

Charter 88

Charter 88 was launched in November 1988 as a protest. A positive protest attempting to diagnose what really ailed the UK in the last decade of the 20th century. What it basically said was that 300 years of unwritten rule from above was enough. That democracy in the UK had not adapted. Its spirit was adrift. It needed a thorough overhaul. Reform was needed, not piecemeal, but in a package, set out in the Charter's ten connected demands.

The afterthought of join your name to ours on the first full page ads produced signatories who fell into what I summarised as five main categories: those who have been campaigning for years on a single issue such as PR; those with a sophisticated understanding of constitutional history who saw that the old order wasn't working any longer; those who were simply fed up with being in opposition; those who were fed up with their votes never having any value; and those who were afraid—afraid of what a continuing erosion of civil liberties could lead to.

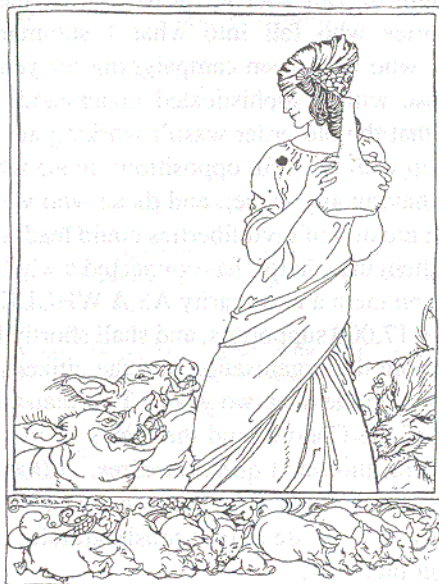
For all of the them the Charter has connected a whole range of problems and issues and given them a new clarity AS A WHOLE.

Today we have 17,000 supporters, and shall shortly be publishing a plan of how we think both the organisation and the citizens' movement can go forward, specifically in the next two years. This plan takes into account the non party nature of the Charter, and the views of many of its supporters, gleaned from several thousand questionnaires. 1,000 of these have been analysed by a member of Radical Statisticians, Andrew Pepper, who is also a Charter signatory, and we are tremendously grateful to him for this major contribution to our planning.

One part of the questionnaire asked people to rank in order the ten demands of the Charter. The result was that top of the list came a Freedom of Information Act. Second was proportional representation and third a bill of rights. Where does this fit in Charter's plans and how are we going to proceed?

In January, Roy Hattersley announced Labour's Charter of Rights which would include a Freedom of Information bill. Charter 88 welcomes Labour's acknowledgement that constitutional issues are of interest to the electorate and that contrary to received views, there may be some votes in them. But we are effectively mandated not to split up the Charter's synthesis, so while there is now clearly an opportunity as well as a need to lobby inside and outside parliament, we also have to prioritise.

In our plan, we state that Freedom of Information is the primary demand of Charter supporters. A basic principle behind Charter 88 is that if people are genuinely informed and offered a full choice they will be wise in their judgement. Rights such as freedom of speech are best exercised when information, especially about the activities of agencies of the State, is widely available. Instead, Britain is highly secretive and public disquiet is growing. The Charter intends to work with the Campaign for Freedom of Information ... other organisations to ensure overwhelming pressure on this issue.'



There are two areas where I believe the interests of Radical Statisticians and Charter 88 might meet. One is with the Charter's monthly vigil. This is our action to discard the cloak of invisibility that still surrounds the organisation in some quarters. Each month, on the first Saturday, we parade the Charter's demands on the steps of St. Martin's in the Fields. This action, for an hour and a half, commits us to the Charter's synthesis, and to its long term nature. The antidote to the expediency of political lobbying. It also changes its focus—one month National Health workers, another month pensioners, a third month, trades unionists. In this way we believe we can start to show the relevance of the Charter to all sections of the community. Why not a focus group of statisticians?

Secondly, we want to be able to publicise a range of violations of civil liberties. We are putting in machinery to be able to publish speedily brief, cogent and expert papers explaining violations and their relevance. We want case histories. If you have them, please tell us about them. In this way, we might be able to use the weight of your expertise and knowledge, and the Charter's numbers and proven power to gain media coverage to real effect. If Charter 88 can, by the wide nature of its support, act as both catalyst and umbrella, then now is the moment for all good people within specialist groups to come to the aid of democracy!

This article is an abbreviated version of the discussion paper given by Josephine King, a former Charter 88 organiser, and member of the Charter council, on February 24 1990. The contact address for Charter 88 is Panther House, 38 Mount Pleasant, London WC1X 0AP. Tel: 01 833 5813 (from May 1, 071).

In the discussion the issues raised were:

1. The difficulty of confusing entertainment programmes in TV with factual programmes so that information and analysis may be trivialised.
2. The problem of the supineness of TV journalists who allow government ministers to get away with talking rubbish.
3. The suggested needs for Charter 88 to work out the limits of any freedom of information measure. It was not enough to suggest the principle and leave it at that: detailed work needed to be done with other organisations.
4. The question whether there should be a government statistical service at all or whether it should be independent. The example was quoted of Eire where there are two services, one governmental and one independent.

5. There ought to be more use made by Rad Stats and other of the Despatches programme which had detailed government abuses of official information.
6. It was suggested that there were limits to a purely constitutional approach to change. There might need to be extra parliamentary action. In addition major decisions were being made by international finance and Charter 88 seemed to ignore this in its analysis.
7. There were serious limitations in seeking to produce constitutional change by polite request.
8. Charter 88 seemed not to be taking much notice of liberty as it affected the workplace: the rights to organise at work and to strike had been eroded.
9. The law was not sacrosanct and should not always be obeyed. Bad laws might be changed by mass disobedience.

This movement, beginning from London, was given the general name of Chartism. Its origin was as follows:

Although the abandonment of the persecution of Carlile had meant that the more violent ill-treatment of the propagandists had ceased, nevertheless, the Radical Press was far from free. Continually Hetherington, Cleave, and other pertinacious publishers of the "unstamped" were arrested and fined, and the circulation of their papers impeded. In 1833 there were eight Radical weekly papers in London with considerable circulations:

<i>The Gauntlet</i> , R. Carlile	about 22,000
<i>Poor Man's Guardian</i> , H. Hetherington	" 16,000
<i>The Destructive and Poor Man's Conservative</i> , J. Bronterre O'Brien	" 8,000
<i>The Working Man's Friend</i> , Jas. Watson	" 7,000
<i>The Man</i> , R. E. Lee	" 7,000
<i>The Crisis</i> , R. Owen	" 5,000
<i>The Reformer</i>	" 5,000

These figures, which come from a hostile source, may be exaggerated. But they omit some papers, including Cobbett's widely read *Register*. Even if exaggerated, it was serious enough that three years later all but the first two journals had been put out of existence, and their place not adequately taken by other papers. A number of the soberer and more pertinacious working-class Radicals of London met together to found an organization to succour and pay the fines for the printers and editors. Among them were Henry Hetherington, James Watson, John Cleave, John Gast and William Lovett, all skilled craftsmen and dependable and earnest men. Out of their consultations rose on June 16, 1836, the "London Workingmen's Association for Benefiting Politically Socially and Morally the Useful Classes," soon naturally abbreviated to the L.W.M.A.

