

# DEVELOPING THE CITIZEN TEST FOR POLICY DEBATE

by  
Kenneth P. Grodd

Like other veteran debate coaches, I have read with keen interest the excellent articles in this magazine that speak to the situation regarding policy debate in the United States. I must confess to being alarmed by the statistic that Mr. Copeland cited regarding the reduction in the number of high schools offering policy debate. As coaches, it is critical that we confront the decline in policy debate. If not, we will be in danger of losing an activity that can have, and in-

even had a debate program. Alas, my students countered that it's not their fault if the public doesn't get it. High-level policy debate, they opined, is a specialized activity whose wonders are such that only the initiated need appreciate. Flabbergasted, I could only conclude that their attitude spoke volumes about our decline. Such denial is tantamount to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. My former debaters couldn't be more wrong, and I am emboldened by the knowledge articulated by previous articles in the *Rostrum*, that there are other coaches, who like me, want to fix the hole in the boat and salvage to magnificent vessel on top.

**... "we should celebrate our ability to articulate in a manner that unites the citizenry in language" ...**

Other contributors to the *Rostrum* have correctly observed that speed and counter-intuitive off case arguments are hurting us. Additionally, it has been noted that debate so often descends into a game, where whining about fairness, ground, and abuse, have replaced any meaningful discussion of the resolution. In fact, the resolution in contemporary debate hardly matters at all. Camps, increas-

deed does have, valuable benefits for our students. I have a modest proposal, but first some musings.

ingly led by student instructors, challenge their labs to put out massive generic positions that are only slightly modified from the year before. There rarely is any examination of the resolution, independent of how it is to be debated. Debaters leave expensive camps largely ignorant of the resolutorial problem area. Thus, they are all but incapable of constructing a meaningful case argument, which is precisely the kind of argument that an educated, or even an uneducated citizen would appreciate.

A few years ago, I engaged in a rather contentious discussion with my senior debaters. The issue involved my deep concern that the trends in policy debate were rapidly thickening the walls between ourselves and our natural constituency. That constituency are educated men and women who should enjoy sitting down and listening to a meaningful discussion of important policy issues. I observed that policy debate, as it is currently practiced, is probably the only high school activity that an average citizen would fail to find any enjoyment witnessing. Even those citizens that really don't like or understand ballet usually enjoy a performance. Every athletic activity has a constituency consisting both of average folks and those more 'juiced in' to its intricacies. But policy debate has lost its natural constituency, and the situation seems to be deteriorating. Good folks, whether policy wonks or educated citizens, simply do not enjoy watching us perform our craft. Worse, they disparage it after they see it, sometimes publicly. I pointed out to my students that I once took our Principal to see one of our policy rounds at the Barkley Forum. Afterward, it was only through persuasion and some good fortune that we

We are not a 'cult'. We should not think of ourselves as a closed society, but rather as a vehicle to conduct policy discussion in a manner that enhances societal understanding of critical national and international issues. Specialization is our natural enemy. It drives off potential coaches, alienates parents and administrators, and reduces our connection to the public that pays for our operation. It is sobering how intelligent new coaches with college educations don't feel they are 'qualified' to judge policy debate. What does their trepidation really say about what we do, or better how we do it? Additionally, veteran coaches often will not judge, but instead hire students who 'get' the activity to judge in their place, serving to further thicken the walls. As a coach who judges, I literally dread most rounds. No mat-

ter how I phrase my pre-round observations, I usually hear the generic round, full of games but devoid of a meaningful discussion of the resolution. I often leave the round after my hour and a half feeling no more intelligent for the experience, and possibly less so. That doesn't mean there are no wonderful debate rounds. But they are becoming fewer and fewer, and we are paying the price. What does it say when so many coaches do not want to judge a varsity policy debate round? Even factoring in fatigue and the burden of other responsibilities, the main reason seems to me to be that judging is not an enjoyable experience. The nature of our activity makes judging another burden, rather than an opportunity for enjoyment, enlightenment, and growth, which it should be.

Many coaches, though by no means all, share my diagnosis. Hopefully, some might find agreement with my prescription. I would propose that we adopt what I refer to as **the citizen test**. All arguments and methods should be examined through the lens of these simple propositions. Would a reasonably intelligent individual observing our activity be enlightened by the discussion? Would they want to talk about the issues that were raised? Would they feel that we have added, not just heat, but light to the policy controversies surrounding the resolution? Or to reduce it more; would a reasonably intelligent citizen enjoy what we do? If the answers to these questions continues to be no, then we might well be doomed. Numerous other speaking events, not just the new Ted Turner Debates, will occupy the void our current practices create. But, if the answers increasingly become yes, then our activity will rebound and thrive. I want to advance five measures that might move the activity to meet my citizen test.

