



To Table or Postpone: What's the Difference?

Larry Larmer, Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Madison

This really happened: A local government body agreed to “table” an item until the next meeting. When the chair attempted to introduce the item at the next meeting, a member objected on the grounds that a tabled item required that the body agree to take it from the table before it could be considered. A lengthy discussion ensued. Why the confusion?

We seem to have fallen into the habit of using the term “table” when we mean to postpone. Technically, tabling and postponing to a definite time are different actions. When a pending matter is tabled correctly, it is set aside with no provision for bringing it back at any specific time. In this case, it requires a subsequent motion to take it from the table. Here’s an example that also really happened: During a local government body’s deliberations, it was discovered that a needed piece of information was in the clerk’s office. The body tabled the pending item – *i.e.*, set it aside – while the clerk retrieved the information. In the meantime, the body attended to other business. When the clerk returned with the information, the body could choose when or whether to take the item from the table. In other words, the body could continue with other business before returning to the tabled item. If the body is following Robert’s, tabled items not taken up in the current meeting can, by agreement of the body, be taken from the table at the first subsequent meeting. In this case, good practice suggests that the possibility of taking up such items should be on the public notice of the subsequent meeting. Items not removed from the table during the first meeting subsequent to their tabling would have to be renewed through the regular agenda-setting process.

By contrast, agreement to postpone a pending item to a specific time means that the body definitely wants the item to be taken up at that time. The specified time could be later in the same meeting, a future meeting, or even to a time after an event has occurred. When the body agrees to postpone an item to a

particular time, it has created, in Robert’s language, an “order of the day” – *i.e.*, the body has “ordered” that the item appear on the agenda at that time. In the example in the first paragraph, the agreement was to delay consideration of the matter to a time specific – the next meeting – so the intention was probably to postpone rather than table. Had the correct language been used, there probably would have been no confusion.

There are two other considerations about postponing. First, postponing an item “until after an event” does not specify when the body will get back to the postponed matter – only when it will not take it up. It would be better to specify postponement until the first meeting after the event. If at that time the body decides it doesn’t want to consider it, it can be further postponed. Another related action or motion is “postpone indefinitely.” Like tabling, it sets a motion aside with no provision for getting back to it at any particular time. Its main use is when a body realizes that, for some reason, it should not take any action on the matter.

In sum: It’s good to know the difference between tabling and postponing and to use the correct language. If another member uses “table” but you suspect s/he means “postpone,” it would be a good idea to seek clarification – especially if you are the chair.

Do you have a question about parliamentary procedure?

Email the League at league@lwm-info.org with the subject line “For the Good of the Order” and Larry may respond in a future column.

