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READINGS IN PARLIAMENTARY LAW

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Edited by Gregg Phifer, *Florida State University*

With special assistance from

Leo G. Athans, California

John E. Baird, California

Hy Farwell, Colorado

Jane M. Klausman, New York

Eve Wilkinson, Florida

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MEETING DYNAMICS

Bernard Grofman

A good chairman needs more than a knowledge of parliamentary procedure. He/she must understand something about meeting dynamics. That is the purpose of this article.

1. *Meetings come in all shapes and sizes.* There are big meetings, small meetings, and in-between ones. There are meetings among friends, meetings among enemies, and meetings among strangers. There are meetings to generate ideas, meetings to make irrevocable decisions, and even meetings to plan other meetings. While some basic aspects of chairing (e.g., fairness) stay constant, a good chairman adapts his behavior to suit the context. Formality and strict adherence to parliamentary procedure are essential in large and factionalized decision-making bodies but largely inappropriate in a group of friends engaging in a brainstorming session to generate fund-raising ideas. In any group the chairman's responsibility is to facilitate the activities of the group. A good chairman, above all else, can intuit where the body is going and help it get there fast without trampling over anybody in the process.

2. *Discern unanimous consent.* A good chairman learns to make use of unanimous-consent requests to expedite decision making. If it is clear that *everybody* in the group is in favor of doing something, and no further discussion is needed, make it easy for all by proposing that it be done by unanimous consent. If there is no objection from anyone in the group *after you have carefully explained what is being proposed so that it is clear to everyone*, then the group's will has been registered. Use the unanimous-request frequently, particularly in small groups. If people object quite often, then you know that you haven't got the feel of the group. When you are in tune with the group, your use of the unanimous-consent request will be recognized as a way of facilitating the group process. You are properly sensitive if, whenever you ask for unanimous consent, you get it.

3. *A little learning is a necessary thing.* You may have seen parliamentary procedure abused to manipulate the parliamentarily less sophisticated. Don't be fooled by strange terminology and complex rules. Basically parliamentary procedure is a combination of basic norms of fairness with some simple rules to help get first things done first. Having at least a basic knowledge of parliamentary procedure is essential to being a good chairman, but learning *Robert's Rules* or its equivalent is only a beginning. The chairman helps people by showing them how they can use the group's procedures to accomplish what they want and by explaining to them in ordinary language the meaning of such parliamentary terms as laying on the table or moving the previous question. At all times the chairman should clarify the parliamentary situation (e.g., what the pending question is). If you don't know parliamentary procedure, you won't be able to do these things. Relying on a parliamentarian to continually tell you what to do is a mistake. A parliamentarian should be used as a consultant on difficult or obscure points of procedure. It is the chairman, not the parliamentarian, who rules on parliamentary points. Parliamentarians help the chairman with sound advice when he/she requests it.

4. *Meetings begin before meetings begin.* Any meeting for which the groundwork hasn't already carefully been laid is likely to be a failure. Before a meeting begins, the chairman should have a clear agenda in mind and should also have ascertained something about the expectations of the other participants. *If you find out what other people want in advance, it's easier to prepare an agenda that everyone will quickly agree to.* Get agreement on an agenda immediately and then stick to it, modifying only by unanimous consent. In the long run you'll get a lot more done that way. Ideally the basic agenda should be known to all participants *before the meeting.*

5. *Meetings don't end when meetings end.* It's all too common in voluntary organizations to end one meeting on a note of consensus and triumph, only to begin the next meeting with a sense of dismay because "Nothing's been done." It's not enough to agree on what needs to be done; you also have to be clear on how it will get done. Meetings are means to an end, not ends in themselves. Responsibilities for action must be clearly assigned.

6. *A meeting without minutes is like a piece of improvisational theater—once performed, it can never be recreated exactly as it was.* Record keeping is often dismissed as petty bureaucracy until people begin arguing over what was "really" decided two meetings ago and have no way of definitively resolving the dispute without good minutes. More generally, it's the responsibility of the officers of an organi-

zation to turn over to their successors a clear and accurate record of the decisions and actions taken during their tenure of office. What did your predecessor hand over to you? What will you give your successor? Good record keeping includes not only minutes and financial records but also committee reports, correspondence files, and up-to-date address lists.

