

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

Parliamentary Debate: Where are we headed?

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When our journal editor, Ed Inch, asked me to share some thoughts on where I envision Parliamentary Debate heading in the next few years, I was happy to take him up on his offer. As many of you know, I am a huge fan of this activity. After watching a few strong parliamentary debates I quickly became converted, realizing that with this format I could ask my students to work on both the content and delivery aspects of good oratory, and the critical thinking and quick thinking required in dialectical types of reasoning like debate. It was also more user friendly for those with conflicting scheduling priorities like jobs, heavy class schedules, and other interests. I also found, like many of you, that I was reinvigorated as a coach. It does not surprise me at all that this form of debate has become so popular in so short a time. I fully expect that it will continue to grow and prosper in the coming years as more discover the many benefits Parliamentary Debate has to offer.

However, I have also noted some problems that we must overcome along the way if we are to achieve all that can be achieved in this activity. For example, I wonder at times if we might not have a bit of an identity crisis. Sometimes I am reminded of when I moved down to San Diego from the Los Angeles area only to discover that many San Diego sports fans seemed to share a visceral hatred for all of the L. A. sports franchises. It was not enough to root for the Padres or the Chargers, you had to also hate the Dodgers and the L. A. Rams and the L. A. Raiders. I had been rooting for them most of my life and now I was supposed to hate them because of some heated rivalry. The funny thing was, when I lived near L. A. I was not aware of any such rivalry. I soon realized it was what I'll call a smaller city complex. San Diego was so used to being in the shadow of L. A. that it defined itself by attacking, deriding and targeting all things L. A. to somehow gain legitimacy. That was silly. Both San Diego and Los Angeles are great cities. You don't elevate one by attacking the other.

Likewise, we need to discourage disparaging remarks against or unfair comparisons with CEDA or NDT debate to define what we are. They offer a valuable activity that provides terrific training and benefits to many, many people. They might value slightly different outcomes and achieve them in slightly different ways. But that does not make them wrong, just different. Let us continue to appreciate and improve upon what is unique to our format of debate and not worry about what others may say, do or think. Anything less is unproductive and unflattering to all concerned. Let us not define ourselves by what we are not, but instead seek out what we are and what we wish to become, and know the reasons why. I hope that we are about training our students to become smart, well informed, articulate speakers that can critically examine claims about current, controversial or philosophical issues with out much prior notice and eloquently defend a contrary position by disproving the original arguments and constructing counter arguments targeted to appeal to a generalized, well informed audience. Unfortunately, we are not yet to that point with many of rounds that I am hearing. We continue to improve dramatically, but there is still much room for improvement in both coaching and judging.

One of the main areas I hope we can focus our attention on in the coming years is the advancement of the theoretical or scholarly underpinnings to what we do. We have been extremely busy, these last few years, focusing on the mechanics of what this new form of debate, will be, constructing a national organization with its own constitution, by laws and tournament procedures, building a Championship Tournament with its own traditions, offering and coordinating and recording a full array of local, regional and national tournaments that offer this form of debate, etc. . . . We should be extremely proud of everything that has been accomplished in such a short amount of time. However, we are now ready to jump into the next stage of our organizational development. We should reflect more on the scholastic and theoretical implications of what we are practicing, and share our collective understanding of practical coaching and judging wisdom.

We need to examine many things about this activity and decide how we want to proceed and why. For example, the way we select and construct resolutions is critically important, yet far from universal and sometimes even far from informed. For example, we do not have the benefit of having several months to negotiate as a community the particular resolitional wording choices and resultant burdens and ground effects that some of our sister organizations enjoy

as they select one very specific resolution for the entire year. Yet, it seems that there should be some guiding principles. Even small wording choices, such as whether or not to include the phrase "This House" might have significant ramifications. But we have not fully explored them in a scholarly manner, outside some intriguing discussion threads on the Parli List Serve.

Additionally, what assumptions and burdens do critics bring to bear on Government cases, and are they too demanding implicitly or explicitly? Could that explain why there is such a lopsided win loss ratio between Governments and Oppositions as will be commented on elsewhere in this issue? Or, why must presumption still favor the Negative in a form of debate that ostensibly allows the Government to defend the Status Quo through vague or metaphoric resolutions? Remember that our resolutions very seldom specifically require the Government to significantly change the status quo, so why should Government teams feel so obliged? Because that is what other forms of debate require? Remember too that those organizations' resolutions specifically require inherent changes to provide negative ground. This seems imminently fair when you consider that Affirmative's have many months to research a specific plan and prove its solvency. Yet portions of our community strongly discourage advanced case research or detailed preparation on current events.

