

Queen's Speech ^[1]



What is a Queen's Speech and when is it delivered? ^[2]

The Queen's Speech is part of the State Opening of Parliament, the formal beginning of each new session of Parliament. No substantive parliamentary business in either the House of Commons or House of Lords can usually occur until after the speech is delivered.

Sessions of Parliament usually last for around a year, meaning that a Queen's Speech tends to be held annually. However, an unusual two-year-long session in 2010/12 meant there was no Queen's Speech in 2011, and the two-year 2017/19 session meant that no Queen's Speech was held in 2018.

Why is the Queen's Speech important? ^[3]

Procedurally, the 'Speech from the throne' allows Parliament to begin a new session and start its business. It is also symbolic of the role of the Queen in the constitution.

Politically, the Queen's Speech is important because it is a test of a government's ability to command the confidence of the Commons – especially if it is at the beginning of a new Parliament, or if a new government has recently taken over. If a government has a majority in the Commons, then a Queen's Speech is unlikely to cause it many headaches; but for governments with only narrow majorities, or who are governing as minorities, the Queen's Speech can be more of a test.

The Queen's Speech also matters because it allows the government to set out its priorities and programme for the coming session, including the legislation that it intends to pass.

Who writes the Queen's speech and what does it contain? ^[4]

The speech is written for the sovereign by the government. Customarily, it is delivered by the sovereign in a neutral tone, so as not to convey any sense of their views. It is also generally expected that the speech will be listened to in silence.

The speech lists the legislation that the government intends to introduce to Parliament, and reference is also usually made to "other measures" that the government will bring forward – this is to give the government flexibility to introduce other bills as the session goes on.

The sovereign will also list any state visits that they plan to make, and any overseas heads of state who have been invited to the UK over the course of the session.

Can anybody other than the Queen deliver the speech? ^[5]

Yes. If the sovereign is unable to attend on the day, the speech is read on their behalf by the Lord Chancellor, and the opening of Parliament – no longer classed as a state opening due to the absence of the sovereign – happens through a Royal Commission appointed by the sovereign.

The current Queen has not been present at only two openings of Parliament during her reign – in both cases because she was in the late stages of pregnancy.

What happens after the speech? ^[6]

After listening to the speech in the Lords, MPs return to the Commons, and both Houses of Parliament take a short break until later that afternoon. When they resume sitting, the Speaker in each House formally reports on the Queen's Speech and orders the text of it to be printed into the official record.

Each House then proceeds to give a purely symbolic formal first reading to two specific bills: the Outlawries Bill in the Commons, and the Select Vestries Bill in the Lords. Neither of these bills are ordered to be printed or to proceed to their second reading, as they are not actually intended to ever become laws nor to serve any practical purpose. Instead, they are designed to show that each House can consider other matters before it turns to debating the Queen's Speech – another way of emphasising their independence from the sovereign.

How is the Queen's Speech debated and voted on? ^[7]

Debate over the content of the Queen's Speech formally occurs on a humble address to the Queen, thanking her for her speech – usually referred to as 'the Loyal Address'. The debate begins after the speech is delivered, and usually continues for several days.

In the Commons, a motion is moved and seconded by two government backbenchers who are, traditionally, from very

different constituencies and parliamentary intakes. Their short speeches are, by tradition, humorous and non-contentious. The leader of the opposition then makes a speech, at which point the more substantive part of the debate begins. The prime minister responds, and gives more detail on the government's plans.

In the Lords, a motion making the address to the Queen is also moved and seconded. The leader of the opposition in the Lords then moves a motion to adjourn the debate, which peers use to hold a general, short discussion on the content of the Queen's Speech.

Both Houses then adjourn, or break, until the next sitting day, when debate on the address continues.

Subsequent days

In recent years, debate over the Queen's Speech in the Commons has tended to take place over six sitting days. Each subsequent day's debate centres around a theme, such as foreign affairs or health, which is usually chosen by the leader of the opposition.

Debate is opened and closed each day by the relevant ministers and shadow ministers. Debates on subsequent days in the Lords also focus on a different theme each day as chosen by the opposition.

Can the Loyal Address be amended or voted down? ^[8]

Yes - it is possible for the address to the Queen to be amended.

In the Commons

Any MP can table an amendment to the address, or sign an amendment tabled by another MP in order to show their support. These can only be debated and voted on during the final two days of debate, as set out in Standing Order No. 33 of the Commons' rules, with the Speaker able to choose a maximum of four amendments for debate.

One amendment, usually in the name of the official opposition, is usually debated and voted on during the penultimate day of debate. Up to three further amendments can then be selected by the Speaker on the final day of debate. One of these will be tabled by the opposition; once that has been dealt with, any remaining amendments are voted on 'forthwith' - meaning without debate. This procedure came into formal operation in 2014, when Standing Order No.33 was changed following the Speaker's controversial decision, the previous year, to allow three amendments on the final day of debate, where previously only a maximum of two had ever been selected.

Sometimes, even the threat of an amendment can be enough to force the government to change course. In 2017, an amendment tabled by Labour MP Stella Creasy, with cross-party support, led to the government changing its stance on women from Northern Ireland seeking abortions in England. The government did this before the amendment was formally voted on.

In the Lords

Although the House of Lords may also debate the address for several days, it is customary that no votes are held at the end of their debates. This means that the Lords have no opportunity to amend or vote down the address.

What happens if the government is defeated? ^[9]

The Queen's Speech can be voted down. This would be of major political significance, as it would clearly call into question the ability of the government to command the confidence of Parliament. Historically, a defeat on the address has been treated as an implicit loss of confidence in a government as it suggests that there is no majority to be found in the Commons for its programme for government.

It is rare for the government to be defeated on the address in the Commons - as governments usually have a majority in the House. But it has happened - most recently in 1924, when Stanley Baldwin's minority government was defeated. Baldwin then resigned as prime minister, and the opposition went on to form a new government.

As no government has been defeated on the address since the passage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act (FTPA) in 2011, it is unclear what would happen if such a situation were to arise. This is because a defeat on the address would not meet the requirements under the FTPA to trigger an election. But any defeat might encourage the opposition to then table a formal vote of no confidence, under the FTPA, in the government. There would also be intense political pressure on the government.

What happens to other parliamentary business while the Loyal Address is being debated?

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Substantive parliamentary business cannot begin until the new session has formally opened, following the delivery of the Queen's Speech.

In the Commons, ministers can make statements, the regular schedule of oral questions can begin, and the government can begin to introduce bills. Secondary legislation can also be considered - but the time allocated to the debate on the address takes precedence. However, the debate on the address can be temporarily postponed in order to deal with urgent business - which last happened in 2006 with an emergency bill relating to Northern Ireland - or interrupted by an emergency debate held under Standing Order Number 24.

However, ways and means motions, which relate to money, and Westminster Hall debates cannot be held until the end of debates on the address unless MPs vote to suspend existing rules. This means that a Budget cannot be held until after the debate on the address has finished.

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- [1] <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/queen-speech>
- [2] <http://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=What%20is%20a%20Queen%E2%80%99s%20Speech%20and%20when%20is%20it%20delivered%3F%20>
- [3] <http://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=Why%20is%20the%20Queen%E2%80%99s%20Speech%20important%3F%0A>
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- [5] <http://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=Can%20anybody%20other%20than%20the%20Queen%20deliver%20the%20speech%3F%0A>
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