*First*, we simply have to deal with the speed issue. There is just no getting around the fact that it is the number one deterrent to citizen enjoyment. What can't be understood can't be enjoyed? It goes beyond judge adaptation. The proof of this is how much evidence is read after the round by the very judges who say they can 'handle' speed. No one really can, and no one really should. Reasonable speaking rates should be the norm simply because it is the norm among educated citizens in all walks of life.

*Secondly*, we should embrace the resolution and the challenges it imposes. If an unaware but educated citizen believes they are about to listen to a debate over ocean policy, they should not be disappointed. The politics DA, the PIC, the generic topicality, strange Kritiks, should be dispensed with unless they are presented with an absolute explanation of their relationship to the resolutional problem area, which almost never happens and might not in fact be possible. Camps should set out to educate young debaters to appreciate, if not celebrate, the resolution as an important policy area, not just to demonstrate how you can link a generic to it.

*Thirdly*, and in connection to the above, we should elevate our willingness to accept inherency, solvency, and harms as a criteria to absolutely decide debate rounds. Today, they tend to be dismissed as "non-offensive" negative arguments, thus not an issue really worth voting on. This way of thinking is counter-intuitive and not connected to any serious consideration of policy. A proposal can be bad without blowing up the world. I suspect that every debate coach has listened to a new colleague, or a citizen observer, demean the low

probability/high impact argument as being ludicrous. But an intelligent citizen would readily listen to a measured inherency position that demonstrated that the harms are being solved absent the affirmative proposal, or that the plan as constructed has no hope of solving the harms, or that the harms are so minimal as not to justify the affirmative proposal. Those are real arguments that people can connect with, both personally and intellectually.

*Fourth*, we need to limit the use of vernacular, both regarding theory and substance. In no way am I suggesting that arguments that rely on theory are less than legitimate. They are legitimate. But application of theory to issues of substance can be made in terms that can be understood by all. A citizen would be able to understand a well-articulated topicality argument, one that presented the challenge to the jurisdiction of the judge over the proposal and the reasoning that supported that argument, and the real implications to the discourse. But what citizen can understand what "T" means, what a blippy presentation of pre-written standards are, and the lexicon used to spit out the voting issues? Richness of explanation is crucial. We should celebrate our ability to articulate in a manner that unites the citizenry in language, rather than one that further divides them by specialization and lingo.

*And lastly*, we should discourage any discourse during a debate round oriented to anything but a discussion of the substance of the issues. Policy debate would be better if all of our artificial constructs such as decision-rules, absolute voting issues, ground, fairness, abuse, time trade-offs, etc. were simply eliminated. What relevance do they have to any other aspect of our existence? They only serve to create a level of discourse well below what the proper level should be. Such positions distract us from a discussion of policy, and replace what should be our focus, to one dealing solely with the 'game'. If the affirmative wins the debate, it should be solely because they have articulated and defended a good public policy. If the negative wins, then they should have demonstrated that the affirmative has failed to do so, or that a real alternative (not a PIC) is superior, or perhaps that the affirmative fails meet well-articulated concerns over jurisdiction. This doesn't make any issue illegitimate, though it probably minimizes some pure theory discussions. Returning to the citizen test, I suspect that no citizen understands or cares about an 'absolute voting issue' or a 'decision-rule'. They seem to care about the substance of the resolution, the quality of the proposal for change, the persuasiveness and analytical skills of those involved, and the quality of the substantive objections made. Winning means something when it is a victory on substance. If the student discourse transcends the game, and elevates the dialog, I have to believe that winning will take care of itself.

I continue to firmly believe that policy debate should be enjoyable to the educated public. I want to have my Principal watch my student's debate. I want to listen to parent observers actually discuss the issues raised in the round they witnessed. I want my students to take away from this activity not just research skills, but skills of presentation applicable to other aspects of life. I am tired of having to explain the unexplainable. I have struggled for 19 years defending an activity that violates the sensitivities of even brilliant observers. Debate should serve to unite us through  
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a common language. Articles in recent issues in the *Rostrum* force a healthy degree of introspection. We are specialized enough as a society. Lets make our activity such that every observer can understand it, enjoy it, and feel inclined to promote it. The citizen test may offer some criteria for change.



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