

# call to order

*Everybody Appreciates a Well-Run Meeting*

—J. Michael Blaska, Parliamentarian & Chief of Staff, Wisconsin Counties Association



I am fond of saying everyone appreciates a well-run meeting. Meetings guided by a specific set of rules are more efficient, cordial and effective.

I learned very quickly serving ten years on the Sun Prairie Town Board and eighteen years on the Dane County Board of Supervisors that understanding the rules of order of a given body gives you an edge in advancing your position and establishing yourself as an authority, which could lead to leadership positions.

Understanding rules of order can be used in many facets of civil society, not only at county board or committee meetings. Many of us are involved in civic organizations, church boards, sport associations, farm groups and other governmental entities.

Rules of order are necessary to conduct any type of meeting. The object of rules of order is to facilitate the smooth functioning of an assembly and to provide a firm basis for resolving questions of procedure. It is unwise for any assembly to function without formally adopted rules of order.

We can find rules for conducting meetings in the *Wisconsin State Statutes*, local rules and *Robert's Rules of Order*. The statutes state that a majority vote is needed to conduct business; however, state statute may require two-thirds vote in some circumstances.

The usual method by which an organization provides itself with suitable rules of order is to include in the organization's bylaws or ordinances a provision prescribing that the current edition

of a specified and generally accepted manual of parliamentary law be the organization's parliamentary authority. The organization then adopts only such special rules of order as it finds are needed to supplement or modify rules contained in that manual.

It is presumed that any organization that has not formally adopted rules of procedure will follow *Roberts Rules of Order*.

Where did *Robert's Rules of Order* come from? It was written by Henry Martyn Robert (1837-1923) and was originally published as the *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies* in 1876. Mr. Robert was an engineering officer in the United States Army who attained the rank of Brigadier General. He was also active in educational work, church and civic organizations.

During the American Civil War, Robert was asked without advanced notice to preside over a meeting on developing a defense strategy in preparation for a confederate attack on the city of New Bedford, Massachusetts. That meeting lasted 14 hours and he admitted to being totally unprepared and embarrassed. Robert declared then and there that he would never again preside over a meeting without knowing parliamentary law – the terms originally given to the rules and customs for carrying out business in the English Parliament.

For the next several years, Robert gathered information and read books on decisions and procedural policy made by the English Parliament

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and the United States Congress. Due to a severe Wisconsin winter while stationed in Milwaukee, Robert was unable to continue the Army's engineering project along the Lake Michigan shore. During the resulting respite, he began writing the manual that today is *Robert's Rules of Order*. In its 11th edition, *Robert's Rules of Order* is recognized as the premier authority on rules of procedure.

Running effective meetings is no small task and *Robert's Rules of Order* is a great place to start. Not only is it important to understand motions, when they are appropriate, whether they need a second, whether they are debatable and when a simple majority to approve is appropriate, it is also important to understand meeting etiquette. How members of a body behave during a meeting, such as a member's motives and germane debate, are as critical to running meetings as points of procedure.

These items and more will be discussed right here in *Wisconsin Counties'* newest feature column, *Call to Order*. Stay tuned to the February installment for a review of the most commonly misused motions in the "not" so well run meetings.



*Henry Martyn Robert was born on May 2, 1837 in Robertville, South Carolina. Author of Robert's Rules of Order, Robert attained the rank of Brigadier General in the U.S. Army and served in the Pig and American Civil War. Robert died in 1923 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.*



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