

When unstatesman-like behavior creeps in

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - Thank you, good ladies and gentlemen. Today I'd like to talk about decorum.

Decorum: Conformity to accepted standards of conduct; orderliness; decency; propriety.

That's the aim of a number of Idaho House and Senate rules. They add a certain gravity to legislative procedures, a dignity that encourages one to be on his or her best behavior.

Food and drink, for example, are prohibited during floor sessions. That's why you never see lawmakers munching popcorn as they listen to a good debate. Men don't remove their jackets or loosen their ties. Lobbyists are banished to an outer room.

The debate itself is equally circumscribed. Even something as simple as asking a question has a set procedure:

House Speaker: "For what purpose does the gentleman rise?"

Rep. A: "Mr. Speaker, for an inquiry of the good gentleman from District B."

Speaker: "Will the gentleman yield?"

Rep. B: "The gentleman yields."

Speaker: "The gentleman yields."

Rep. A: "Thank you Mr. Speaker, good gentleman. My question "

And so it goes, one query at a time.

It's a cumbersome process - I've heard some lawmakers complain that by the time they're done yielding and inquiring and good gentleman-ing, they've forgotten the question they wanted to ask - but it does help keep emotions in check and prevents debates from devolving into open arguments.

That isn't to say the rules prevent all boorish behavior.

Tuesday, for example, disgruntled House members used an amending procedure to express their displeasure at the Senate's treatment of two gun rights bills.

One bill, from Rep. Mark Patterson, R-Boise, makes it a misdemeanor subject to a fine of up to \$1,000 for any Idaho law enforcement officer to help federal agents confiscate firearms from Idaho citizens.

The second, from Rep. Jason Monks, R-Meridian, clarifies that firearms manufactured and sold in Idaho are not subject to federal regulation, taxation or confiscation unless transported across state lines.

Both measures passed the House, but didn't get hearings in the Senate.

Representatives responded Tuesday by taking a Senate school safety bill, gutting its language and replacing it with text from the two House bills.

"The chamber on the other side made it clear they didn't have time to debate these bills," Monks said. "We felt it was important for them to get a hearing."

As initially presented, the Senate bill required school districts to work with local sheriffs to develop security and threat assessment plans for all public schools.

Were Idaho parents free to ask Monks his intentions, House rules outline how that questioning should take place:

Appropriate: "Good gentleman, my understanding is this school safety bill was developed in response to the Dec. 14 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, in which 20 children and six adults were killed. You're removing any language dealing with the safety of our children, any language that might prevent a similar tragedy in Idaho, and replacing it with your own gun rights legislation. Is that correct?"

Also appropriate: "Good gentleman, by taking this step, aren't we effectively killing all three measures, since the Senate won't accept the amendment?"

Inappropriate: "Seriously? You can't find a better way to deal with this?"

Highly inappropriate: "Are you nuts? What the hell are you thinking?"

Bang. That's when the speaker slams his gavel down, debate stops and the guilty party hangs his or her head like a scolded puppy.

This isn't to say Monks or Patterson don't have legitimate complaints about the treatment of their bills - but the practice of spiking legislation has a long and cherished history in both bodies. It's part of a reasonably effective system of checks and balances. If lawmakers truly have a problem with how the system works, they might want to amend the rules, instead of playing games.

I'm reminded of Aristotle's claim that if people just act virtuous, they'll eventually become virtuous.

Perhaps the same is true of these good gentlemen: If they ever start acting like statesmen, maybe someday they'll become statesmen.
