



The Importance of Decorum

By Natalie O'Donnell

Parliamentary procedure helps state legislatures craft public policy.

State legislatures rely on parliamentary procedure to craft good public policy. The process exists to safeguard the rights, privileges and obligations of all members; to provide them with equal opportunities to be heard; to ensure fairness and good faith among them; and to promote full and free discussion of issues. Decorum, defined by the American Society of Legislative Clerks and Secretaries as proper order, etiquette and conduct of members, is central to preserving this impartial, orderly manner.

Why Is Decorum Essential to Policymaking? The presence of decorum creates an atmosphere that is appropriately formal. Hugh Cannon, author of *Cannon's Rules of Order*, argues that the atmosphere of a meeting is much more important than the rules of procedure. A formal atmosphere can make members, staff and even those observing the legislature behave accordingly, which makes the process run smoothly and efficiently.

Second, decorum encourages order. Parliamentarian Thomas Eliot states that, "dignified conduct adds to the chance of a constructive and orderly meeting." Order encourages preparation and participation, which enhance debate.

Decorum places focus on the issues discussed, not on the speaker.

Decorum also places focus on the issues discussed, not on the person speaking. John Tilson, a parliamentary expert and former legislator, remarks that "avoiding personality" is insisted on in most legislative bodies as a "matter of considerable importance." Most parliamentarians universally agree that debate should not be overly personal; rather, there should be a spirit of fair play and guidelines in place to ensure it. Policymakers, according to noted parliamentarian Floyd Riddick, should be open to "humor and compromise, disagree agreeably, win graciously and lose gracefully." Decorum encourages this attitude within the chamber.

How Does a Legislature Encourage and Preserve Decorum? The methods used by state legislative assemblies to implement decorum are similar, although actual sources vary. Many examples are found in chamber rules, some legislative bodies rely on traditions, and manuals and guides may be created by a chamber.

Appropriate language and parliamentary terminology encourage decorum.

Language. The use of appropriate language and parliamentary terminology encourages decorum. A good example is the forms of address used by and for members. In some cases, members are referred to indirectly. Some chambers require legislators to address each other by district number, geographic area or city; others refer to members as "gentleman," "gentlewoman" or "gentlelady." Other chambers are slightly less formal, permitting members to call each other by title and last name. According to noted parliamentarian Alice Sturgis, the avoidance of names altogether also is

appropriate, since a legislator is speaking not as an individual but as a representative of a constituency.

Dress code. A visible way to maintain a formal atmosphere is the creation and enforcement of a dress code. More than half of state legislative chambers have policies that guide the attire of legislators and staff. Common language requires that men wear a suit or coat and tie and women dresses or suits. Some states use the simple guideline of “business attire” or “appropriate dress,” which sometimes applies to visitors on the chamber floor.

A chamber dress code helps maintain a formal atmosphere.

Food, beverages and smoking. Another common method used to preserve order and decorum is to restrict food and beverages on the floor. At least 28 chambers limit or prohibit eating or drinking on the floor and, in many cases, in the gallery as well. Some chambers prohibit the use of tobacco, alcohol and illegal substances in their rules. In 42 states, at least one chamber prohibits smoking or tobacco products on the floor or in the entire capitol by rule, statute or policy.

Technology. Life in the legislature is changing due to increasingly sophisticated technology. This technology enhances the legislative process in many ways. Legislators are more accessible, voting can be done quickly, and legislation can easily be accessed and updated. Ensuring that these changes do not hinder the legislative process and that order is maintained can be challenging. States have had to rely on their own experiences and those of other states to address the issue, because no general parliamentary reference manual addresses the topic. At least 36 chambers have instituted rules or policies to control the use of cell phones, pagers and other electronic devices. These policies address a variety of factors, including where such devices may be used, whether they can transmit or receive communications, if they can be used with an audible signal, and who is allowed to use them.

Behavior. Legislators themselves are crucial to the preservation of decorum. Their actions, awareness of their rights and duties, and knowledge and observance of procedure and rules are perhaps the most critical way to maintain decorum. As stated in *Mason’s Manual of Legislative Procedure*, “it is the duty of all members to conduct themselves so as not to obstruct the like rights of other members.” The presiding officer, in particular, plays a crucial part in encouraging decorum. Members take their cues from the presiding officer, and will look there for guidance on tone and behavior.

Legislators’ awareness of their actions, rights and duties and their knowledge of procedure and rules are critical.

In the words of John Tilson, “Every reasonable safeguard should be observed in the interest of decorum, dignity and better legislative results.” Legislative chambers strive to institute and apply these safeguards, creating an atmosphere conducive to good legislative procedure and, thus, to good policymaking.

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