

# NOTES ON PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE\*

## I. THE NATURE OF THE DEBATE

Parliamentary debate is a rhetorical contest which supposedly takes place in a House of Parliament. The participants are the “Government” and “Opposition” teams and the judge is known as “Mister” or “Madam” “Speaker of the House.”

## II. ORGANIZATION

After the resolutions are read to the General Assembly and the teams reach the room in which they will debate, the Government team has ten minutes to prepare its case (see below).

The debate itself consists of six speeches: four constructive speeches and two rebuttals. The order is as follows:

- A. Prime Minister [Government] (Constructive): 8 minutes
- B. Leader of the Opposition (Constructive): 8 minutes
- C. Member of the Government (Constructive): 8 minutes
- D. Member of the Opposition (Constructive): 8 minutes
- E. Leader of the Opposition (Rebuttal): 4 minutes
- F. Prime Minister (Rebuttal): 4 minutes

(Note: Each debater should time his or her partner’s speeches and monitor the time of the opposing team’s speeches. This leaves the Speaker of the House free to pay attention to the debate.)

In the constructive speeches, debaters introduce both the case and the arguments for and against it. In the rebuttals, debaters sum up the arguments they made and the values they put forward. In rebuttals, debaters may not present new arguments. However, they may respond to previous arguments or even offer new examples.

## III. POINTS OF ORDER AND PERSONAL PRIVILEGE

During any debater’s speech, a debater from the opposing team may bring up one of two basic “points”:

- A. Point of Order. Made when house rules are breached, as when:
  - 1. The debater is making a new argument in rebuttal.
  - 2. The debater is substantially redefining the Government case.
  - 3. The debater has spoken more than thirty seconds overtime.
- B. Point of Personal Privilege. Made whenever a debater suffers personally from a given situation. The two most common times to make a point of personal privilege are when:

1. The debater insults an opposing team member's character.
2. The debater grossly misrepresents an opposing team member's previous marks.

(These points are made by the person insulted or misrepresented.)

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To make a point, a debater must rise, say “Point of Order [or: Personal Privilege] Mr. [or Madam] Speaker,” and wait to be recognized. The debater then holding the floor must stop speaking and step aside. The debater making the point should then succinctly state the point; for example, s/he might say “This is a new argument in rebuttal.” The Speaker will then rule, “Point well taken” or “Point not well taken.” (The debater holding the floor may not respond to the point or defend him- or herself.)

If a point is “well taken,” the time elapsed while the point was being made will be deducted from the speech of the debater holding the floor. If a point is “not well taken,” the elapsed time will be returned to that debater. In either case, neither team may make any further argument on the point or on the ruling of the Speaker.

#### IV. HECKLING

Both teams, the judge, and the audience may heckle debaters at any time. Heckles should be short, witty, and intelligent, but not argumentative. For example, “Your mother!” is short, but rarely witty and never intelligent. “what about the Prime Minister’s argument on strategic force reductions after the reunification of Germany?” is neither short nor witty, even though it may be intelligent. Loud and obnoxious outbursts are also strongly discouraged, and may cause the judge to deduct speaker points.

#### V. JUDGING

At the end of the round, judges decide which team did the better debating. Such an evaluation means judges must determine which team’s arguments were more logical and more credible, as well as which team’s debaters were more organized, more fluent, and more persuasive.

Judges are cautioned not to include their own knowledge, opinions, or biases in the decision, but to rely solely on the arguments presented in the debate. They are also reminded not to make the burden on the Government too heavy, as it is easier to destroy than to construct, and no one can be expected to develop a perfect solution to a given problem in only ten minutes.

# NOTES ON THE GOVERNMENT

## I. DEVELOPING A GOVERNMENT CASE

- A. The Resolution. Ten minutes before each round, the Government team will be assigned a resolution from which it must develop its case. Resolutions in Parliamentary debate are generally short quotations, such as “Weebles wobble but they don’t fall down” or “The walrus is dead, but the eggman lives on.”
- B. The Nexus. With very rare exceptions, resolutions are quite difficult to argue straight. Instead, the Government must offer a nexus between the resolution and a debatable case idea. A good nexus provides a reasonably logical interpretation of the resolution.

