

# REVIVAL

*From the February, 1935 issue of The Quarterly Journal of Speech, and reprinted with the kind permission of the Speech Communication Association, the holder of the copyright.*

## PARLIAMENTARY LAW IN THE SPEECH CURRICULUM

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Recently we visited an educationally modern kindergarten just before noon-time—an hour, as you know, when tiny bodies wriggle and minds are tired. The teacher was attempting to secure calm by entreating in her best pedagogic manner: “Children, let’s pretend that our little mouth is a door, our forefinger is a key—now altogether let’s pick up the key and lock the door and throw the key away. There now!—the door is locked, so we can’t make *any more noise*.” Silence rewarded her efforts for perhaps a half minute. Then down in the front row a buzz-zzz sounded. “Oh, Anne,” sighed the teacher, “have you forgotten? We locked the door of our mouths tightly and threw the key away.” Little Anne’s black eyes sparkled and her curls bobbed eagerly as she confided, “Oh, no, Miss Brown, I haven’t forgotten at all. I’m just whispering through the keyhole.”

Parliamentary procedure has been only “whispering through the keyhole” of the speech curriculum of most colleges and high schools in the United States, and what is more lamentable, there is scant realization of the numerous reasons why this applicant for recognition at the keyhole should be admitted—when, in fact, it should be welcomed by the departments of speech.

There should be a very sympathetic attitude on the part of public speaking exponents towards this applicant, parliamentary procedure, for it was only a few years ago that public speaking himself (or should we say herself, since ladies are credited with so much of the world’s talking), was an applicant seeking admission at the door of the Department of English. Can you remember when high schools were proud and felt themselves modern and progressive, to say in their announcements that “‘Oral English’ is given on Mondays,” or that “in the senior class each student is required to give an acceptable speech?” In colleges, in those

days, students who were English majors were "advised to take the entire semester's course in public speaking." Today separate departments of public speaking are recognized as essential. Do we not wonder why we were so slow to admit such a practical, vital, and interesting subject to its natural place?

Parliamentary procedure offers a more limited, and yet equally practical and vitally interesting contribution to our academic program. Why, then, has its value received scant recognition? Why is parliamentary procedure merely a subject to be "touched upon" during some part of a course in public speaking, or to be relegated to the student's debating society? My guess is that few instructors themselves understand either the fundamental principles and the usefulness of the subject itself, or the vital possibilities of its use in public speaking. If parliamentary procedure is to be "squeezed in" at the end of an already crowded course, if it is to be taught as a subject unrelated to other subjects, if it is to be regarded as an arbitrary collection of words, phrases and rules, which serve as "good manners" at meetings, if it is to be taught from a manual, (all of which are arranged with no more attempt at instructive grouping or presentation than a dictionary), and lastly, if the rules of parliamentary procedure are regarded as facts to be memorized, then the subject has indeed few possibilities and should occupy little space in speech curricula.

If, on the other hand, parliamentary procedure is understood and presented as a system of historically developed rules for the behavior of individuals when meeting in a group, if it is to be taught with the aid of a text which is correctly arranged from a psychological and pedagogic standpoint, if its rules are presented not as facts to be memorized, but as logical and inevitable results in a given situation, and if the fundamental principles underlying the whole system are understood and explained—if all these "ifs" are made realities, then the subject creates intense enthusiasm and becomes a live and fascinating part of the speech curriculum.

Parliamentary procedure is neither a supplement to public speaking nor a corollary of it. It is a definite portion of that larger subject. It concerns itself with the methods by which speakers shall present their ideas which they desire acted upon by the group. It is as necessary a part of the speaker's training as is a course in court procedure to the lawyer or a course in the serving of food to the student of domestic science. A lawyer who has a well-prepared argument, but who knows not when to deliver it, or when to fight in its support, or a cook who has prepared succulent dishes, but who does not know when or how to serve them, is handicapped. Just so a speaker—be his speech ever so convincing—unless he knows where and under what conditions to speak when in group meeting, unless he knows the procedure for securing action on his speech if he desires it,—is handicapped. He must likewise know his own rights and the rights of others in the group. This is the training that parliamentary law furnishes.

For by studying parliamentary law as a distinct subject in the speech curriculum, a subject amalgamated with group intercourse, the student realizes more completely the social laws underlying group fellowship; through the class practice he assimilates the idea that the fundamentals of cooperation and of good citizenship are synonymous with the basic principles of parliamentary law; namely, to accede to the will of the majority, to respect the rights of others, to participate in the discussion and work of the group, and to execute in good faith the decisions of the organization even though opposed to his own views. The knowledge of these fundamental principles governing the methods by which speakers present their ideas which they desire acted upon by a group is not gained as a supplement to public speaking, nor as a corollary to it, but as a definite portion of the large field of speech, the portion entitled parliamentary law.