These are just a few of the many theoretical or practical questions that would be fascinating to explore. Others might focus on the benefits or pitfalls of metaphoric resolutions, or even discuss different types of metaphoric resolutions. The format we currently follow can also be examined. Some have asked why we should use terms like "Government", "Opposition", "Speaker" and "Gallery". Others question the need for procedural points of order or privilege. Or, why don't we go to an alternating format for speeches like that employed in the annual debate against the Irish National Team each year, rather than the traditional format that includes a "negative block" that has the Leader of the Opposition's rebuttal follow the Member of the Opposition's Constructive? What are the pedagogical arguments on both sides of the advisability of coaching or using prepared research material during preparation time? How should cases be formatted? What are acceptable opposition strategies for parliamentary debate and why?

I am certainly not calling for massive changes. I would, however, like to see us examine these issues and explore foundational reasons why we should or should not do what we do. I suspect that in some cases we are guilty of the fallacy of tradition in continuing practices because we have used them with other forms of debate, such as perhaps the notions of presumption favoring the negative and not allowing Government's to support the Status Quo. Ironically, in other cases we may be falling into the "smaller city complex" mentioned above of rejecting something just because it is similar to aspects of another form of debate we apparently wish to distance ourselves from at times, like research. Can't we still pursue research and education, and value eloquence and delivery? I believe we can and look forward to exploring avenues that will allow the best of both worlds to coexist symbiotically.

There is a wealth of areas in which to conduct research and upon which to write articles and/or conference papers. This will ultimately benefit our students, critics and coaches alike. It will also hopefully allow more of us to pursue tenure and advancement in institutions that place a high value upon research.

There are a number of specific steps that can be taken to pursue these goals of enhanced scholarship. One step is to pursue submitting papers and panels at NCA and at our regional organizations to explore and discuss these issues. Get invaluable feedback, then polish the conference papers up and submit them for publication to this journal or to others. This journal can only grow and improve if we the members commit to submitting strong papers to the editor. If uncertain about the process or the merit of an idea, call or e-mail the editor and ask for guidance and advice.

Additionally, I would like for you to start thinking about attending a Parliamentary Debate Developmental Conference being planned for next summer. It will be a two or three-day event where we will have various panels focusing on parliamentary debate related issues. The proceedings will be published following the conference and disseminated to attendees and made available to others. We could not only explore theoretical looks at what is meant by audience centered debate, but also hopefully explore very practical suggestions as to how successful coaches coach, or how to encourage judges to render fair, cogent decisions, or how to gain institutional support for forensics on your campus or within your community. We already have

one school indicating an interest in hosting this event, the University of Alaska at Anchorage. Visiting Alaska in the summer is an incredible experience. While airfare might be a little expensive, Steve Johnson and Shawnalee Whitney are hoping that the low housing rates might help offset these expenses. This is just one possibility of course. Other suggestions will also be welcomed and explored.

One last item related to this notion, which I think we should pursue, is a mentoring program, whether formalized or not. The purpose would be for a more experienced coach to work with a less experienced coach to show him or her the ropes. The need is probably fairly high with the vast numbers of new programs joining our organization. Many new programs have never had debate, others may be converting to Parliamentary debate from other forms. Please do not wait though for a formalized program to be generated. Look around your immediate area and volunteer to help a new coach out. It will be greatly appreciated I am sure. We are also working on a new member's package that we can provide for new programs.

As I mentioned at the outset, I am very excited about what has already been accomplished with the NPDA. But I am even more excited to see what the future holds for us. I hope you will give this some thought and consider how you might become more involved with improving our educational focus. You might help train judges at tournaments, attend a Summer Workshop or camp yourself and/or encouraging your students to attend one (like those at Willamette University or the University of Vermont), submit conference papers or panels to the national or regional conferences, research and write articles, attend or contribute a paper to next summer's developmental conference, or mentor a new coach. Thanks in advance for your service to and participation in this exciting educational endeavor. We could not do it without each of you.