

Chapter

1

Robert's Rules 101

In This Chapter

- ◆ Parliamentary procedure, defined
- ◆ Other parliamentary authorities besides *Robert's*
- ◆ How *Robert's Rules* have changed
- ◆ Why *Robert's* still rules

Imagine the following scenario: As an active member of your community, you attend a meeting about an issue that is important to you. During the discussion, you want to make a point, but you have no idea how to phrase it or even when it's acceptable to speak up. You try once, but are ruled out of order by the chair! Embarrassed, you sit quietly during the rest of the meeting and never share your idea with the rest of the group.

Sound familiar? Unfortunately, a lot of people are scared off by parliamentary procedure, when in reality it's meant to allow all members to participate fairly and equally.

So What Is Parliamentary Procedure?

Parliamentary procedure is a system of conducting business when working in a group (that group is sometimes also called a *deliberative assembly*).

Simply stated, it's an organized system that allows a group of people to come together and make a decision. The system is made up of basic principles and rules that determine how the group will proceed through the decision-making process.

Parliamentary procedure is about helping the group come to a decision; it is not about helping any one individual get his or her way, and it is certainly not intended to prevent members from participating in the group.



Robert's Says

Deliberative assembly—

A group of people meeting together to openly discuss issues and make decisions that then become the decision of the group.

Parliamentary procedure also helps the group stay focused on a single issue until the members resolve it. This technique helps groups make better, more logical decisions—they have the advantage of many minds working together using a systematic approach to problem-solving.

In many respects parliamentary procedure is the “rules of the road” for meetings, but I hope you will see that it's not simply a set of rules. Rather, you should think of it as a set of guidelines by which to conduct meetings.

Getting Down to Basics

The following are the foundational concepts upon which parliamentary procedure is based:

- ◆ **One thing at a time.** Only one main motion is allowed on the floor at a time, but there is a system to put that motion aside if something more urgent comes up.
- ◆ **One person, too.** Only one person may talk at a time.
- ◆ **And only one time per meeting.** The same motion, or practically the same motion, can not be made more than once per session (the only exception is if a member changes his or her mind).
- ◆ **Enough of us have to be here to decide.** The group determines the minimum number of people (called a quorum) that must be present to make a decision for the whole group.
- ◆ **Protected even if absent.** The rights of the members who are absent are protected.
- ◆ **Vote requirements are based on members' rights.** The determination of what kind of vote is needed (such as majority, two thirds, and so on) is based on

members' rights. If an action gives rights to the members, it requires a majority vote to pass. If an action takes away rights from members, it requires a two-thirds vote to pass.

- ◆ **Silence = consent.** If a member chooses to abstain from voting, that member is giving his or her consent to the decision made by the group.
- ◆ **Everybody is equal.** All voting members have equal rights. The majority rules but the minority has the right to be heard and to attempt to change the minds of the majority.

Make the Rules Meet Your Needs!

Because each group is different, parliamentary procedure is designed to be the basis for the rules, which groups can then adapt to their own needs. So in a deliberative assembly, you have the rules that are determined by your parliamentary authority, and you have the rules that are determined by your particular organization (bylaws, special rules, and so on, which I discuss in Chapter 4).

Other Parliamentary Authorities

What do I mean by *parliamentary authority*? That is the set of rules that a group adopts as the rules that will govern them. Although this book is about *Robert's Rules of Order*, it is only one, albeit the most popular, parliamentary authority that a deliberative assembly might choose to use. Other parliamentary authorities include the following:

- ◆ *The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*, originally by Alice Sturgis, is in its fourth edition. The author's aim was to write a concise book based on common sense and parliamentary principles. She got away from the more technical language used in *Robert's*. Sturgis is most popular in the medical profession. Alice Sturgis is dead, and the American Institute of Parliamentarians authored the current edition.
- ◆ *Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure*, by George Demeter, was first published in 1948 and has been revised a few times. The differences



Parliamentary Pearls

You can find the parliamentary authority for your organization in your bylaws. If the bylaws are written following the format prescribed in *Robert's*, you will find an article titled "Parliamentary Authority." That article should be one of the last articles in the bylaws.

between *Demeter's* and *Robert's* are very minor. *Demeter's* is usually considered to be more user-friendly than *Robert's*.



Gavel Gaffs

Don't let people tell you that *Robert's Rules* is outdated and therefore not needed any more! Although following correct parliamentary procedure might seem outmoded and over-fussy in today's informal, fast-paced world, it's actually more crucial now than ever. As long as large groups make decisions, we will need parliamentary procedure.