Assuming that you agree with us that parliamentary procedure is a part of the large subject, public speaking, or speech, may we consider some of the advantages of the study of the subject. High in the list of advantages is the fact that parliamentary procedure offers a natural and uniquely-suited psychological method of combating one of the greatest bug-bears of the beginner in public speaking, *fear*. The elimination of fear and the substitution of self-confidence, which ripens into a joy in speech delivery, is the aim of every instructor. Parliamentary procedure, if given a place in the first part of a student's public speaking training, accomplishes this aim in a phenomenally rapid manner. It is so easy for a student to say "I second the motion," or to rise and move "to adjourn" or "to limit debate," that even the most self-conscious student enjoys making these and similar motions. He is thus drawn rapidly into increasing participation through the enthusiasm of the group; he feels the joy of helping to direct the group's progress from the first time he seconds the motion; and the very brevity of definiteness of the parliamentary phrases lend him confidence. It is only a few weeks until even the most timid students will speak briefly before they have had time to think of fear, upon some motion, and those students will soon be surprised to find themselves speaking for several minutes in support of or opposition to a motion. They would suffer fear and self-consciousness if assigned a speech to deliver, yet will speak at some length in impromptu debate. Thus, parliamentary procedure, if given early in a public speaking course, insures a group of students who speak easily and with enthusiasm. It is not difficult to turn these students towards an intensive study and development of their own public speaking.

Not only does parliamentary procedure form an incomparable psychological beginning for public speaking, but it offers another type of psychological training upon which modern education seeks to lay stress. We are told that the great value of football and other team sports lies in the training of the student to think or act as a part of a team or group, seeking to subordinate his personal advantages to that of the group. This same lesson is taught by the study of parliamentary law. Every fun-

damental principle upon which the subject is based stresses the will and good of the majority, the spirit of fair play, and the speaker's ability to interpret and fit in with the actions of the group.

Another distinct characteristic which parliamentary law tends to develop is that of quick and accurate thinking. Most motions are useful only if made exactly at the proper moment. To make the decision as to when the proper moment has arrived requires a very definite ability to judge quickly and correctly the feelings of the majority and to be able to translate these feelings into the proper motion. Students are forced to give very close attention to the reaction of the audience—an alertness to which the average beginner in public speaking gives little or no attention because of his absorption in his own fear or in his subject. Accuracy, both in judgment of the majority and in choice of motion, develops a high degree of exactness. It is not usually difficult to see that the majority of the group would react favorably to a motion which would cut off debate upon a particular subject, but whether one should move to limit debate or call for the previous question, or move to adjourn, is a matter for accurate decision. One motion will fit the needs of the assembly exactly, while another will fail. A mistaken choice of motion is often as fatal to its maker as was the mistaken choice of direction in a well-known war story. The captain, as you remember, cautioned the soldiers, "If you see any big shells coming your way, just zig-zag back and forth, like the ships do when the submarines are after them. Good luck!" A few weeks later, you may recall, the captain was walking through one of the wards in a base hospital when way over in a corner he spied one of his soldiers, greatly damaged and battered. "Well, son," exclaimed the captain, peering into the soldier's one visible eye, "what in the world happened to you? Didn't you zig-zag like I told you when the big shells came over?" "Yessir, I sure tried to, but I guess I must have zigged when I oughter have zagged."

The definiteness of parliamentary law enables one to judge just when he should zig and when he should zag, but this definiteness of motions and procedure does not require memory work. On the other hand, the whole subject taken together, if correctly taught, is a miniature system of logic. Once the purpose of every motion is understood, every rule connected with it could be told by students who know none of the rules. To know what a motion is intended to accomplish, means that one knows when it may be made, by whom, whether or not it would be debatable, amendable, and what vote would be required to pass it. This training and reasoning out and deducing a multitude of rules to cover a given situation is invaluable to speakers. Its especial value to debaters needs no elaboration. The historic sidelights which accompany any explanation of the purposes of motions are likewise of most definite value to students of history and economics. Concrete development of a very definite logical system of thought results in a very quick comprehension of the arrangement and logical progression of all forms of speaking.

This enumeration of some of the outstanding advantages of the study of parliamentary procedure could be followed by a listing of many minor advantages, but these are apparent. Surely a subject which offers a natural and easy beginning of formal public speaking by eliminating fear, which stresses group action and team work as well as fair play, which develops quick and accurate thinking, and an ability to judge with accuracy the feelings of others, and which, although extremely definite, may be mastered by logical thought rather than by memory, should be welcomed by every leader in public speaking. These advantages are intensified because they are taught through the medium of a subject which is necessary in this present day and age to everyone from beginner in kindergarten who serves on the flower committee up to the mother in the Parent-Teachers Association or the father who leads in his professional meetings. Organizations and committees are the one medium through which groups function and through which group opinion may be expressed. In all social institutions is this interdependence of group association, parliamentary law, and public speaking.

*Your Editor regrets that inquiries have failed to provide information about Alta B. Hall, the co-author of this issue's REVIVAL. He had also planned to include with this article a biography of Alice Sturgis, an outstanding contributor to parliamentary tradition of the twentieth-century, but that proved impossible. Instead, the following paragraphs, extracted from a memorial for Alice Sturgis, written by Paul Mason following her death at the age of 78 in June, 1974, are reprinted from the pages of the Parliamentary Journal of October of that year.*

Mrs. Sturgis taught courses in parliamentary procedure at the University of California at Berkley while she was still a student there and soon afterward wrote her first book... . She guided, advised and assisted all kinds of organization from the tiniest clubs to the mightiest organizations of the nation. She was happy at any time to advise or assist anyone who had a problem relating to organizations or their procedure.

Alice Sturgis was probably best known for her books **Sturgis Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure** and **Learning Parliamentary Procedure**. The **Code** was first published in 1950 and revised in 1966.

In the many places where parliamentarians gather and where parliamentary questions are discussed, Alice Sturgis will be sorely missed but her influence on the practice and philosophy of decision making in associations and groups of all kinds will linger on and on.