7. *Get the feel and set the tone of a meeting.* A good chairman is "in tune" with his/her group. He/she can anticipate its needs, sense confusion or restlessness, and forestall unnecessary bitterness by insuring that minority viewpoints are heard. Learn to watch and to listen. Paper shuffling, restless feet, yawns, eyes up at the ceiling, are clear indications that people are bored. Perhaps you can do something about it by speeding up the pace of the meeting. When the meeting is lethargic, speak faster, call on people quickly, and use unanimous consent a lot. On the other hand, when people are angry or apprehensive, and there's a lot of tension, slow things down and keep things calm by the pace and tone of your remarks. When people are shouting, speak slowly but firmly. Never try to outshout a shouter.

Be attentive to both verbal and nonverbal cues from your group. For example, meetings permit interaction. No significant interaction takes place when a meeting degenerates into a sequence of monologues.

What can you do? First, listen with exaggerated attention, especially in large gatherings where the chairman is visible on a podium or dais. People will look at the speaker who has the floor; so will other members. When you don't pay attention to what is being said, this reduces the attention level of others who (not necessarily consciously) are taking their cues from you.

A second way to cope with too many monologues is to repeatedly refer to what other people have said in the course of a debate, making sure to credit each by name. Once again, the chairman's behavior should set an example for others in the group.

Finally, if worse comes to worst, the chairman may need to call attention to the fact that no dialogue is taking place. Avoid this if at all possible. The chairman should teach by example, not preach.

8. *Get help.* Too often a presiding officer of an organization tries to do everything himself or herself. We know how deadly this can be for the day-to-day business of the organization, but it can be equally devastating when the chairman tries to hog all responsibilities during a meeting. No chairman can preside impartially over a debate while simultaneously giving all the reports and answering all the questions about the organization's activities or vociferously arguing down opposition in debate from the chair. Even so, many have been known to try.

Particularly in small groups it is ridiculous to prevent the chairman from commenting on the substance of an issue. Certainly the chairman has the responsibility to respond to questions of fact germane to the debate.

A good chairman works out a division of labor with officers of the organization and with those who share his/her views on forthcoming agenda items. By studying the questions and the issues that will come up at a meeting you can brief others on relevant facts and arguments. Information is power, but we are often reluctant to share the information we have with others—even our friends. Every time you speak ask yourself: Is what I'm saying really necessary, or am I talking just to hear myself talk? If it is necessary do I have to be the one saying it? Could others in the group give these facts or arguments?

In large meetings the chairman will not allow his attention to be distracted by people who come to the lectern to ask questions of procedure, information, or tactics. Most such items would only waste time if dealt with before the entire body, so a parliamentarian or other responsible official of the organization should be available during the meeting to privately field such queries. Only after this prescreening should more-important questions be raised publicly.

In addition a secretary should be available to read back accurately the text of any motions, to find needed information from previous minutes, and to assist the chairman in time-keeping and in tallying votes.

9. *Go slow in order to go fast.* Many activities, at first view, seem capable of being speeded up to avoid wasting the group's time. But they really must be done slowly, at least initially.

For example, in voting, it's faster to take a voice vote, and faster to take a standing vote than to have a roll call. But it is very important that everyone trust the chairman's count. Disputes and calls for revotes are common in large meetings. Confusion makes it impossible for all members to get the big picture in voting. So, early in the meeting when the chairman believes that a vote is likely to be disputed, even if he thinks the outcome is clear, he should order a revote by a more reliable method. By making clear to the group that he/she is bending over backward to be fair and by establishing the accuracy of previous vote tallies the chairman obtains the group's confidence. In ordering a revote the chairman should stress that he/she will order a revote whenever there is any doubt concerning the results. For example: "We on the podium agree that on the basis of the voice vote the ayes have it; but as I shall order a revote whenever there is any doubt as to the outcome—and this vote was close—I shall order a standing vote. Will those who favor the motion please stand? Will all others sit down? If you are standing, this means you favor the motion. Otherwise, please sit down."

