A second can be so many things. It can mean just missing first place, a slightly flawed bargain, support during a duel, a short amount of time, or a part of parliamentary procedure that is vastly underrated. Some parliamentary authorities disdain the need for seconds while others hold them to high importance. Such a simple word to be subject to so many different meanings and opinions.

When a motion is made by a member, the chair asks for a second – in this case an indication that another member agrees the motion should be considered. Why should it be needed? A logical explanation might be that it takes two to have a debate. A practical explanation is that, if no one else wants to consider the motion, why should the assembly be forced to take it up? Under these circumstances, the requirement for a second protects the assembly from that one member who proposes things that no one else wants to explore. If there is no requirement for a second, the assembly must consider any motion that is made. This is an example of one member having too much power – the right to force a main motion onto the floor, even if no one else wants it considered.

The meeting chair has a responsibility as well. The assembly, like nature, abhors a vacuum. A great chair asks “Is there a second?” and, if none is quickly forthcoming, states “If there is no second, the motion will not be considered.” If there still is no second, the chair states “As there is no second, the motion will not be considered.” The entire set of announcements takes approximately 5-6 seconds, which is more than enough time for a member to offer a second. In other words, ask, don’t beg.

Some motions do not require a second, and for the most part they are motions that protect rights. The most important of these is Point of Order, but others include Question of Privilege, Orders of the Day, Division of the Assembly, Request for Information, and making nominations. What do all of these have in common? Each stops the action in a meeting so that a particular situation can be sorted out. For example, a point of order ensures the rules are being followed, a call for orders of the day enforces the adopted agenda, and a member demanding a division of the assembly verifies the called result of a vote. All of these motions have to do with the business of the assembly, not judgment on the merits of a pending question. All trigger an automatic action by the chair. A point of order requires the chair to give a ruling, a question of privilege requires the chair to determine whether the matter is urgent enough to supersede pending business, and a call for a division requires the chair to re-take the vote to ensure an accurate recording of the result. These are protections of basic rights of members, and all are undebatable, so a requirement for a second restricts those rights.

The importance of a second starts at a very high level at the time a motion is made, fading to almost nothing by the end of a meeting. The chair should not put a motion on the floor that has not been seconded, thus the second serves as a barrier to consideration. But if a chair forgets to ask for a second and debate begins, by its choice the assembly has agreed to consideration and the lack of a second is irrelevant. Once the meeting has ended, the importance of a second fades even further: Unless ordered by the assembly, Robert’s Rules says the name of the person seconding the motion is not put in the minutes.

Important or unnecessary? Perhaps it depends on the situation.