

Parliamentary Authors: What Influenced the People Who Influence Us

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“The great purpose of all rules and forms is to subserve the will of the assembly, rather than to restrain it; to facilitate, and not to obstruct, the expression of their deliberate sense.” - *Cushing’s Manual of Parliamentary Practice*, 1854, p. 187.

We are taught early in our parliamentary studies that Henry M. Robert, seeing the need for a codified set of rules for deliberations in citizen groups, went seeking such a book and, when he discovered that it didn’t exist, began to write it. One of the books he used as a reference was Cushing’s manual. The sentiment expressed in the above quote guides our practice and our ethics to this day. Along the way, though, many others contributed their experience and perspectives to the rich lore that we mine when seeking insight into how best to help an assembly do its work.

As with us all, their backgrounds and philosophies are evident in their approaches to parliamentary writing. It is said that studying a foreign language helps Americans understand the English language. When you have to analyze what you do when you use nouns and verbs, singular and possessive, and all of the other elements, speaking words that you’ve spoken all your life, you see the native language differently. Although 95% of associations use one version or another of *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR)*, many have unique customs or special rules that vary from

the *RONR* baseline, just as English sounds different in different countries. Looking beyond the *RONR* horizon to learn more about the diversity of thought that exists enhances our study of parliamentary procedure. Instead of nouns and verbs we internalize principles of rights and interpretation. No one parliamentary authority can claim to be 100% right for every situation – being able to offer a different perspective on the deliberative process may be the greatest service we can offer. In fact, the discipline of testing one theory or process against another strengthens our understanding of each.

Henry M. Robert (1837-1923)

Henry Robert, the fourth child of seven, was born in a town named after his family – Robertville, South Carolina. He was raised in Ohio, where his father, the Reverend Joseph Thomas Robert, had moved before the Civil War because he did not wish to rear his children where slavery existed.¹ He graduated fourth in a class of 38 from the US Military Academy at West Point in 1857,² was noted for his “exceptional ability in mathematics and related subjects,”³ and became an assistant to the professor of mathematics at the age of nineteen. He went on to a successful career as a military engineer.

These facts alone give us insight into the character and perspective of Henry Robert: son of a Baptist minister willing to take a stand for his convictions, a military officer, and an engineer – fairness, order, and logic. He based his work on long-standing traditions and practices of the US House of Representatives, “... and largely restricted his creativity to his manner of adapting the rules of a legislative assembly to the needs of ordinary societies.”⁴ The current authorship team describes itself as the guardians of that legacy, and “does not consider itself free to make changes simply in accordance with the policy preferences of its members or others, without regard to precedent or common practice.”⁵ Decisions on whether to make changes in subsequent editions are based on two fundamental principles: legitimacy and stability.

Sometimes criticized as “too big” or “too complicated,” *RONR* gives comfort to those who seek solutions to their parliamentary dilemmas. Much of the material that has been added over the years, especially in the 1970 complete revision, was added to give further explanations to aid the reader. The design of the 1970 publication remains to this day, except that in 2000 the popular “tinted pages” that bisected the book into motions and rules was moved to the back of the book because of cost considerations.

The first half of *RONR* contains basic principles and definitions, including a separate section for each motion. Each section contains the basics, called standard descriptive characteristics, a few paragraphs of additional explanation about the motion, followed by suggested language. An excellent way to internalize the language necessary to be a competent presiding officer is to record one’s own voice reading these examples, and then play it over and over until it becomes automatic.

The second half is devoted to meeting management and its procedural aspects: voting, debate, quorum, officers, and discipline, to name a few. The book is intended as a reference and it serves us well. But Henry Robert, while being the most famous contributor, was not the only person to enrich our lives with his pen.

Alice Sturgis (1887 – 1978)⁶

Alice Sturgis, born in Maine, and a graduate of the New England Conservatory, had varied careers including church organist, scholar and instructor at the University of California and Stanford University, and author of four books, three of them reference works on parliamentary procedure. While at Stanford she received a Guggenheim Fellowship for further study in the field, which led her to Paris. From her first book *Textbook on Parliamentary Law*, published with Alta Hall in 1923, to her seminal work, *Sturgis Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*, in 1950, Sturgis maintained a commitment to voluntary organizations and simplifying procedures.

In the preface to the first edition of *Sturgis Standard Code of*

Parliamentary Procedure, the author noted that there were seven basic principles she used to “make the code completely usable and modern:” completeness, simplicity and clarity, conciseness, usability, common procedures, conformance to court decisions, and up-to-dateness. She did not think of a parliamentary authority as the final answer to procedural questions, but as a work in progress to be continually examined and updated.

