

Ask the Parliamentarian

Elizabeth Haynes has been a member of CFUW for 20 years. She has held positions as president of CFUW Muskoka and CFUW Windsor, chair of the Ontario Council Status of Women & Human Rights and Education Standing Committees, Regional Director Ontario West and CFUW Director of Strategic Planning. Her experiences in these positions led her to an interest in studying parliamentary procedure and receiving certification as a Registered Parliamentarian with the National Association of Parliamentarians (NAP).

Q: How do we engage in respectful, meaningful debate in an electronic age?

A: The principles of debate are fundamentally the same whether we are engaging in debate on the floor of a meeting of a deliberative assembly (e.g. local CFUW clubs or the CFUW AGM) or we are debating electronically through a teleconference or webinar. Online forums (e.g. Facebook, bulletin board or chatroom) or other forms of written debate are not recommended by Robert's Rules of Order as explained below.

- All members should have access to the same information at the same time. The chair must have the ability to rule on the admissibility of the information provided—whether it is germane to the question on the floor and whether the speaker is following the rules of decorum. One of the hallmarks of a deliberative assembly is that it provides for simultaneous aural communication. A Web-based or telephone based meeting is not considered duly constituted unless it also provides for simultaneous aural communication. Robert's Rules of Order (RONR) states that attempts to conduct debate in a written format are not recommended, and they do not constitute a deliberative assembly (RONR (11th ed.) p.98, ll. 14-17). In a written or online forum neither simultaneity nor aural communication are possible. There is no guarantee that the same materials will be distributed to all members in the same format, in the same order or at the same time. All of these factors affect the nature of the debate. At CFUW our procedure is to present bylaw amendments and advocacy resolutions, along with their rationale for the motion, in writing prior to our AGM in order to permit member clubs to consider the issues, offer amendments and provide their voting delegates with voting instructions. However, the formal debate takes place on the floor of the AGM where simultaneous aural communication is maintained and the rules of decorum are enforced.
- During the formal debate on the floor, all members wishing to speak to the motion have the right to do so. This right is subject to the rules of debate established by the parliamentary authority and the meeting standing rules. At CFUW that means we must all abide by the rules of decorum laid out in RONR and our meeting rules. We permit proposers to open and close debate. All other members are permitted to speak once on each question subject to the time limit for debate of each question. The debate is balanced and alternates between pro and con. If there are more members wishing to speak on one side than on the other, debate will be ended after the last speaker on the side with the fewest members wishing to speak. Otherwise, debate ends when the time set aside for the discussion has been exhausted. However, when the time for debate has been exhausted it can be extended by a motion approved by a 2/3 vote. The right to speak in debate cannot be abridged unless by a 2/3 vote of the assembly.

- All members must respect the rules of decorum as outlined in RONR on pages 391-397, including:
 - Refrain from Attacking a member's motives.
 - A member can condemn the proposed action or its probable outcome, but a member must avoid discussing personalities, questioning motives or using language such as "is false," "fraud," "liar," or "lie"
 - Refrain from the use of a members' name. "Members of the assembly cannot address one another directly" (RONR (11th ed)p. 392 l. 29). For example, "will the treasurer state the current balance?" is acceptable, while "Will Jane state the balance?" is not.
 - Address all remarks through the chair.
 - Confine remarks to the merits of the pending question. This concept is often confusing when discussing amendments to a motion. Frequently a member will get up to speak in debate on the main motion while an amendment is pending. The chair is correct to rule the member out of order unless the member's remarks are specific to the desirability of amending the motion.

As stated above, in CFUW we have processes for presenting Articles & Bylaws amendments and Resolutions, along with their rationales or backgrounds, in written form prior to our Annual General Meeting. The purpose of this is to allow club members to debate the merits of the motion, to offer amendments and to give their delegate voting instructions. Our procedures allow for clubs to forward their submissions for amendments or arguments for or against the motions to the proposers through the chair of the appropriate committee. Any proposed amendments and their rationales are made available to the full membership prior to the AGM. Arguments for or against the motions help proposers to answer questions and strengthen their rationales. These are not part of the formal debate and generally are not forwarded to the membership as a whole. Nevertheless, they must follow the same rules of decorum as in formal debate, or the chair will ask that they be re-written to be in compliance before they can be forwarded. This year, understanding the importance that members will place on the decision to approve or defeat bylaw Amendment 2, the CFUW board of directors has agreed to create a forum for members to offer discussion points. All documents must be submitted to Myra Willis, Chair of the Articles and Bylaws Committee. Submissions will be vetted for accuracy and to make sure that they follow the rules of decorum as defined in RONR.