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Snippet #154 General Consent

Parliamentary procedure is maligned by some for being rigid – or at least annoyingly meticulous. They don't realize that there's a simple short cut that is fair, transparent, and efficient. But it takes two to do the general consent tango.

General consent, recently replaced in *Robert's Rules* by the term unanimous consent, requires a chair skilled at evaluating the tone of a meeting, and members who are paying attention and fulfilling their duties. One of the ways in which the rights of members are protected and due diligence is demonstrated by the assembly (especially a board of directors) is by adhering to an established process, such as using the six steps for handling motions. This process brings a clear decision forward for deliberation, allows for alternate proposals, and culminates in the opportunity for all to express their views in the form of a vote. The rules of debate prevent one person from monopolizing the floor, and the members are told by the chair exactly what they are voting on just prior to the vote.

But what if the suggestion clearly has general acceptance? If so, then going through all six steps is a chore and seems a waste of time. Remember, parliamentary procedure is about keeping things clear and fair. If we can accomplish those two things, we can take a short cut.

If there seems to be general agreement on an idea, the chair can use general consent. First, the chair must ask if there is any objection to a clearly stated proposed action. For example, if someone has suggested changing an amount in a motion from \$500 to \$700, and there seems to be general agreement, the chair can ask: "Is there any objection to striking \$500 and inserting \$700?" The chair pauses, to allow members to say "I object."

If there is an objection, the process proceeds as if the general consent were not attempted. The chair states, "Since there is objection, the motion must be made and seconded." The chair never asks a member to describe the objection or queries why the objection was made – this is irrelevant. Essentially, the chair has asked: "Does everybody agree on . . . ?" The member has responded: "No." This isn't a value judgment, it's simply a fact.

An objection does not necessarily mean that the member objects to the action – it might mean that the member wants to debate, or make an amendment. An important thing to remember is that when the chair asks if there is objection, stay silent – unless you object. For chairs it's confusing to ask if there is objection and hear: "No objection." The chair isn't asking if someone *doesn't* object. What the chair is listening for is "I object" – or – silence. If there is silence, the chair states "since there is no objection, the motion is adopted."

General consent is recorded in the minutes by stating "approved by general consent." An alternative would be: "By general consent, the board agreed . . ."

General consent can be used for any legitimate motion. The chair might use general consent to suggest a recess, "Is there any objection to taking a ten minute recess?" or for another action of the assembly.

A final word about terminology. Something might be generally acceptable, but not unanimous. The word unanimous is powerful – and often misleading. One way to look at the terms is that general consent means there are no objections, and unanimous consent means everyone agrees. Since it is any member's right to not vote on a question, the member who doesn't agree may simply stay silent. It seems that the more appropriate term is general consent.