

# Queen's Speech:

## Questions and answers



*The Queen's Speech with all its pomp and strange rituals often looks incomprehensible to foreign watchers. So here is a Q&A to the Queen's Speech:*

### **Why is there something like the Queen's Speech?**

The Queen's Speech is a part of the [State Opening of Parliament](#) ceremony – i.e. the official start of a new parliamentary year. The speech outlines the main points the government and the Prime Minister will focus on in the new parliamentary year.

Watch an extract of the 2019 speech here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIXfECCHyIE>

### **Why does the Queen have to appear in Parliament? I thought she was above party politics?**

This is certainly true. The Queen is supposed to be politically neutral. However, one of her functions is the "Queen-in-Parliament", which means the Queen is also a part of parliamentary procedure and has to fulfil certain tasks – like opening and dissolving Parliament, appointing a government and giving [Royal Assent](#)<sup>1</sup> to turn a bill (i.e. a draft law that has been passed by Parliament) into an Act of Parliament (i.e. it becomes official law in the UK).

So, we can say that Parliament is made up of three parts: the House of Commons, the House of Lords – and the Queen.

### **The Queen has to be politically neutral. But how does this go together with her giving a speech on the government's plans?**

The Queen doesn't **write** the speech. This is done by the Prime Minister and the government ministers. The Queen just **reads out** the speech. She has no influence on what the government chooses to put into that speech.

### **Why are there so many rituals that accompany the Queen's Speech? Aren't they a little outdated by now?**

These rituals (we will look at them later) certainly look strange. But they all serve one purpose – to remind the people that Parliament wasn't always the strongest political power in the country. The 17<sup>th</sup> century, for example, saw many disputes and quarrels between the king

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<sup>1</sup> Giving Royal Assent to a bill means the monarch formally agrees to it. [**vocab help:** to assent to sth. = to agree to a request or suggestion]

and Parliament. In those days, several kings came to see Parliament as an enemy rather than a part of the political system. So, leaving the safety of the palace and entering Parliament would actually have been a rather dangerous excursion. On the other hand, the king entering Parliament could also mean trouble: In 1642, King Charles I. tried to arrest five Members of Parliament in the House of Commons.

### **Let's look at some of these rituals! What do they mean?**

Here are some of these rituals: For the duration of the Queen's Speech, one Member of Parliament goes to the Palace as a "hostage" in order to guarantee the monarch's safe return. Remember, there were times in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when entering Parliament meant entering enemy territory.

Then, before the Queen's Speech, the Queen sends some of her guardsmen to search the cellars of Parliament. This is because in 1605, Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the Parliament buildings during the State Opening of Parliament. He hid gunpowder barrels in the cellar, but his plot was discovered before anything happened. Still, the cellars are searched before the Queen's Speech takes place..... just to be on the safe side (and of course these aren't the only safety precautions that are taken!).

The Queen then travels to the Houses of Parliament. In a separate coach, the [Imperial State Crown](#), the [Cap of Maintenance](#) (a ceremonial hat) and the [Great Sword of State](#) are taken to Parliament. The Queen then enters the Houses of Parliament through the Sovereign's Entrance (an entrance especially reserved for the monarch) and proceeds to the [Robing Room](#), where she puts on the crown and the Robe of State. (This year, she chose to wear a diamond diadem instead of the crown – which is quite heavy. Wearing it and keeping it straight for a ten-minute speech is quite a job. So small blame to the Queen if she decided that at the age of 93 it is perfectly all right to make her burden a little lighter!). On the Queen's arrival, the Union Jack on the flagpole of the Houses of Parliament is taken down and the Royal Standard (the Queen's flag) is hoisted instead.

#### **Watch the Queen travelling to the Houses of Parliament and walking to the Robing**

**Room here:** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znH5Fd2eBCE>

The Queen then leads a procession to the House of Lords and sits on her throne. The Cap of Maintenance and the Great Sword of State are carried ahead of her by two peers. Once the Queen is on her throne, the Members of Parliament from the House of Commons have to be summoned (i.e. ordered to appear in the House of Lords). This is another interesting tradition: One of the House officials, the Usher of the Black Rod (or Black Rod for short), walks over to the House of Commons. There, she<sup>2</sup> has the door slammed shut on her. She then knocks on the door three times with her staff and is let in. Once inside the chamber, she summons the MPs to the Lords. The [Mace](#), a ceremonial staff symbolising the power of the monarchy, is taken up by the Sergeant-at-Arms and carried over to the House of Lords. Slamming the door in the face of Black Rod serves to symbolize the legislative's independence from the monarch – and you might have guessed it, this custom dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Clarke OBE has served in this function since 2018. She is the first female Black Rod in Parliamentary history.

**Watch some of these rituals here:** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZlbVvTC6Jw>

*(The Cap of Maintenance and the Great Sword of State being carried into the Lords begins at 00:35. The Imperial State Crown can be seen at 00:45. Black Rod walking over to the House of Commons begins at 03:40, the Sergeant-at-Arms picking up the Mace begins at 05:12.*

*Note that not all of the MPs are following Black Rod's call: [Dennis Skinner](#) (Labour), MP for Bolsover, remained faithful to his self-established tradition of [heckling Black Rod](#) (see also his [Wikipedia](#) entry) with a "No. I'll not be going!")*

### **Is there a debate on the Queen's Speech?**

Yes, there is. Usually the MPs begin a debate on the contents of the speech on the same day. Normally, the debate lasts for five days with a vote at the end. It is, however, extremely rare for a government to lose this vote.

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#### **Sources** (date of access 08/11/2019):

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