She assembled an advisory committee that was unparalleled in its influence and experience, including Supreme Court justices, corporate lawyers, legislators, and educators. As she stated: “The Advisory Committee includes some of the best minds of our time. Their worthy counsel and critical intelligence have been the cornerstone of this code. Their advice will guide its future.”⁷ As a testament to her thorough research, over 3,000 court cases were considered in writing the book, and more than 150 were cited.

The 1960’s were a time of transition in the field of parliamentary procedure. Sturgis’ second edition came out in the middle of the decade, and the major revamping and release of *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, the first of the editions to bear that name, was well underway. In 1967, at a convention of the Speech Association of America, a young college professor had been tasked to chair a panel of presenters that included James Cleary (who participated as an early member of the *RONR* authorship team) and Alice Sturgis. There was so much interest in this particular panel that it had to be moved to a larger room. The professor, Gene Bierbaum, recalled that most of the room seemed to be siding with Cleary on intellectual points, but Alice Sturgis, an “outspoken and articulate” woman, held her own.

Upon Sturgis’ death in 1978, the publishing rights passed to her daughter. By 1983, talks were underway for a collaboration between the Sturgis family and the American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIP) based on three key points: 1) AIP would have control over the content of future revisions of the book; 2) AIP would adopt the book as its parliamentary authority and would encourage its adoption by other organizations; 3) the title of the book would be changed to *The Standard Code of Parliamentary*

Procedure. The third edition, nicknamed *TSC*, was written by a committee that injected a more confrontational tone. They added Chapter 29, “Dealing With Disapproved or Obsolete Motions,” which seemed to take to task those who might disagree with their perspective. Although there is evidence that Alice Sturgis had strong feelings about *RONR*, this was the first instance in which such criticisms found their way into the book itself.

By 1999, in a letter to AIP Leadership, Gregg Phifer was encouraging AIP to plan a fourth edition. Phifer later went on to state:

“In my judgment, our third edition of *Sturgis Standard Code* should be regarded first and foremost as a college text for courses in parliamentary law and not as a ‘parliamentary authority’ (reference work) to be dragged off the shelf to solve an immediate problem.”⁸

In 2001, a subsequent committee presented a fourth edition, which also struggled with voicing and flow. In 2012, a new committee introduced the *American Institute of Parliamentarians Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure (AIPSC)*, noting on the cover that it is based on the work of Alice Sturgis, but recognizing that the balance has tipped from her original viewpoint to that of the committee. The title change signals a completely new publication rather than a revision of earlier editions. Legal citations have been re-introduced and more perspective has been sought from sources outside the revision committee. Some motions have been dropped and others introduced, reflecting more contemporary practices. In addition, it takes on a more professional tone.

There are some interesting comparisons to be made between *RONR* and *AIPSC* with regard to the handling of two motions (devices). *RONR* lists the rights of the majority, minority, absentees, individuals, and all of these together as the fundamental balance upon which the rules are based. *AIPSC* states on page 9 that the “full and free discussion of every proposition presented for decision is an established right of members.”⁹ Interestingly enough,

in comparing the two authorities in the handling of filling blanks and substitutes, the priorities and philosophies seem to switch sides.

When filling blanks, Alice Sturgis clearly placed a higher priority on ensuring that all choices are considered by the assembly, with full and free discussion. All proposed choices are debated and voted on in the order in which they were made, and the choice that attains the highest vote – provided it receives a majority – fills the blank. On the contrary, Henry Robert stated that the first choice to receive a majority vote stands as the will of the assembly, and voting on other choices is unnecessary.

The tables turn with the motion to substitute; Henry Robert seemed to place the higher priority on ensuring a full opportunity to debate both options. Under *RONR*, when a substitute is proposed, it is set aside until debate and amendments are completed on the pending motion, then the pending motion is set aside to allow full consideration of the proposed substitute. Only then is the vote taken to determine which version will proceed to a final vote. Alice Sturgis treated a substitute in the same manner as any other amendment, stopping consideration of the pending motion and opening consideration of the substitute immediately when it was made and seconded. In this case, unless the substitute was defeated, there was no further consideration of the original motion.

A key difference between *RONR* and *AIPSC* is that the authors of *RONR* celebrate their strong and direct connection to the original author and seek to maintain the core content, while the authors of *AIPSC* have followed the philosophy of its original author and sought new horizons of thought. Neither is the “right” way. We in the parliamentary profession benefit from all of this work. What a tragedy it would be to lose either, or to fail to appreciate them for what they are.