With the first resolution, for example, the Government could interpret the weeble to be the principle of freedom in the arts, a principle which may waver, but which the Government believes should never be struck down. From this, the Government could argue that art should never be censored on the basis of obscenity.

The Government should think of the resolution as a springboard from which it can bounce into a specific case. It should not leap so far that it seems really stretched, and it should especially not try to leap to pre-prepared cases which have nothing to do with the resolution. Oppositions can argue that the Government nexus is very weak, especially if it seems like the Government has prepared its case in advance. In reality, however, such arguments are far less important or common in parliamentary than in other debate forms. Remember, topicality does not exist in parliamentary debate.

- C. The Idea. good cases in Parliamentary debate assert what should happen. The Government ought to always be able to identify an idea or a value that they represent. For this reason, cases in parliamentary should advocate some idea (i.e. the case “Art should not be censored on the basis of obscenity”) or, at most, a proposal (i.e. the case, “The United States should not allow Senators to accept honoraria”). The Government should not offer the type of detailed plan common in CEDA and policy debates. Parliamentary debates should always center upon opposing values.

- D. Advocating the Status Quo. the government need not advocate change in the current system and is completely free to argue that something currently under debate should be kept the same. For example, a Government could argue that the Federal Government should continue to fund the National Endowment for the Arts. An Opposition can make just as many arguments against a case which continues the status quo as it can make against a case which calls for change. Can be argued by both sides.
- F. Debatable Cases. In general, the Government in parliamentary debate is free to choose any debatable idea or proposal as its case (within the confines of the resolution). A case is debatable if it is:
1. Not truistic. The Government cannot present a case which it is impossible for an American college student to rationally oppose. Examples of truistic cases include “People should not abuse their children,” “Racism is bad,” or “Rapists should be punished.”
  2. Not tautological. The Government cannot present a case which is true by definition. A Government argues a truism if it argues that “Coke is it” and defines “it” as “a type of soft drink.”
  3. Not offensive. The Government cannot present a case which is so offensive that there is no reason to debate it. Cases like “To prevent the spread of AIDS, all homosexuals should be executed.”
  4. Not reliant on specific knowledge. The Government should not present a case which requires so much specific knowledge that the Opposition cannot debate it. The Government, however, may refer to specific policies, laws, historical events, etc., in order to debate general principles.
- G. Defining the House. Parliamentary debate involves an undefined Parliamentary body. Usually, the Government just argues what generally should happen (i.e. something like “Coloring books should be abolished because they stifle children’s creativity”). The Government, though, can choose to specifically define the parliamentary body and the setting of the debate. The house of parliament can be defined as any decision-making body (e.g. a local school board, the UN Security Council, Santa Claus, etc.). For example, a Government team can present a time/space case which defines the house as the United States Senate after World War I and tries to urge that Senate to vote to join the League of Nations.

## II. THE PRIME MINISTER'S CONSTRUCTIVE SPEECH

- A. The Nexus. The Prime Minister's speech ought to begin by providing the nexus between the resolution and the Government team's case. That is, the Prime Minister should interpret and translate the resolution into a debatable case.
- B. The Case Sentence. Next (and most importantly), the PM should state the case in one clear sentence, for example, "coloring books should be abolished." If the PM is going to say anything clearly and concisely, he should make this sentence clear. Explaining the nexus and introducing the case ought to take no more than the first two minutes of the Prime Minister's speech.
- C. The Structure. The Prime Minister should devote the rest of his speech to three or four basic arguments which substantiate the government's case. Individually or collectively, these arguments should appeal to the core principles the Government supports. The arguments should be coherent and not just a series of scattered points.

