

**MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRESERVING PUBLIC ARGUMENT
IN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE**

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Accompanied by praise and criticism, the growth of parliamentary debate in recent years has been exponential. As Robert Trapp, current President of the National Parliamentary Debate Association points out in his May 28, 1997 letter to the membership of the NPDA, "(f)rom 1994 to 1997, our Championship Tournament has grown from just over fifty teams to almost four times as many. Measured in numerical terms, the NPDA is a healthy infant." Given this growth, a discussion of the future of parliamentary debate seems appropriate.

Regardless of one's perspective of what parliamentary debate is, much has been written about what parliamentary debate should be. In 1992 Epstein discussed the dissatisfaction with various forms of intercollegiate debate, and suggested that "[o]ne proposed alternative to this rift in the debate community is the development of parliamentary debate under the auspices of the American Parliamentary Debate Association (APDA) and the Western States Parliamentary Debate Association (WSPDA)." Johnson continued the discussion in 1994 by expressing concern that parliamentary debate "may take the same path as CEDA, which is taking the same path which NDT took several years ago . . ." by adopting increasingly specialized styles, vocabularies and judging criteria.

These perspectives, and the manifold others expressed both formally and informally, serve to provide direction for parliamentary debate in relation to other alternatives available. While this is certainly a worthwhile undertaking, I propose that we make an effort to define parliamentary debate by what it is, rather than what it is not. To that end, I subscribe to Trapp's conceptualization of parliamentary debate as a forum for "public argument," and will offer practical recommendations that I believe will further this conception.

Public argument, as discussed by Trapp, is defined by its focus on persuasion of an actual audience rather than an exercise in technical inquiry. Trapp writes: "Parliamentary debate at its best is an event that ought to be enjoyable and educational for public audiences seeking information, education, and even entertainment." (1997b). In short, public argument is that type of an argument directed toward a general audience, rather than toward a particular, technically astute audience.

One of the elements of the current form of parliamentary debate that permits a public argument paradigm is a lack of codified practices and procedures that constrain and prescribe the type of argument permitted and required in the event. Because NPDA parliamentary debate is relatively new to the forensic 'scene,' little codified theory particular to parliamentary debate has developed. Furthermore, in rounds, different perspectives and levels of experience on the part of adjudicators still seems to permit a variety of approaches to the event. As in any public forum, the test for "allowable" tactics or strategies in parliamentary debate is still that of rationality: if it makes sense, argue it. This lack of codification should be embraced and nurtured. To do so, however, we must take care to avoid creating an atmosphere in which forgetting this focus is easy.

In continuing his discussion of the future of parliamentary debate, Johnson shares his concern ". . . that we, as professionals, lack the courage to penalize students who fail to communicate or speak only in jargon that people outside the activity cannot understand" (1994). In doing so, he identifies a contributing factor to the increased specialization evident in other forms of debate rather than the primary cause. While we as judges may be afraid to penalize increased specialization and technicality, I believe it is the very structure of modern tournaments that creates an atmosphere in which a move toward increased specialization, a prevalence of highly technical argument, and use of jargon can occur.

Whenever a group sequesters itself, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in pursuit of an objective, a certain amount of specialization naturally occurs: groups develop their own cultures and norms, professions generate their own vocabularies, academic disciplines become more and more technical, and so on. Such a setting provides a fertile environment for the natural evolution of knowledge; because the members of our activity share a context developed and reinforced weekend

after weekend, a high degree of specialization is bound to occur. This is the type of environment created by the current sequestered structure of modern debate tournaments. I'm not arguing that such concentration and specialization is without merit; certainly much solid thought has emerged from what we do in our forensic tournament laboratories. My concern lies with the inherent contradiction in the practice of sequestering ourselves at a tournament to compete in an event designed to teach skills necessary to persuade an audience--any audience.

Each new incarnation of debate brings with it a host of new opportunities. I believe the unique opportunity inherent in parliamentary debate is its ability to provide a genuine setting for public debate. When asked what excites me about parliamentary debate, I frequently answer that it allows me the opportunity to bring debate back to the people--to provide the general public with a venue in which they may observe or participate in a dialectic that shapes perceptions of fact, value and policy. As directors of programs featuring parliamentary debate we must make a commitment to 'bringing debate back to the people.' As Trapp argues, "[p]arliamentary-style debates ought . . . to be made available to groups of high school and college students, to clubs and service organizations, as well as to members of the public at large" (1997b).

Involving 'real' audiences has two distinct advantages: first, it preserves the public argument focus of parliamentary debate, and second, it ensures our own longevity. As discussed above, the only way to ensure that our students are learning skills that will transfer readily out of competitive debate and into the real world is to make the venue in which they test those skills as much like the real world as possible. While it is unreasonable to expect that an exact match to actual conditions can be obtained, at the very least we owe it to our students to provide them with an audience much like they will encounter in the 'real world,' be it a courtroom, a boardroom, or a campaign war room. With regard to the second advantage, we can no longer afford the luxury of bemoaning the decrease in support of forensic programs that serve only a minuscule portion of the student body. To be healthy, we must be visible. To be visible, we must offer a product that is accessible to all.