George Demeter (1893-1983)

George Demeter was born in Arcadia, Greece¹⁰. A graduate of Staley College, Harvard, and Boston University Law School, he

was the first Greek American to be elected to a state legislature in the United States, serving in the Massachusetts legislature from 1933-1937. Demeter was very involved in civic and service organizations. He helped begin the tradition of placing a laurel wreath on the head of the winner of the Boston Marathon and crowned the winners from 1931 to 1947.¹¹ Demeter served as president of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA), which adopted *Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure* as its parliamentary authority at its 27th Supreme Convention in 1949. In 1969, the 6th edition of the work was published by Little, Brown and Company, who gave it a distinctive blue cover and the descriptor: "Blue Book Edition – Revised, Expanded, and Updated."

In the "Note on This Edition" George Demeter writes: "In a word, *Demeter's Manual* serves four notable objectives: 1) it is a reliable *reference* authority; 2) an effective *self-instruction* book; 3) a unique *textbook* as a teaching manual; and 4) its five hundred *court citations* affecting essential rights of members will help minimize, or avoid altogether, costly law suits and vexatious litigation against the organization by dissentious members or its antagonistic factions."¹² This last objective is surely the product of his law career.

The Blue Book is not for those who are allergic to small print. In 1997, when Little, Brown and Company stopped issuing reprints, the American Institute of Parliamentarians obtained permission to reproduce the book for educational use. The AIP edition has the same pagination as the 1969 edition, but with larger pages (and larger print) and a spiral binding to allow the book to lie flat for easier reference.

Demeter's experience as a member and chair of many clubs, including service as commander and judge advocate of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, seems to have given him a certain sense of pragmatism in handling various types of organizational issues. His book includes sections on labor unions, town meetings, city government, public courtesies and ceremonies, and even an entire meeting in drill form. Some of his

more interesting rules and terms include the following:

- Use of the term “coexisting motions” to describe motions arising out of points of privilege (pp. 49, 110-111)
- Yielding time to another in debate and allowing someone who debates on another’s time to speak again on his own time (p. 126)
- Reconsideration of an adopted amendment to the bylaws by unanimous consent (p. 157)
- A “sense of the assembly” motion (p. 51, 60)
- A detailed section on disciplining members and officers, including conducting trials and votes on No Confidence, Censure, Impeachment. (pp. 259-269)

A tremendous amount of information is crammed onto each page, with little white space upon which to rest the eyes. It is based largely on the work of Henry Robert, but brings a legal and educational perspective to the reader. Many of the topics include a “Key Quiz,” fulfilling Demeter’s goal of providing a textbook for the study of parliamentary procedure. This educational focus is also demonstrated by the prolific use of mnemonics to aid learning.

Floyd Riddick (1908 – 2000)

Floyd Riddick is best known as the parliamentarian emeritus of the United States Senate. He was born in 1908 in Trotville, North Carolina. After an early major in pre-law, Dr. Riddick switched his major to political science, going on to earn a Master’s Degree from Vanderbilt University and a PhD in political science from Duke University.

Floyd Riddick served in the U. S. Senate Parliamentarian's office for 24 years. After retiring from the Senate in 1974, he hosted the first parliamentary practicum at his farm in rural Virginia. Some of the students from that first practicum are still active parliamentarians.

Dr. Riddick wrote his parliamentary manual for associations in 1985 with Miriam Butcher, a noted educator and parliamentarian,

who was a regular contributor to the AIP education program. The format of this book is interesting in that the table of contents in the front of the book, as well as the book itself, deals with subjects in alphabetical order. In the introduction to *Riddick's Rules of Procedure*, the editors state: "It is, however, the belief of the authors that while the principles of this tradition must be preserved, their practical application must be modified to meet the needs of the society in which they are used. In today's society one such need stands out: to get the business done with dispatch."¹³ Floyd Riddick's background in political science and work in Congress is reflected in the format of the book: quick reference and no extraneous material.

Upon his death, US Senate Resolution 245 was adopted on January 26, 2000, which describes some of Riddick's accomplishments, such as: creating the Daily Digest of the Congressional Record and serving as its first editor from 1947 to 1951; serving as Assistant Senate Parliamentarian from 1951 to 1964; compiling thousands of Senate precedents into an official volume; and, upon his retirement as Senate Parliamentarian serving as a consultant to the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration.