## III. THE MEMBER OF GOVERNMENT'S SPEECH

- A. Expansion. A member of Government should, first, expand and extend the Government case. He should try to present at least one new argument to add to those of the Prime Minister.
- B. Response. Second, the MG should respond to the opposition's case. The MG should be certain that he responds within the government's own case structure, and not within the structure of the opposition. Just by refusing to debate within the Opposition structure, the MG shows that he rejects the Opposition's view of the world.

## IV. THE PRIME MINISTER'S FINAL REBUTTAL

In his rebuttal, the Prime Minister should crystallize the Government case. The PM should reduce the entire debate to three or four key issues, and show why the Government principles are more desirable than those of the Opposition. In his speech, the PM should always focus upon the big picture.

# NOTES ON THE OPPOSITION

## I. OPPOSITION PHILOSOPHY

A. Have One. The first thing any Opposition should remember about Opposition Philosophies is that it must have one. Because all good parliamentary debates come down to a clash between what the Government stands for and what the Opposition stands for, the Opposition must always stand for something and be explicit about what that is.

B. Core Principles. The Opposition should always try to clash with the basic values or principles espoused by the Government. If the Opposition never attacks the core principles of the Government, it will find that the debate becomes uninteresting, and the Opposition speeches become disorganized and ineffective.

Oppositions should always try to locate and then refute basic Government principles. For example, a Government team might argue that cheating in college is such a pervasive problem that colleges should deter cheating by suspending convicted cheaters from school. An Opposition need not debate this case by arguing that cheating is not so pervasive, or that suspensions wouldn't work. Instead, an Opposition could argue that many forms of cheating shouldn't be punished at all because cheating is good. The Opposition might show that those who cheat develop important leadership skills. Cheaters learn how to manage their time (they make up crib sheets instead of studying useless facts) and how to use the resources of the group (i.e. their neighbors). The Opposition in this case would thus clash with the government's core principle, i.e. that cheating is bad and deserves punishment.

The Opposition can also clash with the Government by reformulating the problem and principles the government has presented. For example, a few years ago, Governments often argued that U.S. companies should divest from South Africa to protest apartheid. These same teams then went on to explain the horrors of apartheid and the benefits of divestment. A clever Opposition might have responded to such an argument not by arguing for the status quo, but instead by proposing that the U.S. invade and overthrow the South African government. The Opposition would thus argue that divestment was a bad idea, and that overthrow was the only real solution.

C. Kinds of Opposition Philosophies. In any round, the Opposition tends to invoke one or more of four main kinds of Opposition philosophies.

1. “The Government is wrong.” In Parliamentary debate, “the Government is wrong” does not just mean that the Government case contains flawed logic or information; Governments almost never develop perfect cases in ten minutes or less. Instead, by arguing that “the Government is wrong,” the Opposition contends that “The Government subverts the principle it claims to support.” A member of the Opposition might say something like, “The Government claims that their case will increase personal liberties. But they are wrong. In reality, the case will have the opposite effect . . .”

For example, Governments have been known to argue that the U.S. should withdraw from NATO in order to secure world peace. If the U.S. maintains its treaty obligations, a Government might contend, a small conflict could easily escalate into a world war. In such a round, the Opposition could respond that the Government case would not improve, but rather severely threaten, world peace, because Europe can neither police nor defend itself. Thus, the Opposition would adopt the Government value, peace, and show that the Government actually subverts that value while the Opposition protects it. Notice that the Opposition does not just argue that it protects the value better than the Government, but rather that it alone protects the value. An Opposition which simply argues that its position is comparatively advantageous will often find that the round bogs down in an exchange of “Yes it is,” and “No it isn’t,” instead of becoming a discussion of the real principles.

2. “The Government principles are not the important ones.” In such a debate, the Opposition would argue that, even though the Government case may support its principles, it subverts other principles which are more vital. Patrick Henry used a corollary of this principle when he said “Give me liberty or give me death;” that is, he claimed that liberty is more valuable than life. Many debates revolve around similar value comparisons.

