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LeaderThoughts #12 by Michael Brown

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Basics of Parliamentary Procedure

For leaders, there are many skills that can serve them well. In addition to developing a better understanding of leadership, for instance, being able to communicate their vision thru spoken and written word is important. Being able to plan things is good. And a working knowledge of parliamentary procedure can also be useful. But what is **parliamentary procedure**? Too often many, especially young people, have a poor understanding of what it is. And this is not helped by adults who have misinformed them.



This is the first in a sub-series of articles on this topic.

It's important to realize that when people come together to make decisions, they need a method of doing so. Our ancestors understood this, in their gatherings in villages and small communities. How do you put forth your idea or proposal? How do you handle the discussion or debate about it? How do you handle any changes to the proposal? How do you handle making a decision? Over time an agreed upon set of rules were developed, which came to be referred to as "parliamentary procedure". And over time, parliamentary procedure has come to mean more regarding the running of meetings and organizations (such as agendas, meeting minutes, and even basic officer duties). Not surprising that term is used. A **parliament** is a legislative body, one which makes laws. It comes from the word 'parley', to speak or discuss.

Sometimes you see the term "parliamentary law" used. This is because it's part of the common law, because parliamentary procedure/law is how laws are created. Usually the lawyerly types get all bent out of shape when they hear "parliamentary law", thinking that makes it part of their area of knowledge/responsibility. Not so. Few lawyers are knowledgeable in parliamentary procedure. It's a separate area of study that not all undertake.

Because parliamentary procedure developed organically, if you will, there are many variants of it. These are enunciated in a variety of "parliamentary authorities", which are works that set down a particular set of parliamentary procedure. While most are very similar (the 'commonly accepted parliamentary law', if you will), there are differences in many of these works.



"This meeting was called in order to discuss the meat. It has been pointed out that there is no more meat. A motion has been made to fight over the bones."

In the US (and most of the English-speaking world), our tradition of parliamentary procedure started with the British House of Commons and its rules. Thomas Jefferson's *Manual of Parliamentary Practice for the Use of the Senate of the United States* (aka "Jefferson's Manual") is the first true parliamentary authority in the US. Written originally for the Senate, today it's used as the authority for the House of Representatives, while the Senate follows their own "Standing Rules".

"Jefferson's Manual" was intended for legislative bodies (i.e., groups such as county commissioners, city councils, state legislatures, etc.) and not regular groups that use parliamentary procedure (what are called "deliberate assemblies", ordinary societies or groups that deliberate or discuss business). So for them, other parliamentary authorities were developed. For decades, many competing works were out there. In 1876, Henry Robert published his pocket manual which became known as Robert's Rules of Order. It has become the most widely used parliamentary authority, now in its 11th edition as *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised* (RONR). *The American Institute of Parliamentarians Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure* (properly the 5th edition of this work) and *Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure* (the Blue Book edition) are probably the 2nd and 3rd most used works in the US.

The basic principles of parliamentary procedure are pretty simple.

- All members have equal rights, privileges, and obligations
- The majority vote decides.
- The rights of the minority must be protected.
- Full and free discussion of every proposition presented for decision is an established right of members.
- Every member has the right to know the meaning of the question before the assembly (the proposed decision) and what its effect will be.
- All meetings must be characterized by fairness and by good faith.

We many times speak of the **rights of members**. In parliamentary procedure, this is usually the right of **voice and vote**: to be able to make motions and debate those motions and vote on them. We also speak of the rights of the majority (majority vote decides), the rights of the minority (to speak in opposition, etc), the rights of those not present (require a quorum to conduct business, all members notified of decisions, etc) and all those together.

Too often, well intended people think that parliamentary procedure is just needless rules and such, and try to avoid using it. But what often happens is that things are done improperly, and members will be upset because things are not going the way they expect or want them, or think their rights are being abused. I have found a few works who try to put forth alternatives to parliamentary procedure. The worse of these don't even bother to find out what parliamentary procedure is, claiming that it was created by Henry Robert, not something that actually predated him (by several hundred years).

There will be further LeaderThoughts in this subseries on parliamentary procedure that will cover several topics in the area, including agendas, minutes, motions, bylaws and more. I have also created a powerpoint presentation on basic parliamentary procedure for Venturers that is out there.

There are organizations that can help one learn parliamentary procedure. The two national organizations are the National Association of Parliamentarians (NAP) and the American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIP), both of which have local chapters. NAP is older and larger. To join, you must pass a test on basic parliamentary knowledge, and you can then go on to be certified as a "parliamentarian" (one who

is knowledgeable about parliamentary procedure) with further testing. They publish a quarterly journal and several other works. AIP is smaller, and does not require a test to join, but they too certify parliamentarians. They publish a quarterly scholarly journal and several other works.

For more info on them, visit their websites:

NAP: www.parliamentarians.org

AIP: www.aipparl.org

(I happen to be a member of both organizations, as well as a member of the Florida State Association of Parliamentarians and an officer of the Plantation Unit of Parliamentarians, both part of NAP).