

Adding Communication to Debate: A Look at Parliamentary Debate  
as a Complement to Cross Examination Debate in Inter-  
Collegiate Competition

Richard J. Bailey, Jr.

"Occasionally we need to look critically at intercollegiate debating to see how it is developing, whither it is going, how well it is meeting its objectives" (Quimby 159). Bates College Professor, Brooks Quimby's call to look at the ongoing development of intercollegiate debate points out the need to examine more closely the current state of intercollegiate debate, and to make changes if needed that will help its intrinsic and extrinsic value to those who participate in the activity. In today's collegiate debate environment, two main forms dominate: the National Debate Tournament (NDT) and the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) styles. A difficulty arises, however, because many participants believe both forms have abandoned the importance of communication for the maximization of information flow. Whether or not this evolution finds its roots in the American mindset that "more is better," when we look at intercollegiate debate on a national level, we find the concept of "communication" has indeed taken a back seat to other aspects of debate. Communication, or the transmitting of concepts or ideas, is according to Malcolm O. Sillars, "expressive of what a person is and essential to the establishment of social

relationships among people" (1). Debate without communication, then, is obviously something which we should question. One possible fill for this void is parliamentary style debate, a relatively unpracticed form in America, although it has been around for centuries. When we look more closely at what parliamentary debate consists of, and see what values it concentrates on, we'll see this style could be a very beneficial complement to Cross Examination Debate Association in intercollegiate competition. By looking at the recent history of CEDA debate in the United States, the principles of parliamentary debate, and the benefits that both CEDA and parliamentary debate provide to competitors, we'll see how adding parliamentary debate to intercollegiate forensics competitions becomes an interesting possibility which would add both enjoyment and educational value to the national debate circuit.

Collegiate debate in the United States has experienced a metamorphosis over the last two decades. NDT rules were at one time the presiding and most popular style of debate. However, many judges and observers, as well as competitors, felt that delivery during NDT rounds was becoming too fast and too far removed from the communication aspects of debate. Walter Ulrich, from Vanderbilt University, addressed this issue in his CEDA Yearbook article, "The State of CEDA, 1986." "Many individuals see the issue of delivery as an important one in CEDA. CEDA's formation was partly out of a dissatisfaction by many with the delivery of NDT debaters" (58). Yet now it appears many of the concerns about NDT's lack of communication skills are being

raised about CEDA. It seems as more and more NDT programs convert to CEDA programs the distinction between CEDA and NDT is diminishing. Many judges and competitors feel that just as NDT, CEDA is becoming a mathematical game based solely on the number of arguments "put out" and the rapidity at which that information can be conveyed. Ulrich commented in 1985 that "The rate of delivery in CEDA debates has become faster and faster, with some speakers bordering on incomprehensibility. Instead of developing arguments, speakers rely on numerous undeveloped arguments" (39). Seven years later his statement can be verified by judging at practically any CEDA tournament. A majority of speakers seem to suffer from a complete loss of breath and slurred speech, many even foaming at the mouth. As Steven R. Brydon, from California State University at Chico says, "many of the practices which were once rewarded in NDT (spreading, speed, overuse of evidence...) are now appearing in, and winning, CEDA rounds" (86).

The concept of "speaker awards" at CEDA tournaments seem most ironic - - awards are usually given to those competitors who can speak at a rate of more than 300 words per minute. We are, in effect, subtly telling competitors that the only way to effectively win an argument is to give the judge more information than the opponent can give, no matter how that information is conveyed. Some judges intensify this message. James Brey from Florida State University says that one judge told him, "I believe that the ability to spread [or to speak faster than your opponent in an effort to leave some of your arguments untouched] reflects an ability to think quickly and creatively and allows greater

depth as well as breadth to be applied to argumentation" (76). I experienced a similar situation in an elimination round at a national preparation CEDA tournament. The judge informed my partner and I that debate was a mathematical game, and anything was possible. Therefore, dropped arguments were to be the biggest determinant of the victor. But why does the trend continue if according to Brey, twice as many judges abhor speed in the round? Brey continues with a commentary from another judge: "I don't like the spread and I strongly dislike a wheezing, gasping debate style which presents material so rapidly that arguments become a blur. Excessive speed is, in my view, a deterrent to effective communication" (76).

