meeting of the History Society. I'm glad so many of you could come. As most of you know, June 15<sup>th</sup> marks the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta by King John at Runnymede. So today we're going to look at some of its provisions that are still relevant today.

**Jenny:** Really? I thought it was all stuff about the church and the barons, and the King not being allowed to seize their farmland. How is it relevant today?

**Steve:** A lot of it dealt with that sort of thing. But it did also contain some important provisions that have been continued on through our laws down the centuries. Let's take a look at some of them. Clause 20 says this, "A freeman shall not be amerced for a slight offense, except in accordance with the degree of the offense; and for a grave offense he shall be amerced in accordance with the gravity of the offense."

**Mike:** Eh? Amerced? What's that?

**Steve:** It basically means fined. That's why if you get a fine for, say a driving offence, they can't charge you the value of your house. They can only impose a reasonable fine that fits the offence.

**Paula:** Well that works for some people in society, but it doesn't work for everyone.

**Steve:** Yes it does, it's a universal law.

**Paula:** No it doesn't, my cousin couldn't get to her job centre appointment last month because her powered wheelchair broke down and she couldn't get herself to the bus stop to go to the appointment. So they sanctioned her and she lost 6 weeks' benefit. We only found out about it because her neighbour found her collapsed from hunger and had to get an ambulance. If that's not a fine, what is it?

**Mike:** Yeah, that's a fine, of course it's a fine.

**Paula:** So if they can fine someone six weeks' money for having a broken wheelchair, that clause isn't being upheld, is it?

**Steve:** Yes, well, anyway, here's another clause that still applies today. "To no one will we sell, to no one will we delay, right or justice."

**Mike:** Oh, that's just nonsense. When they switched me from Incapacity Benefit to Employment and Support Allowance they said I could work full time, even though I have a doctor's report saying my condition is made worse by exertion and I will become ill if I'm forced to work more than half the week. So I appealed, but that was 6 months ago and I'm still waiting for my case to be heard. If that's not a delay, what is?

**Maria:** And what about the changes to legal aid? It's been cut so much that disabled people like me can't possibly make up the shortfall, and the court fees have been increased by 600%. Which means only the rich can afford to take anyone to court now. So if that's not selling justice, what is it?

**Steve:** Um... well... what about clause 30? "No sheriff or bailiff of ours, or other person, shall take the horses or carts of any freeman for transport duty, against the will of the said freeman." That one still applies. Bailiffs can't seize your van, for example, if your livelihood depends on it, unless your debt is for business rates.

**Jenny:** But I read a newspaper article last week which said that more than a hundred disabled people every week are losing their Motability cars because of the

government switching them from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payments. How is that fair?

**Steve:** Er... umm... moving on, clause 45 says, “We will appoint as justices, constables, sheriffs, or bailiffs only such as know the law of the realm and mean to observe it well.”

**Maria:** So how come the former Director of Public Prosecutions claims that the police and the Crown Prosecution Service are regularly ignoring and failing to investigate reported disability hate crimes? That’s not exactly demonstrating knowledge of the law or observing it well.

**Steve:** I suppose that’s just one person’s opinion? I’d have to see the evidence to comment. Anyway, let’s look at Clause 52. “If anyone has been dispossessed or removed by us, without the legal judgment of his peers, from his lands, castles, franchises, or from his right, we will immediately restore them to him.”

**Mike:** What about those disabled people who’ve lost their homes through rent arrears due to the bedroom tax, because no one acknowledges that they need an extra room for their equipment, or for a carer to stay overnight? I don’t see anyone rushing to restore their homes to them.

**Steve:** Well, whatever, the good news is that the closing paragraph of Magna Carta stated that “We have granted all these concessions, desirous that they should enjoy them in complete and firm endurance forever.”

**Paula:** Unless you’re a disabled person. There doesn’t seem to be much in Magna Carta for us.

**Dave:** It seems maybe the historical standard we should be looking to is not Magna Carta, but the 19<sup>th</sup> century philanthropists. They got the church motivated to provide justice, abolish slavery, fund children’s homes, make caring provision for mentally ill people and so on. I think it’s time we stopped expecting governments of any side of the political spectrum to do everything. The church should be the one organisation that is motivated by love, not self-interest. I’m going back to my parish to see what my church can do to ensure everyone gets justice.