

# call to order

## *Previous Question*

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**W**e have all been to meetings where the debate seems to go on and on. Everybody wants to speak. The same thing is said over and over again and the same point is made several times. Is there anything that can be done to end this seemingly endless debate?

If a member wants to end debate and bring the question to an immediate vote, the proper motion to use is to move the *Previous Question*. Its adoption immediately ends debate, stops the amendment process, and prevents the making of any other subsidiary motions except for the higher-ranking motion of *Lay on the Table*. The motion name is somewhat misleading, as it has nothing to do with the question previously considered by the body.

Standard characteristics of the *Previous Question* are as follows:

1. Takes precedence over all debatable or amendable motions to which it is applied
2. Can be applied to any immediately pending debatable or amendable motion
3. Is out of order when another has the floor
4. Must be seconded
5. Is not debatable
6. Is not amendable
7. Requires a two-thirds vote

Further, an affirmative vote can be reconsidered before the vote on the question has been taken.

A negative vote can be reconsidered only until such time has elapsed to make it a new question (essentially meaning after more debate the motion can be made again).

How often have you been at a meeting where someone calls for the question?

A call for the question is often made with the expectation that it will end debate and the chair will call for an immediate vote. The ability to debate a question or subject matter is one of a member's most basic rights. No one member can end debate by simply calling for the question. A member calling for the question from their seat without having attained the floor or interrupting a speaker is considered to be disorderly. A call for the question is in order if it is understood to mean the *Previous Question*.

The presiding officer cannot close debate as long as any member wants to speak and has not exhausted their right to speak. If the chair feels the debate is about finished and a member calls for the question, the chair, without objection or with unanimous consent, can end debate and call for the vote. The *Previous Question* is not allowed in committee.

Debate can be limited by following *Robert's Rules of Order*, which specifies members may speak no more than two times for a total of ten minutes on a motion. This rule is an important tool for running efficient and effective meetings. It forces

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*call to order (cont.)*

## *Previous Question*

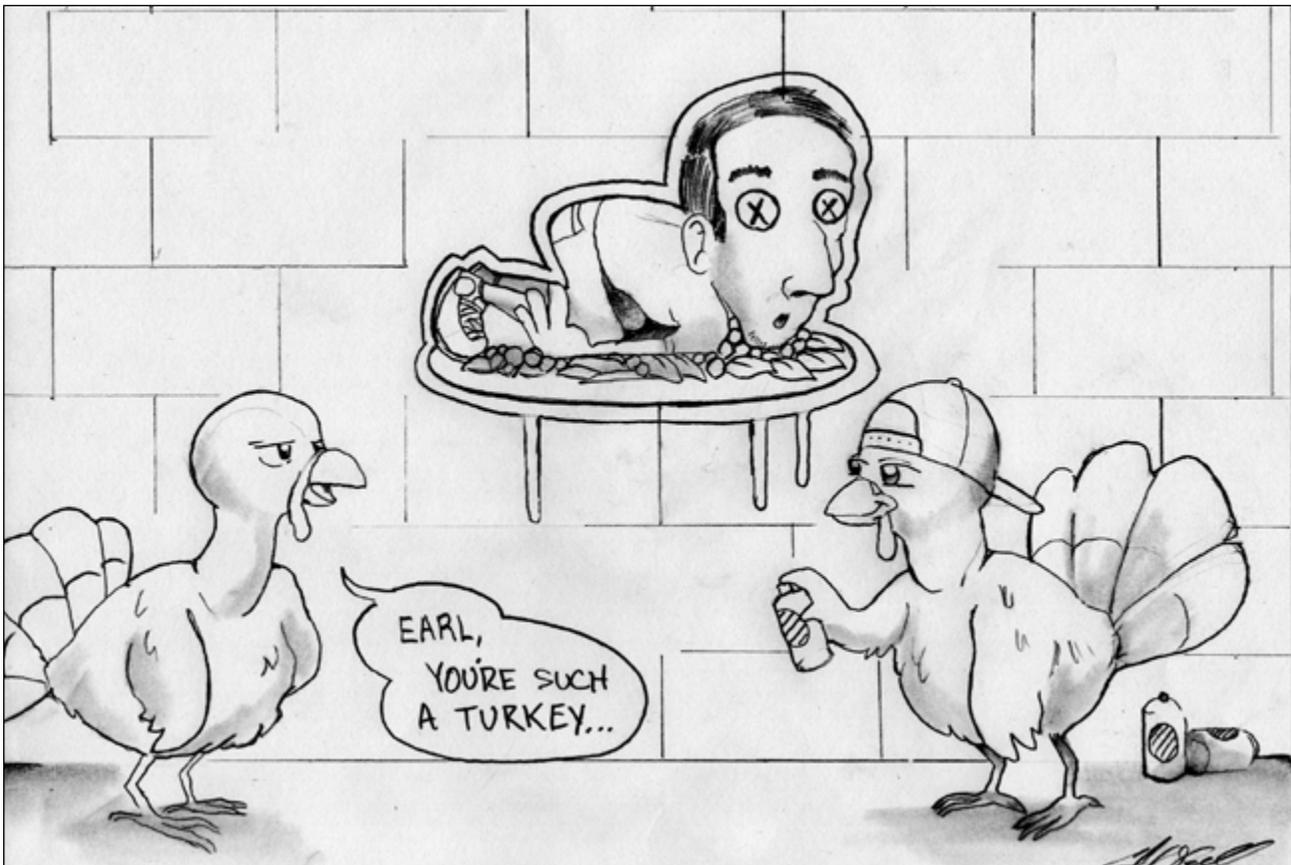
members to be strategic about their debate instead of responding to everything that is said. Some will argue that speaking two times for no more than ten minutes is too limiting. However, this rule applies to each motion. If the main motion is to *Adopt* the budget, a member may speak two times for a total of ten minutes and two times ten minutes for every other debatable motion offered that applies to the main motion. This includes motions such as *Amend*, *Refer*, *Postpone*, *Indefinitely Postpone*, etc. Of course, assemblies can adopt their own rules regarding debate.

I served ten years on the Sun Prairie Town Board, eight years as chair and eighteen years on

the Dane County Board, four years as chair. We had many evening meetings that went well into the morning. The longest county board meeting started at 7:00 p.m. and adjourned at 5:00 a.m. Throughout the meeting, there were several votes to end debate; however, in all my years of public service, I never voted to end debate. As long as members wanted to speak, I was willing to stay. The ability to debate a question is an inherent right in a deliberative assembly. Public officials must be willing to listen to their constituents when they call and their colleagues when they debate.

*Source: Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition*

## *Cartoon*



*Christian O'Connell*