- ◆ *Mason's Manual of Legislative Procedure* is used by more than half of all legislative bodies. It was written by Paul Mason, first published in 1935. The latest revision in 1989 was written by the National Conference of State Legislatures.
- ◆ *Cannon's Concise Guide to Rules of Order*, by Hugh Cannon, was published in 1992. Although not used as a parliamentary authority per se, this book is frequently looked to by presiding officers to help simplify *Robert's*.

While these other parliamentary authorities have gained a small following, *Robert's* still rules when it comes to parliamentary procedure.

Robert's Revisions

When people refer to *Robert's Rules*, they are referring to a lot of different books. Since the first edition came out in February 1876, nine subsequent editions—many of them with substantial revisions—have been published. Here's a list of all of the revisions, their dates, and the key changes:

- ◆ **First Edition, February 1876.** The complete title of this first book was *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies*. Robert had 4,000 copies printed thinking that would last for at least two years. However, he sold all 4,000 copies in six months!
- ◆ **Second Edition, July 1876.** Robert added a few pages and quickly got out the second edition because of the surprising success of the book.

Point of Information

Henry Martyn Robert (1837–1923) was a general in the United States Army. Robert began researching the subject of parliamentary procedure after he was elected chairman of a group. There were only a few technical books available on the topic, and he soon became frustrated with the lack of information available. Making matters worse, the books that were available contained conflicting information.

- ◆ **Third Edition, 1893.** Robert's plan from the very beginning was to get the first book out to the public, receive feedback on it and, once the printing plates were worn out, revise the book, taking the feedback into consideration. The 1893 edition was that revision.
- ◆ **Fourth Edition, 1915.** Robert himself best explained this edition when he wrote, "The constant inquiries from all sections of the country for information ... that is not contained in *Rules of Order* seems to demand a revision and an enlargement of the manual. To meet this want, the work has been thoroughly revised and enlarged, and to avoid confusion with the old Rules, is published under the title of *Robert's Rules of Order Revised*."
- ◆ **Fifth Edition, 1943.** Henry M. Robert died in 1923, and the 1943 edition of *Robert's Rules of Order Revised* was based on notes that he wrote before his death.
- ◆ **Sixth Edition, 1951.** This was published as the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Edition.
- ◆ **Seventh Edition, 1970.** This 594-page revision almost doubled the size of the previous edition. The principles are the same, but in addition to rules it includes many examples and explanations of the rules. This revision was written by Sarah Corbin Robert, the wife of Henry's only son, Henry M. Robert Jr., with the assistance of Henry M. Robert III, James W. Cleary, and William J. Evans.
- ◆ **Eighth Edition, 1981.** The changes in this edition were so minor that they were able to make them within the same pages, sometimes referred to as an in-pagination revision. So if you find something on page 365 of the seventh edition, it will be on page 365 of the eighth edition.
- ◆ **Ninth Edition, 1990.** *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 1990, is a whopping 706 pages long. The authors of this edition made many changes and enhancements, which are described in the preface to the book.
- ◆ **Tenth Edition, 2000.** This edition (written by Henry M. Robert III, William J. Evans, Daniel H. Honemann, and Thomas J. Balch) maintains the basic rules but clarifies and updates them. The specific changes and clarifications are listed in the preface to the book.



Parliamentary Pearls

The object of Rules of Order is to assist an assembly to accomplish in the best possible manner the work for which it was designed. To do this it is necessary to restrain the individual somewhat, as the right of an individual, in any community, to do what he pleases, is incompatible with the interests of the whole. Where there is no law, but every man does what is right in his own eyes, there is the least of real liberty.

—Words of Wisdom from Henry M. Robert, December, 1875.

Everybody Loves *Robert's*

Robert did not set out to be the leading authority in parliamentary procedure. He simply envisioned a need for a set of rules that were consistently followed everywhere. That was the beginning of what is today the most recognized authority on parliamentary procedure.

More than five million copies of *Robert's*, in its various editions, have been sold. While it is impossible to verify exactly, approximately 90 percent of the organizations in the United States that follow parliamentary procedure use some form of *Robert's* as their parliamentary authority. Sturgis is the second most popular parliamentary authority, and the other authorities have been adopted by only a small number of organizations.

Because it has been distributed so widely and used by so many people and groups, if you understand *Robert's*, you understand parliamentary procedure.

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Parliamentary procedure is a system of conducting business when working in a group. It helps groups to conduct business efficiently and ensure that the rights of individuals are protected while the will of the group is achieved.
- ◆ *Robert's* has undergone many revisions since it was first published in 1876. It is currently in its tenth edition.
- ◆ Other books on parliamentary procedure have been written, but none have surpassed *Robert's* in popularity.