CEDA seems to be witnessing a trend in faster-paced rounds with less developed arguments. This trend is also affecting debate audiences. Thomas Miller from the University of California at Los Angeles states that "A speaker's message can only be effective if the critic is willing to listen and understand its implications" (66). Yet in CEDA debate, the audience is not a factor; the big focus is on the judge's "flowpad," which acts as a catcher for the deluge of arguments which stream from the mouths of competitors. Persuasion is basically thrown aside in favor of more, but less developed, arguments. In rounds such as this, any non-forensics oriented listener, such as families and friends of debaters, or even a visiting college dignitary or two, leave the round "flabbergasted" at their inability to understand the debate, and the information they take away comes from their study of the

graffiti on the desk in front of them. CEDA is definitely in the middle of a dangerous trend, one which discourages communicative debate, and one which isolates debate audiences.

Parliamentary debate can be a response to many of these issues. It is a style of debate that concentrates just as much on the way the argument is presented as the argument itself. It is a very persuasive form of debate, and models the legislative system of Great Britain which gives it its name. Parliamentary debate in the United States consists of two two-person teams arguing an extemporaneous topic. The topic is announced fifteen to thirty minutes before the beginning of the round, and usually deals either with philosophical or contemporary issues. The team proposing the resolution is called the Government, while the other is appropriately named the Opposition. One or more judges are responsible for hearing both sides of the argument. The presiding judge in the round is titled the Speaker of the House, and acts as the keeper of order in the debate. In debates with only one judge, that person acts as Speaker. The goal is for each debater to present his or her side's case in a very logical and eloquent manner. The criteria for judging is weighed just as much on the style of the debaters as their arguments.

Parliamentary debate can add many things to contemporary collegiate competition—it can encourage public speaking and oratorical skills, help prepare students for real world applications, add humor to debates, and bring larger audiences to competitive tournaments. According to Dr. Theodore Sheckels, Jr. from Randolph-Macon College, there are seven reasons why an

educational institution would want to sponsor a parliamentary debate program:

- to teach argumentation skills
- to teach public speaking skills
- to teach oratorical skills
- to teach "on-your feet" thinking and speaking
- to expose students to other parts of the nation and world
- to encourage students to interact with peers from other schools, and
- to develop student responsibility. (87)

Five of these objectives are met by CEDA along with the additional skill of research. But public speaking and oratorical skills are not as important in CEDA rounds as they once were. Parliamentary debate combines oratorical skills with argumentation to provide for an easy-to-understand debate. Why should public speaking skills be so important? According to Cole Campbell, in the book Competitive Debate, "The debater who more intelligently communicates his/her position and who can persuade others of that position has a competitive edge over those debaters who focus exclusively on argumentation and research" (51). This focus is true outside the debate room as well, and it is this focus of parliamentary debate which can prepare debaters for real world situations. For example, a lawyer could spout off researched information, but he or she has no hope of winning a trial unless the jury is persuaded to believe his or her position. And, as Ray Weisenborn put it, "Formal debate is persuasion at its apex of perfection" (249). In addition,

parliamentary debate could encourage a larger audience and more audience participation. For example, some debates at Oxford have had up to fifteen hundred people in attendance (Skorkowski 336).

Why do these debates draw such attention? The largest reason is that these type of debates entertain people. In parliamentary debate, the audience, the speakers, and even the judges, are allowed to make comments during the debate. These heckles are permitted and even encouraged, as long as they are "short, witty, and to the point". In addition, the debates are usually somewhat humorous. Jack H. Howe, of California State University, Long Beach, says, "Perhaps one of the cardinal sins of American educational debate has been its tendency to take itself too seriously" (1). Howe goes on to say that in the thousands of rounds he has judged, the ones that stick with him "were the ones accentuated by humor" (2). Parliamentary debate rests on the premise that if judges laugh and enjoy the arguments, it will influence them in a positive manner, as well as the audience. In this manner, the audience becomes extremely important to the debate, and thus the argumentation is geared just as much to them as it is to the judge. As more and more people are drawn to debates, the activity will increase in popularity and become more than just an avenue for donut eating, coffee drinking, cigarette smoking students to kill their weekends. In Europe (especially in Great Britain), debating is, indeed, a sport of minds. It is highly respected, and those who do it well are held in extremely high regard by society. This

should be a goal of American debate, and parliamentary style has been proven in other nations to bring these results.

Now that we have seen a trend in American debate which leaves us with a communication void, and understand some of the basic principles of parliamentary debate, the last question to answer is whether or not parliamentary debate could be run concurrently with CEDA at collegiate tournaments. First and foremost, CEDA does have much pedagogical value and parliamentary debate should not replace CEDA in intercollegiate tournaments. CEDA provides students with experience in research, and with only one topic each semester, that research becomes very detailed and precise. But, more importantly, research leads to knowledge. Each semester, CEDA debaters are exposed to highly controversial and educational topics; all of these topics cover concerns on a national and international level, and they allow the debater to become more familiar with some of the reasons legislators and other government officials make certain decisions. CEDA also allows debaters to understand the importance of value in policy making.