In a debate round, a Government team might argue that the College Board should reverse its recent decision, and not allow the use of calculators on the SAT. The Government could explain that students need to have basic math skills in order to function in society. The Opposition might respond, however, that it is more important today for students to

know how to use calculators than to know basic math. The would be arguing that technical literacy, and not numeracy, is the more important skill.

Likewise, a Government might argue that the U.S. should not have consented to German reunification because reunification threatens the security of Europe. An Opposition could respond that the U.S. did the right thing, because we must sometimes sacrifice some security in order to support self-determination and democratic choice.

3. “The Government principles are bad.” sometimes, a Government team will not have thought about its underlying principles, and will make an assumption about their value. The Opposition can point out these assumed values and show why the assumptions are invalid and the principles undesirable.

For example, in the case about suspending student cheaters, the Government spends all of its time explaining that cheating is rampant and that drastic steps are necessary, but never explains why cheating is bad. The Opposition can point out, and refute, this assumption by arguing that cheating may not be so bad after all.

Likewise, if a Government argued that Canadian colleges should serve apple juice instead of beer at social events, the Opposition could refute the implicit assumption that beer is bad, and go on to show why beer can be a good thing.

4. “The Government is right.” Governments are obligated to present cases which are debatable. But cases which are irrefutably true cannot, by definition, be debated. (See *infra* for an explanation of how to argue that a Government has presented a true, and thus undebatable case). If a Government presents a true case, the Opposition should say so. There are two kinds of “true” cases:

- a) The tautology. A tautology is a case which is true by definition. For example, if the Government case was that “Coke is it” and then defined “it” as “a type of soft drink,” they would have presented a tautology. If the Government defines you out of the round, they have likely presented a tautology.

- b) The truism. In Parliamentary debate, a truism is a case which no reasonable American college student can argue against. This

means that the Opposition can not make even one rational, non-offensive objection to the Government case.

Cases like “Apartheid is immoral,” “Sexism is bad,” and “You hear your neighbor beating his wife. You should call the police.” are all truistic.

5. “The Government is offensive.” There is one other kind of stance an Opposition can take, although it should be used only rarely, and only when truly justified. If a Government presents a case that is so offensive that it truly cannot be debated, then the Opposition can make that claim and refuse to debate. Oppositions should remember that calling a case offensive is not a technique of argument, but rather a refusal to argue.

If an Opposition hears a case like, “It would be better to be gang raped than to be shot in the head at close range” (Yes, this case was actually run at one tournament) they can justifiably refuse to debate. If, however, they were to hear a case like, “Pornography and prostitution should be legal, because men need to have some way to relieve their sexual urges,” they might point out that the Government was offensive in characterizing women as sexual objects, but they could still debate, and we hope, destroy the case.

## II. OPPOSITION TECHNIQUES AND ORGANIZATION

### A. The Leader of Opposition (LO)

1. Opposition Philosophy. The LO should define the initial Opposition philosophy, that is, what the Opposition stands for in the round. Because the LO has had so little time to construct her responses before she speaks, she may not know exactly what the entire philosophy will be, but she should explain in general what the Opposition will argue.
2. Clash with the Case Sentence. As soon as the LO hears the sentence that makes up the Government case, she should immediately begin to think about what is wrong with that sentence. If a Government case is, "Parents with school-age children should not have televisions in their home," the LO need not wait to hear how the Government supports its case before she prepares her response. Instead, she should immediately formulate reasons why parents should have televisions and figure out what underlying Government principles she disputes.
3. Structure. The LO should have her own structure which is different from that of the Prime Minister. When an LO follows the Government structure, she metaphorically "busy in" to the government view of the world, and weakens her own authority. Thus, it is almost always more effective to create an Opposition structure different from that of the Government which simultaneously presents the Opposition's contentions and refutes the Government's claims.
4. Truism and Tautology. If the Prime Minister has presented a truism or tautology, the Leader of Opposition must point this out. Remember, above all, that an Opposition cannot argue that a case is true, and then in the next sentence give five reasons why it's a bad idea. A case is either debatable or not debatable, but not both. To argue truism or tautology, the LO must:
  - a) Argue why the case is truistic or tautological. The LO should show what makes it impossible to debate the case. For example, the LO might say that she cannot possibly be asked to argue that apartheid is good because it contravenes the most fundamental American values of equality, liberty and justice, and that to argue

for it would be to argue for the same kind of racist institutions which we dismantled in our own country.

