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Mr Squeaker loses his voice... peace breaks out in the Commons

Political Sketch



The day John Bercow lost his voice — from Squeaker to Croaker — proved to be the most civilised in the Commons for weeks. Well, there's a coincidence. With the little termagant largely

muted, MPs rubbed along with each other just fine.

The cordiality felt significant, for Boris Johnson was presenting his new Irish-border Brexit solution. Conservative Leave and Remain supporters united behind it, government supporters as disparate as David Gauke and Steve Baker giving it the nod. Criticism from the opposition benches was less rancid than of late. Although the SNP's leader, Ian Blackford, made a call for Mr Johnson to resign he gave it only half-throttle and chuckled as he resumed his seat. Mr Blackford is invariably quite cheery when that tooth-grinder Joanna Cherry is not sitting beside him.

The one person who really ranted against the plan was Jeremy Corbyn. "No Labour MP could

Theresa May watched from behind Boris Johnson as he presented his new Brexit proposal to the Commons. John Bercow, below, was struggling to keep his voice

support such a reckless deal," he cried, with a little stamp of the feet. And yet it is thought that several Labour members may do just that.

Mr Bercow's voice loss, alas not quite total, became apparent when he sprang to his



toes just after 9.30am to say "order, order". The words emerged sounding like the ribbit-ribbit of a frog with catarrh. The creak of a graveyard gate. Henry Kissinger after a bender. He should probably have taken the day off, but that would have meant entrusting proceedings to his deputy Sir Lindsay Hoyle, who hopes to succeed him. Bercow is not a Hoyle supporter.

The PM arrived at 11.30am to make his statement. It was delivered at a measured pace with none of the partisanship and lip-licking sometimes seen from Mr Johnson. Equally, it did not draw the sort of histrionic Labour shrieks that so mottled last week. Mr Johnson was elaborately courteous, inviting opponents to come and see him with their concerns. This was Boris in deal-making mode.

The House was not full. Some onlookers wondered if it was ominous that the Democratic Unionists were not in their seats. Probably not. After an early intervention from Sir Bill Cash ("a welcome indication of progress") it became clear that ardent supporters of Brexit and the Union were going to support this latest idea from Downing Street. Mark Francois, Peter Bone, David Jones: all these firm Eurosceptics gave it a fair wind, and when Mr Baker did the same Boris expressed his relief, and that made Mr Baker bristle with pride.

On the other side of the Tory divide, Ashford's Damian Green, a Europhile, "welcomed the proposals". Alistair Burt (Ind, NE Beds), damp as moss, "commended the prime minister's tone". Greg Clark (Ind, Tunbridge Wells)

"welcomed" the proposal, raising only a small query about the free flow of goods over the Irish border. After this slew of friendly remarks by ex-Tories, Boris was urged by Sir Peter Bottomley (C, Worthing W) to forgive the rebels and readmit them to the party. Boris did not quite do that — the "Surrender Act" they had imposed on him had had "very serious consequences" — but his tone was amicable and he certainly did not kill Sir Peter's suggestion of a reconciliation.

Philip Hammond (Ind, Runnymede & Weybridge) was in the chamber but he did not try to intervene. That particular malefactor may go on sucking his acid-drops a while longer.

North Oxfordshire's Victoria Prentis, a hockey-sticks Europhile, possibly spoke for many when she hoped that "this might be the beginning of the end" of Westminster's Brexit blockage. But not all resentments will abate. Earlier, Bercow had a dig at the attorney-general, Geoffrey Cox, regarding the "abuse, calumny and vituperation" that had been aimed at the anti-Brexit Commons (Mr Cox, you will recall, called it "this dead parliament").

As Mr Cox left the chamber he had words with Bercow. They did not look friendly. A lawyerly digit was wagged. Bercow looked startled, as bullies do when someone stands up to them.

