

The Chatham House Rule

The term 'Chatham House Rule' is frequently used when issues concerning Strategy, Intelligence or sensitive policy are being canvassed or discussed in a public forum by people of note, particularly officials, who have a specific knowledge in these areas. They can speak more openly and freely if the Chatham House Rule applies at the meeting. For this reason, members attending RUSI meetings are likely to receive more frank and accurate information than is generally available. The Chatham House Rule is a guideline to the handling of sensitive material that may be included in lectures and presentations given at various forums. The Rule originated with the Royal Institute of International affairs, which is located at Chatham House in London. The Rule, which was formulated as the Chatham House Rule of Confidentiality in 1927, states:

When a meeting or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant may be revealed.

The Rule is not legally binding in any way, and indeed the only sanction that exists for a breach lies with the organisation sponsoring the lecture (members or others may be excluded from future meetings), or the lecturer, who may refuse in future to speak to the organisation.

RUSI of Australia bodies frequently (usually at the request of the presenter) apply the Chatham House Rule – this is always stated beforehand by the Chairman who will remind the audience of their obligations under the Rule. At seminars, the Rule may apply throughout the seminar or may be invoked for individual speakers as appropriate. During presentations when speakers are effectively making a public announcement, it will be stated that the Chatham House Rule does not apply.

FAQs (as advised by Chatham House)

Q. What are the benefits of using the Rule? **A.** It allows people to speak as individuals, and to express views that may not be those of their organizations, and therefore it encourages free discussion. People usually feel more relaxed if they don't have to worry about their reputation or the implications if they are publicly quoted.

Q. How is the Rule enforced? **A.** Chatham House can take disciplinary action against one of its members who breaks the Rule. Not all organizations that use the Rule have sanctions. The Rule then depends for its success on being seen as morally binding.

Q. Who uses the Rule these days? **A.** It is widely used by local government and commercial organizations as well as research organizations.

Q. Can participants in a meeting be named as long as what is said is not attributed? **A.** It is important to think about the spirit of the Rule. For example, sometimes speakers need to be named when publicizing the meeting. The Rule is more about the dissemination of the information after the event - nothing should be done to identify, either explicitly or implicitly, who said what.

Q. Can you say within a report what you yourself said at a meeting under the Chatham House Rule? **A.** Yes if you wish to do so.

Q. Can a list of attendees at the meeting be published? **A.** No - the list of attendees should not be circulated beyond those participating in the meeting.

Q. Can I 'tweet' whilst at an event under the Chatham House Rule? **A.** The Rule can be used effectively on social media sites such as Twitter as long as the person tweeting or messaging reports only what was said at an event and does not identify - directly or indirectly - the speaker or another participant. This consideration should always guide the way in which event information is disseminated - online as well as offline.

Thanks to Chatham House and the RUSI of Vic