Another point: It is never wasted time to explain clearly and precisely what the pending question is and the implications of a yes or a no vote. This is particularly true in a large meeting, such as a convention. When amendments or incidental motions are offered, it is easy for people to become confused.

It seems inevitable that in any large group there will be those who abuse parliamentary procedure either out of ignorance or design. For example, some attempt a point of order, privilege, or information. They call for the previous question without waiting to be recognized. The chairman should clearly, simply, and repeatedly explain the procedures. He/she should be tolerant of innocent mistakes. Only *and only* when it is clear to everyone that some are deliberately misusing procedures to gain a debating advantage should the chairman crack down. When this happens the chairman should act quietly but firmly and there should be ample warning. For example: "The chairman recognizes that many people are not familiar with parliamentary procedure and wants to help people to get done what they want to get done. The chairman has repeatedly explained that a point of order cannot be used for debate. This is the eighth time that someone has risen to a point of order and then proceeded to debate the issue. Is there anyone who is not clear that a point of order cannot be used to get the floor for debate?"

If procedures are made clear to people and are seen as fair, problems will usually be resolved. Nonetheless, some groups include individuals who will be disruptive if permitted to be. It is up to the chairman to insure fair treatment to all and enforce norms of civility. To control hopelessly disruptive individuals the chairman must mobilize group sentiment. For people who fail to respond to explanations and hints a crack-down should come only when the practices have become so obnoxious that it is clear that they must be stopped if the group is to be able to do its business. In stopping abuses the chairman must be clear that the abuses are his target and not particular persons. The rules apply to all, equally. If the chair overreacts or acts too soon, he/she will raise serious doubts about his/her own fairness. His/her actions may incite even more disruption. A good chairman, like a good comedian, must have a finely tuned sense of timing.

10. *Get to meetings early and start them on time.* Strictly speaking, of course, you can't start a meeting till you have a quorum; but in the absence of a quorum you can open the session with introductions of guests or reports that do not require a vote. As long as people realize that no business will be transacted in the absence of a quorum they are unlikely to object. Once you establish a reputation for beginning on time, people will begin coming on time.

Learn to make use of time limits (both of total time and of time for each speaker) to control debate. If you sense that people are ready

for a vote, ask if there are people, still undecided, who need further debate. Learn also to use special orders to place a crucial item of business at a designated time, interrupting all other business. This helps to hold a quorum, for people are assured that they will not have to wait indefinitely before the crucial item comes up.

The setting of a meeting is important and too often neglected. Formal settings (e.g., rooms set up as mock legislatures) encourage people to play-act and posture, especially when there are microphones. Avoid rooms too large for the size of the meeting. When forced into such a setting, confine the group to a portion of the space and bring people into a more intimate atmosphere. Movable chairs and a circular arrangement are better than fixed chairs in straight lines. In general the smaller the group, the less formal and more intimate should be the setting. One caveat: In a decision-making group above a certain group size (perhaps about twenty) it is a mistake to have everybody lounging around on plush sofas or chairs or on the floor. Informality can become counterproductive, because the group, lacking structure and focus, tends to degenerate into a series of private conversations. Even in small groups it is often important to structure the environment by putting people around a table.

Except in highly politicized large groups where the chairman must be impersonal and enforce polite forms of address between members, it is desirable to get people on a first-name basis. This is particularly important in overcoming differences in income, education, or status.

11. *Honesty is the best policy.* Machiavelli notwithstanding, it is impossible in the long run to convince people that you are both fair and impartial if, in fact, you are not. Being fair and impartial does not, however, mean never making mistakes. No matter how experienced you are, you will find yourself making errors in judgment. When you have been wrong, admit it. Never try to cover up your mistakes. In the long run you will be respected more if people realize that you realize that you too are human and thus fallible.

Good luck! You may need it.

Bernard Grofman is Professor of Political Science and Social Psychology, School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine. He is a specialist in mathematical models of collective decision-making and the political consequences of electoral laws, with over one hundred published articles on topics such as jury verdict choice, reapportionment and voter turnout, and coalition formation models. During the last decade he has been involved in eleven states as an expert witness in redistricting litigation or as a court-appointed reapportionment expert.