

STURGIS: THE THIRD EDITION

Edwin C. Bliss, CP

The publication by McGraw-Hill of the Third Edition of *The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure* marks an important milestone in the history of parliamentary law. For the first time, a book on parliamentary procedure has been produced using the parliamentary process.

In other words, the new edition of "Sturgis" doesn't represent just the personal opinions of Alice Sturgis, or of any self-appointed "authority." It is a group effort, reflecting, as nearly as possible, the views of the members of the American Institute of Parliamentarians. But because Alice Sturgis subscribed to the basic goals of AIP, including the "removal of unneeded complications, confusing ambiguities and archaic terminology from parliamentary usage," it was necessary to make only minimal changes from her classic Second Edition.

One change, suggested by the publisher, was to modify the title of the book, so that *The Sturgis Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure* now will be known simply as *The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*, with appropriate recognition, of course, of Alice Sturgis as the primary author. However, to those of us in the field, I am sure the book always will be referred to informally as just "Sturgis."

The revision project began in 1983 at AIP's annual convention in Colorado Springs, when a motion was approved to establish an *ad hoc* committee to contact McGraw-Hill to explore the possibility of having a revised edition of Sturgis prepared under the direction of AIP. The publisher indicated an interest, and at the 1984 convention in Florida a motion was unanimously adopted to set up a revision committee which would operate under the general supervision of the Education Committee. Appointed to the committee were Ed Bliss, Miriam Butcher, Joyce Parks, Sanford Peterson, and Donald Wolfarth. Hearings were held during the 1984 convention, and the committee solicited the opinion and experience of the membership. Members of the Advisory Council provided valued suggestions, as did organizations that use Sturgis as their parliamentary authority. Many articles in *Parliamentary Journal* also were helpful. Final work on the revision was completed in the summer of 1987 for publication in January, 1988.

Many of the changes are merely changes in wording to clarify ambiguity,

or to remove gender bias. Significant changes include the following:

Object to Consideration: This rarely used motion has been eliminated. The rationale is that it simply isn't needed, as there are easier ways to accomplish its purpose, and that it often confuses those who are not familiar with it, since to accomplish its purpose requires a two-thirds vote in the negative.

When it is desirable to refuse to consider a matter, there is nearly always a good reason, such as the absence of a key member, the need for additional information, insufficient time, the need for consideration by committee, a more urgent matter, a conflict with the bylaws, or some misunderstanding that has come to light. In such cases, a motion to postpone temporarily, to postpone definitely, or to commit; or a request that the motion be withdrawn; or a point of order are better. Thus it is likely that use of the motion is simply unneeded. These alternative motions are also less harsh than the impertinent phrase, "I object to consideration of the question."

It is argued sometimes that the motion is needed to prevent discussion of an "embarrassing" matter; but in explaining it the chair calls attention to the "embarrassing" matter anyway. There is an easier way to avoid discussion: the motion to lay on the table. When used this way—tabling a matter before any discussion has taken place—the motion to table should require a two-thirds vote, as recommended by Henry Robert.¹ Thus, the matter is handled more simply, yet still has the protection provided by the two-thirds requirement.

Postpone Indefinitely: This motion has been abolished in the new Standard Code. It is really a bit of game-playing, confusing the uninitiated who are often perplexed by the need to vote *for* the motion if they are against the main motion and *against* it if they are for the main motion. Its very name is misleading, indicating postponement, when its real purpose is to dispose of the main motion negatively.

When used to get around the limitation on debate it is being used to thwart the intent of the majority as expressed in the motion limiting debate. This is another example of the game-playing that brings parliamentary procedure into disrepute. As for the argument that it permits a sort of "straw vote," this is true—but it is a ploy that can be useful only for opponents of the motion, not proponents, which provides an unfair advantage.

It is true that the motion can be used to kill a main motion without a direct vote—but essentially the same thing can be accomplished by tabling. Of course, the tabled motion can be brought before the assembly again by a simple majority vote, but (a) that seldom happens if the intent was to kill the motion, as is usually the case; and (b) even if the tabled motion is brought before the assembly again, what harm has been done? After all, the majority rules.

