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CLOSING DEBATE (aka “Calling the Question”)

Situation: When a member or members of a group feel that debate on a pending motion is unproductive or that the group needs to move to other pressing issues, they may desire to end the debate and vote immediately on the pending motion. However, if debate is ended prematurely, the group might fail to consider relevant information or some members might not have had a fair chance to have their views heard. Thus, correct procedures to close debate need to balance the need to move ahead efficiently with the need to deliberate the matter fully and fairly.

Misconception: A belief has somehow developed that if a member wishes to end debate, s/he need only call out “question!” or “I call the question” and that such utterance requires the group to end debate and vote immediately on the pending motion. Such practice in giving one member the right to curtail deliberations increases the risk of an ill-thought out decision and may infringe on others’ rights of participation. This practice has no basis in Robert’s Rules of Order.

Correct Procedures: Closing debate on a pending motion can be done properly only with the consent of the group – not on the demand of a single member. The group decision to close debate can be made either informally through unanimous consent or through a formal motion process.

Closing debate informally begins with the suggestion from a member or from the chair that, for whatever reason, the group should come to closure on the pending motion. The chair can then ask if the group is ready to vote on the pending motion. Assuming that all members of the group agree that it is time to vote and that no member still wishes to speak to the motion, the chair can indicate that debate has ended and that the group will now vote on the pending motion.

If unanimous consent is not obtained, it is still possible to close debate through a formal motion that, like most other motions, would need to be seconded and voted on. A member could say either, “I move the previous question,” or “I move to close debate.” Under the Robert approach, this motion requires two-thirds of the votes cast for adoption. However, an individual group may have its own rule on closing debate that calls for some other vote requirement. If the motion to close debate passes, the group then votes on the motion that was immediately pending. The process of closing debate may be initiated by a formal motion without first attempting to use unanimous consent.

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