

GUIDE TO BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY DEBATING

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When I was originally asked to write a guide to British Parliamentary ('BP') debating, the debating style used at the World Intersvarsity Debating Championships, I think I must have been a little bit 'tired and emotional' shall we say. The reason I say this is that I came up with the following eleven step guide to BP:

- Step 1:** Be hammered.
- Step 2:** Don't be too hammered.
- Step 3:** Don't be not hammered enough.
- Step 4:** Be just right. Like Special K.
- Step 5:** Offer lots of 'point of being hammered'.
- Step 6:** Make sure the adjudicators are hammered.
- Step 7:** Try to speak relatively coherently ... relative to the other hammered debaters, that is.
- Step 8:** Get to step 9.
- Step 9:** Walk to where you will speak from (plan ahead for this step).
- Step 10:** Speak. In English. For the whole allotted time. Loudly enough to be heard. Not so loudly as to aggravate hangover which has already been aggravated by planning and executing step 9.
- Step 11:** Don't get to step eleven. You won't be able to count past ten.

It was suggested that this might be somewhat insufficient for those debaters relatively unfamiliar with BP style and so I decided to set forth the following words of (much more sober) wisdom.

An overview

A BP debate has some things in common with a three-on-three debate. It has a topic, for instance. And speakers arranged into two sides. However, this is about where the similarity ends. Instead of having two teams of three people each in a debate, you have four teams of two people each. These four teams are arranged into two sides—the *Government* and the *Opposition*. Each speaker speaks for seven minutes.

The first team on the Government side is called the *Opening Government*, consisting of the *Prime Minister* and *Deputy Prime Minister*; the second team on the Government side is called the *Closing Government*, consisting of the *Government Member* and the *Government Whip*. The first team on the Opposition side is called the *Opening Opposition*, consisting of the *Opposition Leader* and *Deputy Opposition Leader*; the second team on the Opposition side is called the *Closing Opposition*, consisting of the *Opposition Member* and the *Opposition Whip*. These names are based on the positions in British Parliament. I am sure the Whip has something to do with the S&M tendencies of the members of the Tory party.

Roles of the speakers — opening half

Each of the teams, and the speakers within the teams, has a certain role to fulfil. These are quite different in the opening half of the debate to the closing half of the debate. The opening half is quite similar to three-on-three style.

The Prime Minister essentially has the same role as the first speaker of the affirmative in a three-on-three style debate. He or she defines the topic, contextualises, sets out a model (if required), announces the team split for the Opening Government and then delivers his or her three (the magic number) points.

The definition provided by the Prime Minister cannot be challenged by the Opposition Leader except in three narrowly defined situations. In effect, this grants the Opening Government a divine right of definition. This means that *squirrels* inhabit many BP debates. These are definitions which can only be suggested to be linked to the topic if you were drunk, on drugs or the Opening Government. It also means that the topics can be extremely open, such as ‘That this house believes that the glass is half full’. It is up to the Opening Government to define this topic in such a way that it becomes a debatable issue. For example, they might (if they were suicidal) argue that the glass is half full means that we should be optimistic and that the thing to be optimistic about is peace in the Middle East. They might then propose a mechanism for gaining peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and it would be a debate about that.

The three grounds upon which an Opening Opposition can challenge the definition of the Opening Government are *truisms*, *time setting* and *unreasonable place setting*. Truisms are where the definition is self-proving. For example, if the topic were ‘That this house believes we should eat, drink and be merry’, it would be an invalid definition to argue that humans require food and drink to survive. This is because it is impossible for the Opposition to argue that humans do not require food and drink to survive.

Time setting is where the definition sets the debate in a time period other than the present. For example, if the topic were ‘That this house would take up arms’, it would be an invalid definition to argue that Chamberlain should not have tried to make peace with Hitler.

Finally, unreasonable place setting is where the definition sets the debate in a place that is unreasonable given the topic. For example, if the topic were ‘That this house should ban cloning’, it would be an invalid definition to limit the debate to Azerbaijan simply because the Prime Minister is doing his or her thesis on that country. Nevertheless, some place setting is reasonable. For example, if the topic were ‘That the US should pull out’, it would be reasonable to make the debate about the US pulling out of Iraq.

If the definition is invalid for any of the above reasons, the Opposition Leader may challenge it and provide an alternative, more reasonable definition. These debates are extremely messy and are to be avoided at almost all times. In the absence of a spasmanought Opening Government that provides an invalid definition, the Opposition Leader rebuts the Prime Minister, sets out an alternative model (if required), announces the team split for the Opening Opposition and then delivers his or her three points. Rebuttal should, as in three-on-three style, be signposted, prioritised, etc. The Opposition leader should spend about two or three minutes of his or her speech on rebuttal and the rest on positive material. Often the Opening Opposition will have to react very quickly to the case being run by the Opening Government and come up with a case on the fly.

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Roles of the speakers — closing half

The closing half of a BP debate becomes a little complicated. This is essentially because although the closing government, say, is on the same side as the opening government, it needs to differentiate itself in some way. This is the place for *extensions*.

