

Conducting Business Quickly and Fairly

Introduction to Parliamentary Procedure

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How many of you think “parliamentary procedure” is the spectacle regularly broadcast on C-SPAN, where Great Britain’s tory and labour party members yell at each other while the prime minister bangs his (or her) gavel trying to keep the peace? Well, at least two Sacramento legislators know (even if most of us “commoners” do not) that parliamentary procedure is not limited to use in actual parliaments such as the British House of Commons. The Davis-Stirling Common Interest Development Act, Civil Code Section 1363, subdivision (d), states that “meetings of the membership of the association shall be conducted in accordance with a recognized system of parliamentary procedure or any parliamentary procedures the association may adopt.” What on earth were Messrs. Davis and Stirling talking about?

“Parliamentary law,” as it is called, is a system of codified rules to help order meetings so that business can be conducted quickly and fairly. As far back as the eighteenth century, it *did* refer to the customs and rules of conducting business in the British Parliament (and you thought I was joking, didn’t you?) While parliamentary law eventually came to be used at all levels of government in Great Britain and the fledgling

United States, it was not until 1876 when Henry Martyn Robert, collected and wrote down a standardized set of rules of parliamentary procedure. He called his volume of some 200 pages *Robert’s Rules of Order*. Even today, *Robert’s Rules of Order* is the parliamentary law guidebook for all kinds of assemblies, organizations, schools and clubs –

- **Maintain decorum at all times.**
- **Confine debate to the merits of the question under discussion.**

Modern parliamentary law is not much different, but must now be applied to more up-to-date situations, such as parent-teacher group meet-

visions of parliamentary law are meant to ensure the rights of the majority while protecting the rights of the minority, and to defend the rights of individual members while safeguarding those people absent from the meeting. To guarantee these core values, parliamentary law requires participants in a meeting to do the following:

- **Address one item at a time.**
- **Extend courtesy and fairness to all.**
- **Let the majority rule.**
- **Guarantee the rights of the minority.**

You probably already incorporate these principles into your meetings, so it will be a small leap to learn to use the Robert’s Rules of Order system correctly.

By the way, did you notice that the Davis-Stirling Act leaves associations the option to pursue a *recognized* system of parliamentary procedure or *any* parliamentary procedures “the association may adopt”? Messrs. Davis and Stirling realized that not every formality will apply. But so many of the principles, terms, and forms of action set forth in Mr. Robert’s system already take into account common sense and courtesies which have both timeless appeal and easy application in modern settings. Why reinvent the wheel?



including homeowners associations.

Early parliamentary law focused on the following basic provisions:

- **Address one subject at a time.**
- **Alternate between or among opposing points of view in the discussion.**
- **Have a “chairperson” tally votes for both sides of the issue.**

ings, sales meetings and shareholder meetings (this last category being the business equivalent of the “meeting of the membership of the association” referenced in the Davis-Stirling Act). The fundamental purpose of parliamentary rules has not changed in hundreds of years: To protect the rights of those people attending and running meetings. The basic pro-

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