With these goals in mind, I offer two recommendations that can, with a minimum of effort, capitalize on the unique accessibility of parliamentary

debate while preserving its public argument focus: 1) we must make a commitment to aggressively market our debate product, and 2) we must create a product that is accessible and desirable for a consumer.

Unfortunately, as we are all too well aware, debate events are not as popular as other activities--such as athletics and theatre--typically sponsored by colleges and universities. Thus, the first recommendation--to aggressively market debate--adheres to a principle very familiar to professional marketers: to sell a product you first have to create a demand.

I have faith that interest in debate on the part of the general public can be generated--if that interest is cultivated properly. Successful creation of a market for parliamentary debate is essential to the health of the activity. We have here a form of debate that is not only accessible to the general public, but integrates within its guidelines elements of popular appeal: humor, wit and heckling are all attributes of a successfully staged debate event that are sure to have an audience demanding more. Emphasizing these attributes, with word of mouth, topic selection, or pre-event publicity can encourage people to attend. Nearly everyone, since the times of the Romans during the Colosseum to the Salem Witch Trials to the World Wrestling Federation, has been able to assemble an audience for what they think will be a no-holds-barred fight. This natural human predisposition to voyeurism can easily be exploited by emphasizing the "argument" part of debate. What's more fun than a good fight? This, of course, does not mean that substantive inquiry is necessarily sacrificed for screaming and hair-pulling. Some of the best debates of our times have been an eloquent balance of crowd pleasing wit coupled with insightful analysis. In other words, once you get them there with the flash, you'll hold them there with the substance.

Further, we need to do more to educate our market about the product we want them to consume. When contrasting American styles of debate with British styles, the first thing one notices is how much more raucous the British house seems. American audiences tend to be quite reserved when attending an 'event.' If we encourage them to become involved--either informally through heckling or formally through opportunities such as floor speeches--we make the event less of a formal "lecture" and more of an enjoyable participatory event.

Finally, we need to be more diligent in seeking sponsorship for our events. Local politicians, newspapers, libraries, literary societies, bookstores, radio and TV stations, and so on are prime targets for support. Additionally, there's no reason that the Championship Tournament, with proper publicity, can't develop strong relationships with sponsors. The Irish Debate Series is sponsored by *The Irish Times*, why not ask one of our national newspapers to respond in kind? An official paper for the Championship Tournament? National coverage for a national event? It seems only intuitive.

But to properly market a product, we must have a product to market. Unfortunately, while an efficient means of creating a great deal of exposure to a variety of competitors in a very short period of time, the average forensic tournament is not conducive to hosting observers. Too many times I've seen bewildered parents, teachers, or community members interested in debate wandering aimlessly around a tournament while those that understand the secret code of postings scurry to their rounds. Frankly, your average member of the public seems to have little interest in committing their entire weekend to plodding around an unfamiliar campus. Instead, I propose two under-utilized alternate venues that may attract new consumers to the product of debate: intramural tournaments and contract debates.

An intramural tournament, hosted for students at a particular campus, can have great appeal. It can be either a short effort, over the course of a week or weekend, or it may be scheduled to take place over an entire semester. Such tournaments offer the opportunity for different departments to sponsor teams, or may be open to all members of the student body. Often, sponsorship may be gained from local businesses for awards: airline tickets, merchandise, restaurant gift certificates, and the like not only provide incentive for students to get involved, but offer a cheap form of advertisement to what traditionally is a significant portion of a local business's market. Students involved in the forensic program or faculty from various departments may serve as adjudicators for the tournament. An informative session on the procedures of parliamentary debate--which may of course be modified for convenience--and a single-elimination format make for relatively simple administration. In addition to being an exceptional recruiting tool for the competitive forensic program, such a tournament exposes the entire student body to debate, and

ensures that later debate events will have a market to which the events may be "sold."

Contract debates are not a new idea. In fact, the designation "contract debates" comes from the earliest form of intercollegiate debating. A university's debating club would invite a local rival to campus to debate in front of an audience of local supporters and, hopefully, boosters from the visitors' university. The topic would be announced in advance so both teams have time to prepare adequately, and impartial guest judges and/or the audience would adjudicate the event. In its modern conception, a series of contract debates could be scheduled in much the same way that football or basketball games are scheduled, with several occurring over the course of a semester. Inviting regional schools increases the 'local rival' aspect of the debate, and inviting a school from further away may emphasize the importance of the event. The advantage of contract debates is that it creates a more consumer-friendly product: the debate is billed as a clash of local rivals, school pride is on the line, and the presence of an audience ensures a lively house.

It is with the recognition that the average director is already pressed for time with teaching, research, service, and coaching that I offer these suggestions. To me, these seem relatively low-effort, high-reward events that can be run with assistance from the student team members. Additionally, I'm not advocating a departure from the current conception of forensic tournaments. Such events are valuable for coaches and students alike and necessary for the growth of the event.

Simply put, we have in parliamentary debate an opportunity to elevate debate once again to a place of prominence. We also have the opportunity to preserve a unique aspect of an event that gives students an education in dialectic that closely parallels its real-world application. Given the potential benefits these suggestions provide, I believe the time is right for us to capitalize on those opportunities.

References

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