

Critique of the 1995 NPDA Final Round

Shawnalee A. Whitney

The 1995 NPDA national tournament, hosted by Willamette University, featured outstanding topics and I was fortunate to see several strong rounds of competition. I applaud the efforts of the teams who advanced to elimination rounds and congratulate their coaches, however, I do not believe that the final round of the tournament characterizes the best possible example of NPDA parliamentary debate. I voted for the Government in this round, but my vote resulted more from a loss by the Opposition rather than a genuine victory by the Government.

Debated by Mr. Neil Sample and Ms. Meredith Marine from the University of Wyoming (Government) and Mr. Dan Lair and Mr. Mark Porrovecchio from Carroll College (Opposition), the final round had both strengths and weaknesses. As of this writing I have not spoken directly with either team about the round, but I think the debaters would likely agree with me that it could have been better in a variety of ways. I offer that comment not as an attack on the debaters or their coaches but as a cautionary note to those who may view the videotape of the round, believing that it characterizes the epitome of NPDA parliamentary debate. In my mind, it does not.

I believe the chief strengths of the round include the topic, attitude and demeanor of the debaters, and involvement of the audience. For a variety of possible reasons, the opposition seems to have the upperhand in winning rounds of parliamentary debate. That was not the case in this round. While any number of measures may be employed to try and level the playing field, I think one of the clearest solutions is to provide less amorphous topics. The

topic ("this house would forego economic progress for cultural integrity") was challenging, thought-provoking, and allowed for debate that hinged on a wide range of issues. I thought it was an interesting question; one that provided adequate room for defensible positions from both the Government and the Opposition.

In terms of their performances as speakers, the attitude and demeanor of both teams is laudable. I felt the Government won the round on the strength of Mr. Sample's constructive as the Prime Minister and on his rebuttal, despite Mr. Lair's valiant and noteworthy efforts in the rebuttal for the Opposition. All four debaters demonstrated intelligible, audience-oriented delivery. Additionally, each team *engaged* the other in a direct, lively, conversational fashion. As a result of the manner in which the round was debated, the audience was fully involved and participating in the round. While I am very much in favor of audience-centered debate, I did find that the noise level was occasionally distracting with such a large audience (about 100 people). Despite the occasional distraction, however, this round provided an apt demonstration of parli's audience-centered format.

Despite these strengths, I believe the round could have been improved in a variety of ways. First, I was disappointed with the lack of explicit structure in this round. I do not expect parliamentary debate to feature as detailed an organizational pattern as might be seen in round of CEDA or NDT. Minute detail in the labeling of subpoints is not warranted in the more oratorical parliamentary debate format. However, a more explicit system of signposting-- such as that found in persuasive, impromptu, or extemporaneous speaking-- would have helped the round considerably. More obvious structure would assist in the demonstration of a position's application and its impact on other arguments advanced in the round. It would also help the audience and the adjudicators to follow the arguments and extensions more readily.

Second, the round would have been enhanced by inclusion of more support through examples and stronger extensions from the speakers in the second position on both teams.

While Ms. Marine responded to Mr. Lair's arguments and had no significant problem with positions that were dropped, her arguments seemed little more than a reiteration of Prime Minister Sample's positions rather than a true *extension* of his arguments. The aim of an extension is to expand, elaborate, augment, and show the conclusion or impact of the arguments offered in constructive speeches. In my mind, the Member of Government did not extend positions very effectively; simple responses were given to arguments advanced by the Leader of the Opposition, while the Government positions were simply pulled across the flow.

As to the efforts of the Member of the Opposition, Mr. Porrovecchio had a strong record of being a fine debater with a fine mind but his performance in this round was not characteristic of other rounds where I had seen him debate. He seemed confused about the Opposition's overall position and began to advance arguments that sounded distinctly Governmental in nature. The crowd's reaction to this reversal was obvious and Mr. Porrovecchio seemed to take on a somewhat defensive tone. In addition to the confusion with the arguments, he noted that the lights at the front of the room were quite hot. He even commented that he was sweating and was uncomfortable. Between the reversal of his team's position and the fact that his manner suggested a lack of assurance, the speech was not as effective as it could have been.

I believe this round teaches us several things. First, the round provides us with a good example of the type of topic I hope we will see more frequently in parliamentary debate. Second, it demonstrates the audience-centered nature of parliamentary debate. Third, it points to the need for an identifiable pattern of organization. Finally, perhaps the most crucial thing illustrated through this round is the importance of the speakers in the second position (Member of Government, Member of Opposition). These performances illustrate the need for clearer extensions and stronger delineation of a team's position by those in the second position.

While I do not see the round as the epitome of parliamentary debate, I was pleased to see so many people interested in the round and believe it was an enjoyable and educational event for those who watched as well as for those who debated. Despite the concerns delineated above, I believe these debaters are to be congratulated on their efforts in the final round of the 1995 NPDA national tournament.