Tabling: As in the Second Edition, the Third Edition of Sturgis uses “to postpone temporarily” as the preferred wording of this motion, although the usage “to lay on the table” and the more commonly used “to table” are, of course, acceptable.

When this motion is used to dispose of a motion without debate (as in the example given above), or when it is used to end debate when some members wish to continue, the chair should require a two-thirds vote, as recommended by General Robert.²

The Standard Code follows the practice of Congress in recognizing tabling as an acceptable way of killing a motion. Despite the recommendations against this by General Robert³ and by Sarah Corbin Robert⁴ most American organizations routinely kill motions by tabling them, just as most legislatures do. The Standard Code validates this practice, which through continual usage has become part of the “common law” of parliamentary procedure.

Reconsider: Like most modern authorities⁵ Sturgis has always held that the motion to reconsider can be made by any member, regardless of how he or she voted on the motion itself. In the Third Edition, however, one important change has been made. The motion to reconsider does not open the main motion to debate. Discussion is limited to the reasons for reconsideration.

To permit discussion of the main motion during debate on the motion to reconsider puts the assembly in a ludicrous position—it is, in effect, “reconsidering” the main motion while deciding whether to reconsider it! It is much more logical to limit discussion to the reasons for opening up the question again—i.e., such things as that a new fact that has come to light, or a change in the situation has occurred since the vote was taken, or an error that has been discovered. Then if the assembly decides to reconsider the vote it can do so. If it decides not to, the matter is dropped—and no time has been wasted on *de facto* reconsideration prior to the vote.

In addition to these revisions, a number of minor changes have been made in wording. For example, the term “adjourned meeting” is confusing to many people, referring as it does to both a meeting that has ended and one that has resumed. The *Standard Code* now recommends the term “continued meeting” to refer to the resumption of a meeting previously adjourned to a certain time.

Another change in terminology is substitution of the term “close debate” for “vote immediately” (as in the Second Edition) or the sometimes confusing “previous question” (as in RONR). Several authorities suggested we use the wording, “I move to close debate and vote immediately,” which admittedly would be more complete, but in the interest of brevity it was decided to follow the lead of Keesey and Riddick and use the simple phrase, “I move to close debate.”

Two new chapters have been added to the Third Edition. One is a chapter on how to deal with obsolete motions and terminology. Even though an organization may have adopted the *Standard Code* as its authority some members are likely to use procedures not included in the *Standard Code*—such as the motion to reconsider and enter on the minutes, or the motion to go into a committee of the whole. The revision committee added a chapter explaining how such motions can be handled.

A chapter on frequently asked questions also has been added. Because the average inexperienced presiding officer is unlikely to read any parliamentary authority cover-to-cover, it was felt that a concise summary of the essential procedures in a question-and-answer format would be helpful.

To the many AIP members who have provided us with suggestions and counsel, I would like to express the heartfelt gratitude of the revision committee. And in this year, during which AIP celebrates its 30th anniversary, we hope the new *Standard Code* will be a significant step toward the realization of the goals stated in AIP's Action Program: "to work for the improvement of parliamentary procedure, to promote the use of effective, democratic parliamentary practices, and to remove unneeded complications, confusing ambiguities, and archaic terminology from parliamentary practice."

ENDNOTES

¹Robert, Henry M., *Robert's Rules of Order, Revised* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1971) 109. See also Robert, Henry M., *Parliamentary Law* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1975) 63.

²*Parliamentary Law*.

³Robert, RONR, p. 108-109.

⁴Robert, Sarah Corbin, et al. *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970) 177-178.

⁵Butcher, Miriam, "I Move to Reconsider the Motion to Reconsider," *Parliamentary Journal* XXVIII: 4 (1987) 129.

Ed Bliss, a member of the AIP's Advisory Council, chaired the committee that prepared the Third Edition of the *Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure*.