- b) Redefine the case to something debatable. Redefinition is perhaps the LO's most important job if she faces a truistic or tautological case. If she does not redefine, the sides can only argue whether or not the case is truistic, which makes for a very boring round. Rather, the LO should reformulate the case so that it would be debatable and then proceed to debate that reformulation.

For example, the LO in the apartheid round could say, "It is impossible to debate whether or not apartheid is moral. The real issue, however, is what we should do to end apartheid. To make the case debatable, the Government must argue that we do something to end apartheid, for example, that U.S. firms divest from South Africa. We, however, would say that we should not take so drastic a step."

When the Opposition redefines a Government case, it must obviously be careful to neither redefine the Government into an undebatable position nor to redefine the case to something totally unrelated. The LO should try to find the debatable case closest to the one presented by the Government.

B. Member of Opposition (MO)

1. Coherence. First and most importantly, the MO should make the Opposition philosophy as convincing and coherent as possible. As the speaker with the most time to prepare, the MO should really put his speech together well and make sure that it is clear what the Opposition stands for.
2. The Opposition Block. The MO should take advantage of the Opposition Block (the fact that the Prime Minister has only four minutes to respond to both the eight minute MO speech and the four minute LO speech). The more good, well-developed arguments he makes, the more difficult he makes the Prime Minister's job. Although he should put pressure on the Prime Minister, however, he should not simply make silly, insignificant, or illogical arguments in the hope that the Prime Minister will waste time responding to them. An MO who makes meaningless arguments will always be unpersuasive, and any good Prime Minister will simply ignore dumb Opposition arguments.

3. Expansion. An MO needs to make new arguments not just to put pressure on the Prime Minister. The LO probably had very little time to think of arguments before her speech, so this is really the first and last time to present really solid reasons why the Opposition should win. The MO should be as expansive as possible, and at the same time undercut everything the Government has said or assumed.
4. Response. The MO should respond to the arguments made by the Member of Government. Again, he should do so within his own structure, because following the Government structure validates the Government view of the world.
5. Perspective. Finally, the MO should develop his own perspective on the round, and a structure which goes with that perspective. The structure may be similar to that of the LO, but it should contain substantial differences and at least one major new idea. Although he may need to review Opposition concepts brought up by the LO, he should never just reiterate. Expansiveness and persuasiveness are the keys.

C. Leader of Opposition Rebuttal

1. Importance. The LO rebuttal is probably the most important Opposition speech, because it really clarifies what the Opposition stands for. When the judge decides the round, the chances are that he will remember little more than the two rebuttals, so if something is important to the Opposition case, the LO must highlight it in the rebuttal.
2. Structure. The LO should be most concerned with how he structures his rebuttal. He has only four minutes, and thus should have approximately 3 or 4 issues which describe the Opposition's view of the world. These issues should (tautologically) be gelled into the form that makes the most sense.
  - a) Consolidate. The LO should combine related arguments into one general issue, and then expand and re-explain the arguments as individual aspects of that issue. The simpler the structure, the more easier it will be for the judge to remember it.

- b) Refer to the MO. The LO should be sure to include at least one major argument made by the MO, and should usually borrow the MO's phraseology, in order to remind the judge the MO spoke and said something important.
3. Why It Matters. Finally, the LO should explain once again what the debate comes down to, what the Opposition stands for, and why it matters.

## CAVEAT

We hope that this information will give you a general idea about Parliamentary debate. We must remind you that everything contained in these pages are our own impressions of what seems to work. There are no real *rules* of debate, because the rules themselves are always subject to debate. Instead, there are only examples of possible approaches. Always remember that debate is about persuasion, that those who win are those who persuade a judge that they are right.