

What is a Parliamentarian?

What an interesting term...In Canada, the term usually refers to someone who actually sits as an elected Member of Parliament—a parliamentarian!

However, in our context, it is borrowed from its more American usage where it refers to more broadly to a person who has demonstrated knowledge of parliamentary procedure and who has passed an examination to become a member of an association such as the National Association of Parliamentarians or the American Institute of Parliamentarians, or passed examinations to become certified or registered with one of these associations.

As well, in the American system, Congress does have an official non-partisan Parliamentarian who is its advisor on the interpretation of its rules and procedures.

What does a Parliamentarian do?

Ordinarily, a parliamentarian's work falls into 4 general categories.

1. Drafting and Interpreting Bylaws

Bylaws define the structure, governance, rights and responsibilities of an organization and its members. Bylaws specify rules that may be unique to an organization and that cannot be suspended by motion.

And of course, they must be compliant with any laws governing the organization.

Parliamentarians are often asked to help an organization in drafting, revising, or interpreting bylaws.

I find that I've developed a real interest in this type of work more and more over the years—both with policy writing as with bylaws—it can be so absorbing.

2. Parliamentary Opinions

Parliamentarians are often asked to review an organization's governing documents (their bylaws and policies) and provide an opinion as to how to proceed to accomplish a particular objective—or even if it is possible without making substantial changes to their documents.

Like many people who serve as parliamentarians, I get calls or emails looking for advice related to what an organization can and can't do according to their documents fairly regularly—often because they want to see their way around a sticky situation... I do like this role, though, because it can be a real challenge to determine not just what can or can't be done: often there is more than one way to interpret documents; often plenty of room for flexibility; even with motions, there can be more than one motion used to accomplish the same goal—parliamentary procedure is not an exact science by any means—and this keeps it interesting.

3. Meeting and Convention Planning

Parliamentarians are often called upon to help an organization in planning a meeting or convention. Sometimes, people aren't sure how to organize the agenda or what protocols are important to follow—the parliamentarian can help.

They can also help in the preparation of things like scripts for parts of the meeting or convention, credentials reports, election forms, and the processes in the consideration of motions, bylaw amendments, running elections, and so on.

This might be my least favourite role, but it has some high points too. I just worked with a newly formed National foundation that had never had an Annual General Meeting, so was starting from scratch—that was quite interesting.

4. Serving as Parliamentarian at Meetings/Conventions

The role of the parliamentarian at a meeting is to be a resource to the chair, to assist the Chair in the conduct of the meeting. The Chair should know the rules of the meeting themselves; the Parliamentarian is there to act as a second set of eyes and ears to help the Chair avoid missing important things.

The parliamentarian sits right by the Chair to give help, guidance and support during the meeting. The Chair can and should consult with the parliamentarian when they are not certain on how to rule on something or proceed in a particular situation. However, it is the Chair who makes all rulings, not the Parliamentarian: The parliamentarian serves in an advisory capacity only, without any authority. It is also worth remembering that the Parliamentarian is required to be impartial and unbiased; thus, the Parliamentarian is not an advocate for the Chair or for any particular position.

The excitement of this role comes from the fact that you never know what you will encounter at a meeting or convention. Of course, this is also where the stress arises for the person serving as Parliamentarian. No matter how well you prepare, there will always be some surprises. I especially enjoy this role when I'm at a meeting or convention of what I consider to be "friendlies"—and Alberta School Council Association definitely falls into that category. By this, I mean that if I make an error or give the Chair poor advice, I always feel that I can say to the assembly, "Oh, let me correct myself...this was my fault," then fix the error, and that the assembly won't tear me to pieces. I am able to learn from the situation along with the assembly.

Why do I enjoy serving as a Parliamentarian?

So, I mentioned a bit about what I like in each area. Let me conclude by giving a general comment about Parliamentarians.

Some parliamentarians make their livings doing this type of work, and have designations such as Professional Registered Parliamentarians, indicating that they have passed difficult examinations and that they keep their credentials active in a number of ways. They might serve a wide variety of clients, including government agencies, corporate boards, elected and non-for-profit boards, and so on. I really admire these folks because they have a great depth of parliamentary knowledge and usually experience to go with it. Others just serve as parliamentarians only occasionally—maybe just in their own church or service group, donating their time or earning a small honorarium.

Most of my work in this area has been with Boards that are serving others: Alberta School Councils Assoc is a good example—everyone involved is doing this work for the betterment of students and their schools. Other examples include not-for-profit boards, post-secondary student groups, church and community groups, and so on. So, these are Boards full of people who I admire for the work they're doing and who I think are making our society better overall through their work. So, by helping these groups to have better meetings, I feel the satisfaction of being able to contribute to this wide variety of work for the greater good.