



State Openings of Parliament: Reduced Ceremonial

Summary

It has been announced that the State Opening which will take place on 21 June 2017 will be conducted on the following basis: no carriages will be used, the Queen and the Regalia of State will travel by car. The Queen will wear day dress and a hat, whilst Officers of State will carry the Imperial State Crown, Sword of State and Cap of Maintenance. The Royal Procession will take place on a reduced scale.

Below is an outline of the traditional State Opening Ceremony, followed by a description of the State Openings of 1939 and March 1974, setting out how the ceremonies in these years differed from the norm.

Traditional State Opening Ceremony

The Buckingham Palace website describes the elements of the State Opening ceremony which are customary on most occasions.¹

- The Queen travels to Parliament in a State Coach, escorted by the Household Cavalry.
- The Queen proceeds to the Robing Room where she is dressed in the Robe of State and the Imperial Crown.
- The Queen then leads the Royal Procession through the Royal Gallery to the chamber of the House of Lords.
- The Members of the House of Commons are then summoned to the Chamber to hear her read a speech setting out the Government's legislative programme for the forthcoming session. Members of the House of Lords wear ceremonial robes.

It is also notable that the Queen customarily arrives in Parliament at the Royal Entrance, also known as the Sovereign's Entrance.²

State Opening Ceremonies of 1939 and 1974

There are examples in recent history of State Openings which have involved some reduced elements of ceremony. An article published in *The Times* describes the simplified war time State Opening of 28 November 1939.³ The article notes that the King wore the uniform of Admiral of the Fleet and the Queen "was in a plain dress of black velvet". The King wore a naval cap, while the Imperial Crown was carried by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield. The steps of the Throne were mostly occupied by "men in the uniform of the Services". The Peers who were present "wore morning dress instead of robes, except some few who were in uniform". The Royal Procession was made up of 24 people.⁴

The State Opening of March 1974 involved "less than the customary ceremony [...] when the Queen interrupted a foreign tour at short notice to open Parliament in person".⁵ The Queen travelled to Parliament by car, rather than carriage, and arrived at the Peers' Entrance rather than the Royal Entrance.⁶ The Queen

wore day dress and a hat and Peers wore morning dress rather than robes. It also appears that the Royal Procession was much reduced, being made up of 9 people. By way of comparison, the State Opening ceremony which took place later in the year, in October 1974, provided for a Royal Procession of more than 60 people.⁷

Background

The State Opening of Parliament takes place to open every parliamentary session (not only the start of a new Parliament which directly follows a general election).

The State Opening of Parliament typically takes place annually, though 1974 and 2011 provided exceptions to this. In 1974, two elections took place as a result of a hung Parliament after the first. Consequently, two State Openings also took place that year—the first on 12 March 1974 and the second on 29 October 1974. Queen Elizabeth II attended both.⁸ In 2011, a State Opening of Parliament did not take place. This was due to the uncommon length of the 2010 parliamentary session which continued into 2012. On 13 September 2010, Sir George Young, the then Leader of the House of Commons, announced that “Her Majesty’s Gracious Speech on the occasion of the State Opening of Parliament will, in future, ordinarily take place in the spring, rather than in the autumn” subject to the passage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill.⁹

Further Reading

- House of Lords Library, [The Sovereign's Ceremonial and Formal Role in Parliament Today](#), 4 March 2016
- House of Lords, [State Opening of Parliament](#), 2014

¹ Buckingham Palace, [‘State Opening of Parliament’](#), accessed 12 June 2017.

² Parliament website, [‘State Opening of Parliament’](#), accessed 12 June 2017.

³ *Times*, [‘Parliament Opened by the King’](#), 29 November 1939.

⁴ ‘Ceremonial of His Majesty’s Proceeding to Parliament’, 28 November 1939.

⁵ Erskine May, [Erskine May’s Treatise on The Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament](#), 2011, 24th Edition, p 158.

⁶ ‘Arrangements, Opening of Parliament by Her Majesty the Queen, 12 March 1974’.

⁷ ‘The Ceremonial to be Observed at the Opening of Parliament by Her Majesty the Queen’, 29 October 1974.

⁸ [HL Hansard, 12 March 1974, cols 7–12](#); and [HL Hansard, 29 October 1974, cols 7–11](#).

⁹ [HC Hansard, 13 September 2010, cols 33WS–4WS](#).

House of Lords Library briefings are compiled for the benefit of Members of the House of Lords and their personal staff, to provide impartial, politically balanced briefing on subjects likely to be of interest to Members of the Lords. Authors are available to discuss the contents of the briefings with the Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

Any comments on briefings should be sent to the Head of Research Services, House of Lords Library, London SW1A 0PW or emailed to purvism@parliament.uk