

The lady sails proudly away

It was a privilege to attend the birth of a new political tradition yesterday. I refer not to Mr Smith's shadow budget, but to Ron Brown heckling Black Rod, and the presentation to Mr Speaker by Tony Banks of a stuffed badger. Read on...

As a public relations event, the shadow budget was a success. But if Walworth Road is to pack press conferences with claques of cheerleaders, Yankee-style, to clap their man and jeer journalists who ask awkward questions, then the occasions will have to be avoided. On television it may have appeared that the press were applauding Mr Smith. We were not. I returned to the Commons.

Parliament had galloped through remaining business. To watch 170 clauses pass in the twinkling of an eye was breathtaking. The sitting was then suspended while the Lords passed what the Commons had sent, and sent it back. Mrs Thatcher walked alone into the Chamber.

After years of making personal remarks about the former prime minister, perhaps I am permitted to say that yesterday she looked lovely. She wore very dark green with black collars and a diamond star on one lapel. She seemed quite composed. John Major was absent. Mrs Thatcher made for the government front bench, which was empty. What, we wondered rather nervously, had she in mind?

The table on which the dispatch box sits — where she had stood so many thousands of times — was littered with papers. Mrs Thatcher walked up and tidied the mess. She put the documents together into neat little piles, glanced at her handiwork, and left.

I remembered how, when she was Leader of the Opposition, she would climb on to chairs to check for dust on top of the picture frames in the shadow cabinet room. "It's the way a woman knows that a room's *really* been cleaned," she once told us.

By now we were ready for Black Rod. He arrived from the Lords. A new Black Rod (the last one never recovered from a Dennis Skinner stage whisper of "I bet he drinks Carling Black Label"), he faced a situation no Black Rod has faced before.

Ron Brown, the MP who has been dispossessed by his Leith constituency Labour party and is famous for

an incident involving damage to the Mace, and another involving knickers, tried to interrupt. Was the aim to pick an argument with Black Rod himself? No: apparently the MP wanted to complain to the Speaker about something else. Only Ron Brown (if I may borrow from another lager advert) can do this. Black Rod ignored him.

MPs trooped off to the Lords to hear the prorogation. Neil Kinnock being absent, Mrs Thatcher paired up with Frank Haynes, the retiring Labour MP for Ashfield. His booming and good-natured interruptions have always made her laugh.

When they returned, it was time for Mr Speaker to send us home. It was his final duty. "I have to acquaint the House..." he began — and read out the completed bills: "Still Birth Definition Act, 1992, Traffic Calming Act, 1992..." Then "by virtue of Her Majesty's command", he prorogued the Commons.

Mrs Thatcher, who had sat with her long-time supporter and friend, Gerald Howarth (C, Cannock & Burntwood), was almost the first to say goodbye. To a huge cheer she walked down the gangway, shook Mr Speaker's hand, and sailed proudly out. It was sublime.

Something ridiculous was required, and Labour's Tony Banks provided it. Banks was the star of the Badgers' Bill last year. When it came to his turn to say goodbye, he pulled from under his arm a large fluffy toy and handed it to the Speaker, whose wig shook in amazement. It was black-and-white, in synthetic fur. On closer inspection, a toy badger. Mr Speaker placed it at his feet, and carried on shaking hands. Finally the last MP, Sir Marcus Fox, said goodbye. The Speaker was alone in the Chamber.

He picked up the badger. Waving the bundle of fluff in a final salute to the press gallery above, he left.

Mr Weatherill has been a splendid Speaker. He has extended and developed many parliamentary traditions. Who knows? In years to come the Presentation of the Badger, which will follow the Heckling of Black Rod and culminate in the Waving of the Badger, may be observed as our latest ancient British ceremony.

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