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**Thinking Clearly About Speaking Freely – Part 18:  
Applying Robert's Rules of Order To Cancel Culture**

by

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[Real Clear Markets](#)

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In Part 17 of this ["Thinking Clearly and Speaking Freely"](#) series, I argued that free markets help combat Cancel Culture while, conversely, expansion of government control and intervention supports speech suppression. As I explained in ["Free Markets Are a Crucial Antidote to Cancel Culture,"](#) a free market order is instrumental in nurturing a culture conducive to speaking freely because the mutual cooperation necessary to facilitate voluntary exchange depends upon habits of tolerance, including tolerating speech with which you may disagree.

That last piece was part of my ongoing project to consider how to nurture a constitutional *culture* more supportive of free speech – more conducive to "speaking freely" – in spaces, like social media, where our Constitution may not mandate allowing such speech.

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In our system of democratic governance, the rationale for valuing the ability to speak freely regarding matters of public import should be self-evident. But if any reminder is needed, consider reports from just the past several days focusing only on COVID-related subjects. Now – but not earlier when consideration of divergent views by respected voices might have saved lives and meaningfully reduced public harms – it's finally acceptable to speak more freely about the origins of COVID, the role of natural immunity in preventing spread of the disease, and the societal costs incurred by prolonged school closings. There is a price to be paid when speech challenging the "official" line of the government, at times aided by the mainstream press, is suppressed.

Now, in this piece I want to invoke [Robert's Rules of Order](#) as a means of combatting Cancel Culture – or put affirmatively, as a means of supporting a culture conducive to speaking freely. Yes, those same *Robert's Rules* that the president or parliamentarian of your neighborhood civic association, church board of directors, school board, or local city council uses to run a meeting.

The first edition of *Robert's Rules*, compiled by Henry Martyn Robert, appeared in 1876. The Twelfth Edition, which I have in hand, and which supersedes all previous editions, was published in 2020. It's suitably weighty, consisting of over 700 pages, most of which specify in mind-boggling detail the proper "parliamentary" procedure for deciding the order of business, making and disposing of motions of all kinds, conducting nominations and voting, compiling minutes, and so forth.

Don't worry! I'm not going to suggest that one way of nurturing free speech is literally to "throw the book" at the Cancel Culture warriors. As I said it's quite weighty, and used as a weapon, it might cause injury. I'm not even going to suggest that the inveterate speech silencers be required to read through all the rules.

I ask only that those who wish to silence others with whom they disagree seriously consider the purpose behind having a set of accepted rules to govern the conduct of deliberative bodies, whether they be the houses of Congress or state legislatures, or just a small-town council meeting, a PTA meeting, or a neighborhood association gathering. Consider this key statement from the "Principles Underlying Parliamentary Law" from the current edition of [Robert's Rules of Order](#): "Ultimately, it is the majority taking part in the assembly who decide the general will, *but only following upon the opportunity for a deliberative process of full and free discussion.*" This makes clear in unmistakable terms that a central purpose of codifying such an elaborate body of procedural rules is to ensure that all those involved in deliberations have an opportunity to present their views, even if they are in the minority.

Indeed, according to *Robert's Rules'* Introduction, an impetus for Henry Martyn Robert to compile the original edition stemmed from the proliferation in the first decades of the nineteenth century of a multitude of nonlegislative voluntary organizations of various kinds – "political, cultural, scientific, charitable, and religious." Of course, we know from Tocqueville's [\*Democracy in America\*](#) of Americans' disposition to form what he called "an immense assemblage of associations." To achieve the mutual objectives of their members, these voluntary organizations needed rules for the conduct of their meetings that would ensure that all viewpoints were allowed to be considered.

Throughout this series I have emphasized that, ultimately, the health of our democracy depends on our willingness to allow our fellow citizens to speak freely about matters of public importance – to tolerate, and then consider, speech with which we may disagree. Thomas Jefferson, who published his own [\*Manual of Parliamentary Practice\*](#) in 1801, put it this way: "For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

But I give Henry Martyn Robert, the author of the original *Robert's Rules*, the last word: "The great lesson for democracies to learn is for the majority to give the minority a full, free opportunity to present their side of the case...."

It is in that spirit that I suggest combatting Cancel Culture with *Robert's Rules*. Not literally, but by appreciating that a core purpose of the rules is to enable those engaged in any deliberative process to speak freely so that we all may think more clearly. Such appreciation would go a long way towards strengthening our Constitutional Culture.

\* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank in Rockville, MD. The views expressed in this *Perspectives* do not necessarily reflect the views of others on the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *Thinking Clearly About Speaking Freely – Part 18: Applying Robert's Rules of Order To Cancel Culture* was published in *Real Clear Markets* on March 9, 2023.