



State Openings of Parliament: Reduced Ceremonial

Summary

Following the 2019 general election, the State Opening of Parliament on 19 December was held with “reduced ceremonial elements”.

The last time the state opening had featured reduced ceremonial elements was on 21 June 2017. It differed from normal state openings in a number of ways, including:

- No horse-drawn carriages were used. Instead, the Queen and the Regalia of State were transported by cars.
- The Queen wore a day dress and a hat, rather than the ceremonial robes.
- There was a reduced royal procession.

The 2017 state opening marked the opening of the 2017–19 session and followed the general election held on 8 June 2017. It featured reduced ceremonial elements due to its timing. Prior to this, Erskine May states that the ceremonies between 1917 and 1919 and 1939 and 1948 also featured “less than the customary ceremony”, as did the state opening in March 1974.

This briefing outlines the traditional state opening ceremony, followed by a description of the state openings of 2017, March 1974 and 1939, setting out how the ceremonies in these years differed from the norm.

Russell Taylor | 6 January 2020

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Traditional State Opening Ceremony

The Buckingham Palace website describes the elements of the state opening ceremony that are customary on most occasions:¹

- The Queen travels to Parliament in a State coach, escorted by the Household Cavalry.
- The Imperial State Crown and regalia travels in front of the Queen in a carriage of its own.
- The Queen proceeds to the Robing Room where she is dressed in the Robe of State.
- 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 Ceremony in 2017

Before December 2019, the last state opening with reduced ceremonial elements took place on 21 June 2017. It occurred with reduced ceremonial elements due to its timing; for example, its proximity to the Trooping of the Colour ceremonies on 17 June 2017. It opened the 2017–19 session, following the general election held on 8 June 2017.

The Parliament website lists the following differences compared to a traditional state opening:

- No horse-drawn carriages were used. The Queen and the Regalia of State, including the Imperial State Crown, travelled to and from Parliament by car.
- The Queen did not wear the usual ceremonial robes or crown. Instead the Queen wore a day dress and hat.
- There was a reduced procession, with a scaled-down presence of Royal Household staff.
- The Queen was preceded by Officers of State bearing the Imperial State Crown, Sword of State and Cap of Maintenance.
- The Duke of Edinburgh attended the ceremony; wearing a morning suit rather than an Admiral of the Fleet naval uniform.³

¹ Buckingham Palace, '[State Opening of Parliament](#)', accessed 28 November 2019.

² Parliament website, '[State Opening of Parliament](#)', accessed 28 November 2019.

³ Parliament website, '[State Opening of Parliament 2017](#)', accessed 28 November 2019.

State Opening Ceremonies of 1939 and 1974

Erskine May explains that “between 1917 and 1919 and between 1939 and 1948 Parliament was opened by the Sovereign with less than the customary ceremony”.⁴

An article published in *The Times* describes the simplified war time state opening of 28 November 1939.⁵ 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.⁶

The state opening of March 1974 also involved “less than the customary ceremony” due to the Queen interrupting a foreign tour at short notice to open Parliament in person.⁷ The Queen travelled to Parliament by car and wore day dress and a hat, rather than the ceremonial robes. Peers also generally wore morning dress rather than robes and there was a reduced royal procession.⁸

Background

The State Opening of Parliament takes place to open every parliamentary session.

The State Opening of Parliament typically takes place annually, though 1974, 2011 and 2018 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.⁹ There were also two state openings in 2019, the first marked the end of the 2017–19 session and the second followed the December general election.

In 2011 and 2018, a State Opening of Parliament did not take place. This was due to the uncommon length of the sessions, which both spanned two years. The 2017–19 session was the longest since the English Civil War.¹⁰

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](#), 2019

⁴ Erskine May, [Erskine May’s Treatise on The Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament](#), 2019, 25th Edition, para 8.32.

⁵ *Times*, ‘[Parliament Opened by the King](#)’, 29 November 1939.

⁶ ‘Ceremonial of His Majesty’s Proceeding to Parliament’, 28 November 1939.

⁷ Erskine May, [Erskine May’s Treatise on The Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament](#), 2019, 25th Edition, para 8.32.

⁸ ‘The Ceremonial to be Observed at the Opening of Parliament by Her Majesty the Queen’, 29 October 1974.

⁹ [HL Hansard, 12 March 1974, cols 7–12](#); and [HL Hansard, 29 October 1974, cols 7–11](#).

¹⁰ House of Commons Library, ‘[Is This the Longest Parliamentary Session Ever?](#)’, 10 May 2019.