In modifying the work of Henry Robert, Riddick, instead of requiring a second for motions, turned the process around and recommended that all motions properly made be considered unless a question of consideration was raised. Michael Malamut, CPP-T, wrote of this influence in the *Parliamentary Journal* in 1998: "Another notable distinction in the focus of Riddick is the obvious legislative influence . . . For example, Riddick contains descriptions of procedures usually only found in legislative bodies, such as pairing, stopping the clock, sunshine laws, and the sunset clause."¹⁴

Dr. Riddick's influence is also seen in AIP's documents of authority, as he called them. Riddick led an effort to do a full revision of the AIP governing documents and their structure, and we still use the term Standing Orders today. His connections with the College of William & Mary provided the consummate setting

for the June Practicum for many years, until its move to the Baltimore area in 2007.

Hugh Cannon (1931 – 2005)

Hugh Cannon was a soft-spoken southern gentleman, generous with his time, financial resources and knowledge. Cannon and Robert were both early achievers: Henry Robert graduated with high honors at West Point, while Cannon received degrees from Davidson College, Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar, and Harvard Law School.

Hugh Cannon practiced as a working parliamentarian. His two largest, best known clients were the Democratic National Committee and the National Education Association. It was these two clients that gave him the extensive experience with large assembly meetings that formed the basis for the pragmatic philosophy that pervades his book. His work was not just theoretical – it was practical. He often shared his experience with other parliamentarians and his best advice to them was to “play the ball where it lies.”

Cannon’s Concise Guide to Rules of Order presents in three parts: The Chair, The Members, and The Meeting. The author started to write a rules book and added the first two sections as an afterthought. For many years parliamentarians have turned to page 15, “Earning the Goodwill of the Assembly” to give their presiding officers an introduction to presiding. He recognized the role of the presiding officer as key: “The Chair makes the difference at meetings. If the Chair is an effective leader – focusing on the members, treating each fairly, earning everyone’s trust – then the meeting will be successful. If not, it will end in disarray and fail to meet its objectives.”¹⁵

Cannon believed that the atmosphere of a meeting was much more important than the rules. He saw annual meetings as the opportunity to revitalize the members and often said that the purpose of a meeting was to have the members go home saying “What a great organization I belong to!” He was willing to “fudge”

the rules if it got the assembly where it wanted to go, and was fond of reminding us that “a meeting is not a classroom for parliamentary procedure to be taught to the assembly by one member.”

Some examples of Hugh Cannon’s “southern gentleman” influence include:

- Resistance to interrupting a person speaking: Member recognized “as soon as possible” for point of order” – page 108
- Questions do not interrupt the speaker, even if germane, and suggests the chair ask the questioner to wait until the speaker is finished – page 108
- Time required to answer a question is not counted in debate – page 109
- Chair focuses on the member and resists distractions – page 20

His political experience is evident in his definition of special orders, which are not just for consideration at a specific time, but are a series of combined orders to include the exact time debate is to begin, limits on time for the whole debate, division of time between sides, limitation on the number of amendments, and the exact time for debate to end and the vote be taken. Cannon created a card system for communication with the chair and used a log system to record the actions of the meeting. He was a frequent speaker at parliamentary educational events on these and other topics.

Certainly much more can be said about each of these great intellects, whose legacies have shaped the way we deliberate and make decisions in all types of assemblies; this is just a sample. We are shaped by our backgrounds and our experiences, and each of those we have profiled here bear out that fact. We must encourage study of the concepts and principles that have been part of decision-making for centuries and encourage the development of new ways of looking at those concepts. No matter how a motion is

handled on the floor, all of these authors believed in achieving two primary goals in a meeting: order and fairness. We must honor and respect our past, but never give up the hunger for knowledge that caused Henry Robert to enter that bookstore and purchase his first copy of Cushing's book.

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Notes

1 *The History of Morehouse College*. Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA, 1917, p. 21.

(<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/georgiabooks/pdfs/gb0312.pdf>)

2 Smedley, Ralph C., *The Great Peacemaker*. Los Angeles: Borden Publishing Co., 1955, p. 15.

3 Ibid.

4 Robert, H., "Guiding Principles for Changes in New Editions of Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised", *National Parliamentarian*, Vol. 73, No. 1, 2012.

5 Ibid

6 Obituaries, *Press Herald*, Portland ME, Jan. 14, 1978

7 Obituaries, *Press Herald*, Portland ME, Jan. 14, 1978

8 Letter from Greg Phifer, CPP, to The Leadership of the American Institute of Parliamentarians dated February 16, 1999

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13 Riddick, F. and Butcher, M., *Riddick's Rules of Procedure*. Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1985.

14 Malamut, M., "Distinctions Between Riddick's Rules of Procedure and Robert's Rules of Order," *Parliamentary Journal* (October 1998), p. 142.

15 Cannon, H., *Cannon's Concise Guide to Rules of Order*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992, p. 13.

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