

WHAT IS PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE?

by
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P a r l i a m e n t a r y D e b a t e

*Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity
Will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions;
For opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.*

John Milton

Parliamentary debate is growing by huge numbers at the college level. As invariably happens that means that high school programs and tournaments are beginning to explore this “new” style. But for those who are uninitiated or want to know more what is parliamentary debate?

Parliamentary debate is a formal contest of persuasion, wit and rhetorical skill modeled on the House of a democratic parliament. It is patterned or based on the debate in the British House

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of Commons and the platform debate first popularized at the University of Oxford. Two teams, the government and the loyal opposition, with two debaters on each side if it's the American version of parliamentary debate, consider a resolution proposed or offered to the House.

A different resolution is debated each round. The resolution to be debated is announced approximately fifteen minutes before the round begins. Most resolutions begin “This house believes” or “This house would”. Occasionally it begins with the simple word “Resolved”. A typical resolution might be “This House upholds liberty over necessity”, or “Resolved: controlling crime justifies increased police powers”. Resolutions are selected from the very large number of controversial issues that can be derived from economic, political humorous, sociological and philosophical questions found in our culture.

The resolution can be anything. It might be a line of poetry (This House affirms that truth is beauty), a quote from the Bible (Resolved that the world was created in seven days), a core philosophical belief (This House believes in the greatest good for the greatest number), a specific current event policy (This House opposes the war on terrorism), or a line from a song (This House affirms that all you need is love). Some tournaments provide two topics a round and the government team gets to

select which topic to use.

Supporting the resolution is the Government. Arguing against the resolution is the Opposition. The judge is called the Speaker of the House.

During the fifteen minutes before the debate starts both sides prepare their cases. Some tournaments urge or occasionally even require that five minutes into preparation time the government notify the opposition what case they will argue so that the opposition is better prepared.

The speaking order starts with (1) the Prime Minister for seven to eight minutes, the length depending on the rules for that particular tournament. This speech begins by acknowledging the Speaker, the opposition, announces the resolution and may offer definitions of the most critical words. It presents a case and supports it with several independent arguments and examples. The case must always side against the status quo, against present beliefs or actions. The government bears the burden of proof. Then comes (2) the Leader of the Opposition for eight minutes. This speech provides the opposition's philosophy, contests and offers counter definitions if necessary, presents the opposition strategy and or a counter case, gives new independent analysis, and then attacks or rebuts the government's case.

Next (3) a member of the government speaks for eight minutes. She usually starts with an overview then attacks the opposition's case and or arguments. She then rebuilds, as well as she can, the government case and introduces any new arguments her side thinks important. Then (4) a member of the opposition gets the floor for eight minutes. A common organization is to start with a review of the Opposition philosophy, then introduce new attacks and analysis, rebuilds the main points from the first opposition speech and answers Government attacks, and ends by setting Government burdens.

Finally comes (5) the closing rebuttal by the Leader of the Opposition for four minutes. No new arguments are allowed in this speech, although new examples are. It usually addresses the main issues, crystallizes, and finally provides dichotomies. (6) The closing rebuttal by the Prime Minister for four to five minutes, depending on tournament rules. Again no new arguments are allowed but refutation of opposition arguments and responses to attacks on the government case are good tactics, especially when they are focused on the most critical issues in the debate. New examples are allowed. Often time the speech ends with crystallization of the biggest or most important reasons to vote for the Government position.

The constructive speeches present the case for each side. New arguments are given only in the constructive speeches. Rebuttals attack, rebuild attacks, and or answer opposition arguments and attacks. Timing and time signals are either handled by the Speaker or a person designated by the Speaker.

The speakers are usually judged on their logic, argument selection, knowledge, wit, delivery and rebuttal skills. Emphasis is placed on quick thinking and analysis, on command of rhetoric and refutation. No recorded evidence or outside written material is allowed in the majority of parliamentary tournaments.

Interruptions

Unlike almost all other forms of competitive debate parliamentary debate allows speakers to be interrupted. Debaters on the other team can attempt to interrupt the speaker in three ways: heckling, points of information, and points of order.

Heckling includes sarcastic commentary, short jokes at the speaker's expense, a quick touch of *Reducto ad absurdum*, or a short refutation of the argument. Good heckling is very short (usually just one sentence), never rude, and is expected to occur two or three times each speech. Teammates and audience members are allowed to react to heckling and or other things any speaker says. They can applaud, boo, laugh, cheer, or do anything else that is not rude or distasteful or intended to interrupt the speaker's presentation.

After the first ninety seconds of a speech, and excluding the last minute of the speech, an opponent can rise to a "point of information". To do it the opposition speaker stands up with hand on her head (yes, on her head), and asks to be recognized. The speaker is free to ignore the questioner, say no, or accept the question and answer it. The speaker can even allow or tolerate follow up questions.

Either side can also rise to a Point of Order. Points of order are a protection for both sides. They are usually reserved for the rebuttal speeches. By raising a "point of order" the debater claims that a breach or violation, in accepted debate practice has occurred. An opponent might rise to a point of order, for example, if he thinks a new argument or disallowed evidence is being introduced. The judge, the Speaker of the House, rules immediately for or against the point, the claimed infraction.

National and International Variations

Parliamentary debate is organized in the Eastern and parts of the Southern United States by the APDA, the American Parliamentary Debate Association, a student run organization. In the West, Southwest, and parts of the South it is run by the NPDA, the National Parliamentary Debate Association, which is run by university faculty. Canada is organized by the CUSID, the Canadian University Society for Intercollegiate Debate.

Japan is based on APDA rules and procedures, but some rounds have two or three resolutions for the government to select from. In Australia there are three debaters on each team, with two teams in a debate labeled affirmative and negative rather than Government and Opposition. Australasian debate has responsibilities more clearly defined for each speech and judges consider these responsibilities in their scoring.

The British style is used in the United Kingdom and at the World Debate championships. Teams are two people but there are four teams in every debate, two on each side. None of the teams confer with each other before the debate begins. Every speech lasts seven minutes.

One element that unifies all types of parliamentary debate is its extemporaneous nature. With only ten to fifteen minutes preparation time after the topic is announced every successful team will use its knowledge, organizational skill, wit and creativity to develop strong persuasive arguments and examples.

The extemporaneous style is a major difference between parliamentary debate and the team policy debate often found at American high schools and colleges. While team policy debate has one topic that is researched and debated for an entire year, parliamentary debate has the topic change every debate. Team debate uses prewritten cases and blocks, parliamentary debate relies on quickly developed arguments and nearly spontaneous thought and logic. Research is critical in policy debate; it can be used only during preparation time in parliamentary debate.

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(William H. Bennett is Chairperson of the CDE National Summer Camps which includes a parliamentary debate institute - and CDE Publications. This article © 2002 by William Bennett.)