Parliamentary Procedure: Lay on the Table¹

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Use of the Motion

The motion to *Lay on the Table* is used to temporarily delay action on a pending question while something else of immediate urgency needs consideration, or when another item of business needs to be addressed before consideration of the pending question. For example, suppose an item of business is being considered, and it is obvious during debate that the motion is going to take longer than expected to dispose of, causing the motion to run into the time allotted for the guest speaker, who must get to another appointment. In this case it would be in order for a member to move to lay the motion on the table to allow the speaker time to address the assembly. It is proper for the chair to ask the maker of the Lay on the Table motion to state the reason for the need to table it.

The key to the proper use of this motion is that there must be

- a sense of urgency that necessitates the delay in considering the motion,
- no set time for taking up the motion again, and
- the opportunity for the assembly to consider (or not consider) the motion afterwards at the will of the assembly members.

Of particular importance is that the effect of the motion to Lay on the Table is to remove a motion from the floor

immediately without having to consider it at the present time or to move the Previous Question, which requires a two-thirds vote. Basic principles of parliamentary law require a two-thirds vote for any motion that suppresses a main motion for the session without debate. The motion to Lay on the Table, being undebatable, requiring only a majority vote, and having the highest rank of all subsidiary motions, is in direct conflict with these principles if it is used to suppress a question.

Standard Descriptive Characteristics

The motion to Lay on the Table may be applied to any original or incidental main motion, to a debatable appeal (one that does not adhere to the main question, so that the action on the latter would not be affected by the reversal of the chair's decision), or to the motion to reconsider. It cannot be applied to an undebatable motion to Appeal the Decision of the Chair.

The motion to Lay on the Table is undebatable and cannot have any subsidiary motion applied to it. It yields to all privileged motions and any incidental motions that arise out of the motion itself. When a motion is laid on the table, all motions applied to the motion are also tabled.

The motion to Lay on the Table can be made while an order limiting debate (i.e., Previous Question) is in force. Since the motion to Lay on the Table is the highest ranking

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subsidiary motion, no other subsidiary motion can be applied to it.

The motion to Lay on the Table is out of order if it is used to merely delay or prevent a vote on a motion. However, it is often confused with the motions to Postpone Indefinitely or Postpone to a Certain Time (Definitely). When used in this way, it is misused. The motion to Postpone Indefinitely is used to kill the main motion, preventing its consideration for the duration of the meeting. However, the motion to Lay on the Table allows the assembly to bring back the motion by merely taking it from the table by a majority vote. Likewise, the motion to Postpone Definitely sets a particular time for the motion to come back before the assembly without another vote. Also, both motions to postpone allow for debate, which would negate the primary advantage of the motion to Lay on the Table (being able to temporarily set aside a motion without debate).

A motion remains on the table until it is taken from the table by a vote of the assembly. Once taken from the table, the motion is handled as it would have been at the time it was laid on the table.

Once a motion is laid on the table, the amount of time it remains there is dependent upon how frequently the group meets. For example, for organizations that meet at least once in a three-month period, the motion may remain on the table for duration of the current meeting and the following meeting. However, if the organization meets less often than quarterly, the motion must be removed from the table during the current meeting, or it dies there. If the motion to Fix the Time to Which to Adjourn is adopted and its effect is to extend the present meeting to a different date, the motion that was laid on the table on the first day remains there until taken from the table, even if this action occurs on the second date.

The motion to Lay on the Table cannot be reconsidered, but if lost, it may be made again if there has been material progress in business or debate, or if an unforeseen urgent matter requires immediate attention. If adopted, it still cannot be reconsidered, but the question may be taken from the table as soon as the interrupting business has been disposed of, and while no question is pending.

A motion that was tabled and then taken from the table may be tabled again if significant progress in business or debate has been made. Motions to Recess or Adjourn that have been made and lost do not justify a new motion to Lay on the Table.

According to Davidson (2012), no motion on the same subject or one that would affect the question may be entertained while a question is on the table.

Form and Example

The form of the motion is as follows:

Member: After properly obtaining the floor, “I move to lay the question on the table.” (Note that the motion cannot be qualified in any way. If qualified, the chair should rule the motion out of order.)

Chair: “Is there a second?”

Second Member: “I second the motion.”

Chair: “The motion to Lay on the Table the motion thathas been made and seconded. The motion to Lay on the Table is undebatable and unamendable and will come to an immediate vote. Those in favor of the motion to lay the pending question on the table please indicate by saying ‘Aye.’ Those opposed please indicate by saying ‘No.’ The motion to Lay on the Table is adopted/lost.”

If the motion to Lay on the Table is adopted, the chair would then move to the urgent matter that caused the need for the action to be taken. If the motion to Lay on the Table is lost, the chair would resume business at the same point at which the motion to Lay on the Table was made.

References

Davidson, R. G. (2012). *Lay on the table*. Retrieved from <http://www.parlipro.org/table.htm>

Robert, H. M. (2011). *Robert’s rules of order newly revised* (11th ed.). Philadelphia: DaCapo Press.