The Government Member rebuts the Deputy Opposition Leader and then provides an extension to the Opening Government's case. He or she should spend about three or four minutes on rebuttal and then give the extension. An extension is essentially a new perspective on the debate. There is often controversy about what constitutes a valid extension, but the following seems to me to be the safest explanation. An extension may constitute a new argument to support the model the Opening Government proposed, a new framework for analysis or any other thing that differentiates the Closing Government from the Opening Government within the grounds of the debate set out. It cannot, however, be something that shifts the grounds of the debate entirely. Thus, it cannot be a model different to that proposed by the Opening Government and it cannot totally change the nature of the debate. If the Opening Government did not, due to spasticity, introduce a model where one was required, it seems to me that introducing a model would be an invalid extension. However, one might be able to tentatively suggest mechanisms for meeting the goals of the Government without explicitly calling them a model.

Suppose the debate was about affirmative action and the Opening Government was supporting affirmative action for race. They have proposed a model involving quotas for Aborigines in Universities and have argued purely on the grounds that Aborigines are underrepresented in terms of numbers at University level and this should be alleviated by a quota system. It would be a legitimate extension for the Closing Government to argue that increasing the numbers of Aborigines at a University level would have flow-on benefits for the rest of the Aboriginal community. It would *not* be a legitimate extension to introduce a new model that did not rely on quotas and it would *not* be a legitimate extension to argue that affirmative action should be extended to gender. The reason that these would not be legitimate extensions is that they fundamentally change the grounds of the debate. (These views contradict the explanation of extensions given by the Glasgow Worlds chief adjudicator. He said that gender is a valid extension to an affirmative action case based on race. He was wrong.) If the Opening Government had simply argued about affirmative action in principle, without suggesting quotas, the Closing Government might be able to support the arguments by referring to examples where quotas had been used and suggesting that such a system might be appropriate here. But this should not be called a model and should be done slyly and carefully.

The Opposition Member rebuts the Government member and then provides an extension to the Closing Government's case. He or she should spend about three or four minutes on rebuttal and then provide the extension.

The Government Whip then acts like the third speaker in a three-on-three debate. He or she does not introduce new material. He or she rebuts the whole of the Opposition's case,

including the extension, and provides a summary. This rebuttal will, of course, be thematic and signposted. He or she will try to emphasise the Closing Government's extension as the key issue or framework for analysis in the debate and emphasise it again in his or her summary. He or she should spend the vast majority of his or her speech on rebuttal with the summary taking less than a minute.

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Points of information

The final difference between three-on-three style and BP is the existence of *points of information*. Between the end of the first and the beginning of the sixth minutes of every speaker's speech, speakers from the other side of the debate may offer points of information. They do this by standing up, putting one hand on their head, holding the other hand out in front of them and saying 'Point of information' or something similar. The less creative examples of things to say are 'On that point' or, if you were asking about the elderly for example, 'Point of the elderly' or 'On the elderly'. The most creative example I have ever heard is 'Point of Macarena'. The reason for the hand on head out in front business is again based on British Parliament — the hand on the head was to hold a wig on and the hand out in front was to hold out a parliamentary bill.

When a speaker is asked a point of information, he or she may either accept — 'Yes' or 'Go ahead' or 'What!?' if you're really worked up — or decline — 'No thank you' or 'No' or 'Take a seat!'. If a point is declined, the person offering it should sit down. If accepted, this gives the person offering the point a chance to voice that killer point that totally destroys everything the speaker is saying. A point of information can be phrased as a question — 'How do you address the fact that ...' — it can contain a fact or a restatement of an argument — 'The elderly do support euthanasia as shown in ...' — or it may simply get information from the other side that will be used to hurt them in a later speech.

Points of information can be useful for the closing teams to flag their extensions (no sexual innuendo, please) before they give them. It is a good idea sometime during the Government Member's speech for the Closing Opposition to ask a point that introduces in some way the extension that it plans to run. The Closing Government should do this during the Deputy Opposition Leader's speech. The simplest way to do this is to say, 'How do you address the argument that ...' and then introduce the argument that will be run as the extension.

Points can also be useful for the opening teams during the closing half of the debate to bring the focus back to their arguments if the debate seems to be shifting to focus too heavily on the extensions. The simplest way to do this is to say, 'How do you address the argument that we brought up that ...' and then restate one of the key arguments that was run and that seem to be falling out of the debate. This is important because the opening teams must stay relevant to the debate

Each speaker should aim to take two points of information during his or her speech. They should be taken at times that are convenient, rather than in the middle of a sentence, for example. It is good to take them between arguments, and approximately evenly spaced during a speech. Each speaker should aim to offer around six points of information during a speech by another speaker, but this should be moderated or increased depending on the debate. If the debate is a particularly raucous one, more points may be required in order to stay in the

debate. If the speaker is weaker and speaks more quietly, for example, less points may be advisable to avoid being accused of badgering the speaker by the adjudicators.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker ...

BP debating is the type of thing that you really must do to understand fully. Getting used to answering points, dealing with unexpected definitions, etc., are skills you can only gain with practice. However, once you get used to the way BP debates work they are extremely enjoyable and a lot more entertaining and dynamic than three-on-three style debates.

Then again, you could choose to ignore everything I have said except my eleven step guide. Believe me, the vast majority of speakers at Worlds don't seem to get beyond step one.