

# PARLIAMENT



Apology: Maria Miller's statement lasted for only half a minute

## QUENTIN LETTS



## On a very brief performance

**W**E gallery scribes are not equipped with the sort of high-tech timing equipment used by athletics marshals at the Olympics, so no one was precisely sure how long Maria Miller's 'apology' in the Commons lasted. But if parliamentarians are going to persist in such scurvy behaviour, our editors are going to have to provide us with top-notch stopwatches.

Perhaps we should find sponsors. 'This sketch brought to you by Accurist', or something like that.

Was it 32 seconds? Some thought so. The bloke from the Telegraph reckoned she had pushed it to 34 seconds. The Western Morning News thought 31.

A website had Mrs Miller down to a competitive 27 seconds, which would put her in the Usain Bolt league.

But did one measure it from the moment she started speaking or the moment she lifted her hams off the green leather?

I'm afraid I was having a bit of trouble removing the top from my ballpoint pen - having earlier been in the Treasury select committee, I had chewed it, from boredom, and it had become stuck.

By the time I got the thing off and turned to a fresh page in my notebook, Mrs Miller had started - and finished. Neowww! That was not an apology so much as a Formula One car zooming past you at Silverstone.

She had entered the Chamber around midday accompanied by Government Chief Whip Sir George Young, Bt.

A black outfit was topped by a white cardigan and a slender necklace. Her barnet had been scraped back and given a squirt of lacquer. As Maria Queen of Scots approached the scaffold, her hairdo did not budge an inch.

Strike up the funereal drum roll. Muffle the horses's hooves in black silk.

Also in the cortege was Anne Milton, a Whip and unofficial convener of the Tory wimmin.

**M**RS Milton used to be a district nurse. Did she have a phial of sedative in her handbag in case Mrs Miller had an attack of the vapours? They headed for the backbenches. This caused a momentary sensation: had she quit the Cabinet? But no. She did not speak from the despatch box because she was here acting in her personal capacity as an 'Hon' Member.

Tory MPs formed a 'doughnut' round Mrs Miller. Having plenty of personnel in the TV shot would give the impression that Mrs Miller was much loved. Gavin Williamson (S Staffs), the Prime Minister's PPS, sat next to Mrs Milton. Downing Street was plainly determined to support her, as we also saw from the way it stuffed the parliamentary day with ministerial statements. Who said the days of cynical news management were over?

Mrs Miller, rising at the invitation of an oily Speaker, spoke off a single sheet of paper. You might have thought she could have

## 32 seconds...

## you'd have struggled to

## write a cheque

## for £5,800

## in that time!



Insolent: Maria Miller apologises in the Commons

learned such a short text by heart. The words 'I of course unreservedly apologise' passed her lips. Seldom has a sentence sounded so insincere.

She thanked the Standards Committee for 'bringing this matter to an end', if end it be. Some might feel that when a Cabinet minister behaves so badly, the only proper conclusion is a resignation.

She completed her tiny soliloquy. You would have struggled to write a cheque for £5,800 in that time. Half a minute! The mating strokes of a bonobo monkey take longer. Even a dragonfly, most ephemeral of God's crea-

tures, might have felt compelled to ask: 'Is that it?'

She sat a second or two. Then she collected her sheet of paper and, accompanied still by Mrs Milton, walked without evident shame towards the double doors. Her bulletproof hairdo was held stiff and high. She sailed out with a gait that said 'screw you, voters'.

Mrs Miller is minister for Fleet Street. Keen lecturer on ethics that she is, she will surely not object if, recoiling with distaste, I suggest this insolent little performance fell far short of what is seemly for a senior Minister of the Crown.