Parliamentary debate also has its advantages. As stated earlier, parliamentary debate fosters a greater focus on communication and humor, which will in turn help debaters with oratorical skills, make debates entertaining, prepare students for real world situations, and draw audiences to competitions. This increased public awareness will help the status as well as the support for intercollegiate forensics.

As far as running both forms of debate concurrently, obviously scheduling conflicts become a concern. Although debaters would need to choose between styles, there are often instances where because of the lack of a prepared case, or because one partner had other engagements, debaters are forced into either not going to a particular tournament, or solely participating in individual events. Parliamentary debate would allow the CEDA debater to gain debate experience even in these situations. This experience also may help CEDA debaters to carry some of the parliamentary skills back into CEDA debates. According to Glenn Capp, "The emphasis on tournament debating...has tended to decrease the importance of educational debate as a persuasive activity" (214). Its possible this importance could be reinstated using parliamentary debate. In addition, many students who participate in individual events such as informative, persuasive, and After Dinner Speaking, shy away from debate because they don't feel capable of developing the speed that enables a CEDA debater to survive. By running parliamentary debate rounds concurrently to CEDA rounds, many individual events participants would get a chance to develop argumentation skills while they sharpen their oratorical skills. As Dr. Quimby put it, "Tournaments certainly have a place in any well-rounded forensic program, but when they become the major part of the program, their educational value should receive careful scrutiny, with respect both to the institution and to the debater" (160). What we must ask, then, is what is best for the institution and the debater. Parliamentary debate can possibly

raise more financial and public support for the activity as a whole. In addition, the educational opportunities simply increase when the debater is given more options. Not only will parliamentary debate cause no harm to the CEDA world of debate, but it can provide a refreshing alternative to the debate atmosphere, one which may bring more attention to the forensics environment - attention which it surely deserves.

As Jon M. Ericson put it:

In modern democratic societies, the right to debate is a priceless asset...If the speaker can convince enough citizens that the new idea is a better one, then the speaker can literally change the policy of the city, county, state, or even nation. (1)

Debate is obviously something which should be encouraged on all levels. It can, indeed, teach skills that can be employed for very useful purposes in society. Quimby concludes, "In brief, we can provide more preparation for life situations, more audience participation, more experience in persuasion than is now our habit" (161). If we allow parliamentary debate a place in intercollegiate forensics tournaments, we will simply be allowing debaters to choose from a wider assortment of debate styles, each with its own merit and advantages. E. Sam Cox stated that "the strength of academic debate depends on the existing variety of offerings" (422). So adding options only makes the entire program stronger. As P.E. Lull stated in 1949, "a good forensic diet needs variety" (429). Adding parliamentary debate will give

intercollegiate tournaments that variety. CEDA still has its place in collegiate debate, but running parliamentary debate concurrently can only add to that diet, allowing competitors more choices, and in the end, more educational experience.

## Works Cited

- Brey, James. "Definitive Acceptance or Rejection of Certain Tactics and Arguments." CEDA Yearbook 1989: 76.
- Brydon, Steven R. "Judging CEDA Debate: A Systems Perspective." CEDA Yearbook 1984: 86.
- Campbell, Cole C. Competitive Debate. Chapel Hill: Information Research Associates, 1974.
- Capp, Glenn R. Principles of Argumentation and Debate. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965.
- Cox, E. Sam. "An Objective Analysis of One Audience Debate." Argument in Controversy Nov. 1991: 422.
- Ericson, Jon, James Murphy, and Raymond Zeuschner. The Debater's Guide. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.
- Howe, Jack H. "Debate Should Be a Laughing Matter." CEDA Yearbook 1982: 1.
- Lull, P. E. "Some American Replies." Quarterly Journal of Speech 1949: 429-430.
- Quimby, Brooks. "Can We Learn Debating From the British?" Quarterly Journal of Speech 1947: 159-161.
- Sheckles, Theodore F. Jr. "Parliamentary Debate: A Description and a Justification." Argumentation and Advocacy Fall 1990: 86-87.
- Sillars, Malcolm O. Messages, Meanings, and Culture. New York: Harper-Collins, 1991.
- Skorkowsky, G. R. "British University Debating." Quarterly

Journal of Speech 1971: 335-343.

Thomas, David A. Advanced Debate. Skokie: National Textbook Company, 1975.

Ulrich, Walter. "Eliminating the Abuses of CEDA Debate: The Debate Judge as a Referee." CEDA Yearbook. 1985: 39.

Ulrich, Walter. "The State of CEDA, 1986." CEDA Yearbook 1986: 58.