

CHAIRMAN, CHAIRWOMAN, OR CHAIR?

For years the use of Chairman, Chairwoman or Chair have fascinated me. I have had countless discussions with Captains of industry around the world and frequent discussions with my co-members of the King III Committee and my co-members of the Task Team writing King IV.

Whenever this issue comes to mind, I am reminded of the famous words of Derek Walcott (the Saint Lucian poet and playwright and current Professor of Poetry at the University of Essex) who wrote that “the English language is nobody’s special property. It is the property of the imagination: it is the property of the language itself.”

Imagine my joy when the article under the above rubric by US Attorney Keith Paul Bishop landed on my desk!

In the article, Bishop writes that to someone who is not familiar with the English language, many words must seem bizarre. One such word is “chairman”. Does this refer to a chair made into a man or a man made from a chair? What should be made of a law that solemnly proclaims “All references in this division to ‘chairman’ shall be deemed to refer to ‘chair.’?” After explaining that a “chairman” refers to someone who officiates a meeting, a non-English speaker might ask what has that to do with being a chair.

He goes on to say that etymologically, the word is a combination of “chair” and “man”. The word “chair” ultimately comes to us from the Greek (καθἔδρα) by way of Latin (cathedra) and Old French (chaire). Despite the changes in alphabet and spelling, the word has always meant essentially the same thing – a seat, something on which one rested his or her tokhes. When the ancient Romans held a public meeting or trial indoors, they usually did so in a building known as a basilica. Typically this was a structure containing a long, high ceilinged room with a curved end known as an apse. When a trial was being held, the judicial magistrate, known as a praetor would sit on a special chair in the middle of the apse. (See, e.g., William Shakespeare, Macbeth Act I, Sc. 3 (“And look you lay it in the praetor’s chair”). Hence the man (in ancient Rome, the praetor was always a male) the sitting on the chair was in charge of the proceedings. After Constantine became emperor in 306 CE, many existing basilicas were converted into churches and new churches were built following the design of pre-Christian Roman basilicas. Perhaps the most famous basilica today is St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican City, the current version of which was completed in the 17th century. The word “basilica” is derived from the Greek word for king, βασιλεύς. The word “cathedral” is derived from the Greek words, κατά (down) and ἔδρα (seat).

As Bishop points out, in modern times, there has been greater awareness of gender neutrality and concomitantly an aversion to gender specific terminology. “Chairman” is usually considered to refer exclusively to males, although “man” is derived from the Anglo Saxon term “mann” which simply referred to a human being, regardless of sex.

Robert’s Rules of Order, written, for those of you who have forgotten, by Brig. Gen. Henry Martyn Robert, containing rules of order intended to be adopted as a Parliamentary authority for Deliberative Assemblies, states that in meetings, your presiding officer should be addressed by title, such as “Madam Chairman” or “Mr. President.” Robert’s Rules provides that an officer’s title should be used as defined in the bylaws, or the rules of order. In Robert’s Rules, “Chairman” is considered as gender neutral as “Director” or “Governor.” (Not many female members of a board of directors or a board of governors want to be called a “Directrix” or a “Governess,” the traditional feminine forms of “Director” and “Governor.”) But

courtesy demands that a person's preference as to the usage of their title be honored. Accordingly, "Madam Chair" or "Madam Chairperson" is not incorrect if it's the pleasure of a woman holding the position of presiding officer.

And so the debate continues, I remember once being told by a gentleman company director that he strongly objected to the use of "Chairwoman" as "Chairman" was a combination of the words "Chair" and "manager" (abbreviated to "man") and that the chairman is the Chair Manager, the person managing the meeting from the Chair. And another suggestion that I once received was that the debate could be ended by definitively setting out the title to be used in the Company's memorandum of incorporation.

So I conclude with the famous words of Doug Larsen, the well-known US columnist and Editor, who said that if the English language made any sense, lackadaisical would have something to do with the shortage of flowers.

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