

Parliamentary Professional

by Adam J. Jacobi

Parliamentary procedure is often the most feared and misunderstood facet of Student Congress. While snowed-in during a particularly cold winter in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Henry Martyn Robert desperately wanted a solution toward maintaining an orderly agenda for meetings he was asked to facilitate. His response was to write his *Rules of Order*, now in its newly revised 10th edition (RONR) and still edited by one of his descendents vis-à-vis the Robert's Rules Association. His rules instilled several guarantees for the democratic process: to allow as many people as possible – even a minority – an opportunity to express their opinion in the course of debate, to debate one specific issue at a time, and to rule by majority while still protecting the free speech rights of the minority. He also felt it important that all members of an assembly be treated equally and respectfully.

While Robert's Rules is certainly not the first set of rules for keeping order at meetings, it is the modern “gold standard” by which attorneys, lawmakers and community/civic groups use for governing their policies. The NFL employs parliamentary procedure based on Robert's Rules, with a few modifications. An important overarching principle must be kept in mind at all times: parliamentary procedure in Student Congress serves only as a framework to allow for debate, and should not consume the time in a session.

Speaking time is established in the *Student Congress Manual* as three

minutes, with two continuous minutes of questioning for the speaker who introduces legislation (the “author” or “sponsor”) and one continuous minute of questioning for subsequent negative and affirmative speakers on that same legislation. For those same subsequent negative and affirmative speeches, some leagues and invitational tournaments still use the old standard of allotting the balance of the three minutes of a speaker's unused time for questioning, without a period expressly set aside for that purpose, unless the chamber suspends the rules (requiring a 2/3 vote) for individual speakers to extend their questioning. I have noticed presiding officers in some areas, confused over the various rules, infusing the two by taking the balance of unused speaking time, *plus* one minute, which to my knowledge is **not** a rule anywhere. Where one minute of questioning is used, no arithmetic is needed to compute questioning time.

Any student interested in presiding or any coach interested in teaching it should first consult the NFL's *Student Congress Manual*. The manual underwent a facelift in the fall of 2007 to be more user-friendly and organized. Since Congress is such a highly technical event (because of the parliamentary procedure), and because it is intended to not allow contestants to simultaneously participate in other forensic events while they are in a session of Congress, its manual is separate than any of the other forensic events, so the first several pages are dedicated to explaining its basic rules and

conventional practices. There's even a sample script (SCM-4) for assisting a presiding officer in beginning a session, and general rules (SCM-6) that can apply to any Congress – not just the district qualifying tournament or the national tournament. So much confusion and bad habits of procedure could be avoided if more students and coaches read these few pages.

One of the most ignored guidelines is rule #5 (SCM-6), “The presiding officer will pause briefly

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between speeches to recognize any motions from the floor, however, he/she should not call for motions (at the beginning of a session, the presiding officer should remind members to seek his/her attention between speeches).” Yet I constantly hear presiding officers ask between every speech “are there any motions,” or worse yet, “barring any motions we now move to a speech in affirmation/negation.” Several years ago, when I pointed out the incorrect use of “barring...” to one of my students, he responded, “Well, I didn't call for motions!” My retort? “Saying ‘barring’ is just a negative/reverse way of calling for motions. Presiding officers should remind members to rise and say “Mr./Mdm. Speaker,

I rise to a point of parliamentary procedure,” and respond with “State that point.” The member should then state his/her motion as “I move to...” (notice the difference in the use of “move” as a verb, as opposed to the incorrect “I motion to” or the clumsy “I make a motion.”) While some decidedly detail-oriented individuals’ feathers get ruffled when they hear “motion” instead of “move” used as a verb, forensics does exist to teach young people proper communication, and besides, detail-oriented individuals (including parliamentarians and judges) tend to gravitate toward Congress, because of their love for the nuances of procedure – including its correct linguistic usage!

Understanding the rules – and not just *Rules of Order*, but Student Congress conventional practices – is important toward establishing the credibility of the presiding officer and the validity and fairness of debate that happens under the situation of competition. While that’s the most important step a student interested in presiding can take to be effective, there remain some additional factors in fostering professionalism.

As the script on SCM-4 advises, the presiding officer is urged (step 2) to explain presiding preferences, and then execute these consistently throughout the session. That’s important toward earning the respect and trust of peers, particularly when the element of competition is considered. The presiding officer should be aware of biases, and take special efforts to balance recognition around the room, to different schools, and even take mental note of any students who may not easily be recognized because of height or other factors.

Another factor effective presiding officers should strive for is to strike a balance between keeping

order and engendering a friendly atmosphere for debate. After all, this is *Student Congress*, and young people can sometimes forget their manners, especially after a long day. To keep the course of business on track, a presiding officer must be forceful, but not rude or downright *bossy*. Tact is an important ally, because it will gain an effective presiding officer respect while not annoying people for being needlessly and abrasively detail-oriented without purpose.

Finally, and bringing this article full-circle, an effective presiding officer should be hardly noticeable. His/her job is to foster debate, not to show off use of procedure, or steal the limelight from speakers. Effective and economical use of words goes a long way toward allowing for more speeches. Anticipating the direction of debate, being ready for motions, and keeping detailed records really helps a presiding officer stay on top of his/her game. Speakers, too, should not deliberately make the presiding officer’s task difficult, because they are only robbing themselves of additional time to debate. In many ways, leadership can be both a great experience and a sacrifice. Presiding officers sacrifice the opportunity to speak while serving their term of office. Students from the floor should respect that and strive to be part of the solution, instead of instigating a problem.

(**Adam J. Jacobi** is the NFL’s Coordinator of Member Programs and Coach Education. One of his former students, Eva Z. Lam, was the second student in the history the NFL National Student Congress to preside over a final Super Session and win the championship in that chamber).

STUDENT CONGRESS MANUAL

Congress Mission Statement

The National Forensic League is committed to educational development of the individual through the vehicle of Congressional Debate, which promotes leadership and communication skills through rigorous interaction and debate on issues confronting our democracy. These skills will prepare them for learning and leadership throughout our lives.

Core Values

As members of the National Forensic League community, we share a commitment to:

- Promote ethics in research and competition.
- Promote respect for diversity of ideas and of community.
- Promote seriousness of purpose and demeanor.
- Promote empowerment gained through knowledge.
- Promote the tools of effective and ethical leadership.
- Promote active participation in Democratic processes.
- Provide an opportunity for developing higher level thinking skills and critical analysis of issues.
- Develop interaction skills and cooperative decision making skills used in an assembly or in a committee.
- Learn the basic principles of Parliamentary Procedure and its use in a democratic society.



Oath of Office

I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter, so help me God.

NATIONAL FORENSIC LEAGUE

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ALL OBSOLETE COPIES SHOULD BE IGNORED.

Refer to the October 24, 2008 Student Congress Manual pages SCM-4 and SCM-6 as noted in Adam Jacobi’s article found online at <http://www.nflonline.org/AboutNFL/LeagueManuals>.