One thing people find easy to criticize about parliamentary procedure is its often pretentious nature and nowhere is that more evident than with the rules about committee of the whole and its first cousin, quasi committee of the whole. In fact, it becomes hard to explain while keeping a straight face because, in this instance, common sense and normal communication seems to go out the window in favor of pomp and circumstance. That being said, it’s still useful to understand what these motions are trying to accomplish.

First, let’s step back a bit and define a fundamental term: deliberative assembly. Deliberative assemblies are defined in Robert’s Rules and other authorities as having certain characteristics:

- They have the authority to act in the name of the entire group;
- They meet in a single room, or have the capability for simultaneous communication; and
- Individuals are free to act according to their own judgment.

Committees generally do not have the authority to act – they report back to the appointing authority with recommendations. In short, committees start with a question to be answered; boards, with a decision to be made. A meeting that begins without clear motions for action can run into trouble, requiring further information or discussion.

It is these characteristics that are at the heart of the concept of committee of the whole. By majority vote, the assembly can change itself from a deliberative assembly to a committee. But wait, there’s more. Now the chair calls someone else to “chair the committee” and the regular chair becomes a member of the committee. However, instead of having more freedom, the committee of the whole actually has less: it cannot appoint subcommittees or refer any matters, it can’t close or limit debate, and it can’t recess or adjourn. For example, if it wants to impose a time limit on debate, it must “rise” (return itself to a deliberative assembly) and take such votes in regular session, then return to committee of the whole under the new debate limits.

Under quasi committee of the whole, the regular chair remains in the chair for the committee meeting, and there are fewer restrictions on considering motions. However, the things allowed a quasi committee of the whole result in making the procedures more confusing than if all the restrictions were in place.

Last is something called informal consideration, which basically only removes the restriction of two speeches per person in debate.

Anything that purports to make things easier but includes this many restrictions and convoluted procedures is not a useful tool for getting things done. The heart of the problem is that a decision that has problems or is unclear is being considered. Perhaps the need for these devices is an indication that the entire matter should be postponed or referred to staff or a committee. A deliberative assembly (especially a large house of delegates) isn’t at its best when asked to fix flaws instead of debate pros and cons. A better solution is to set up an informal consideration with a time limit and hash things out.