CHAPTER 9

On That Point: Navigating Parliamentary Debate

Coming Up!

In this section, you'll learn about the procedures and techniques of parliamentary debate. You'll discover how to use questions, or Points of Information, to damage an opponent's case, and how to react when questions are fired at you.

THE PARLIAMENTARY TRADITION

Parliamentary debate has a long history in legislatures around the world. The United States Congress, the British House of Commons, and the German Bundestag are all examples of national legislatures. In these chambers, the great debates of society take place. Elected representatives from various regions gather to debate laws on economic, social, and foreign affairs. The debates tend to be lively and vigorous, even becoming public spectacles at their most heated moments.

Did You Know?

Modern parliamentary debate started in England.

Many of the features seen in national parliaments have worked their way into student parliamentary debating, such as the titles of the participants and other formalities. The student version shrinks the number of debaters from several hundred to four, in most styles. As with real parliaments, there is a Government and an Opposition.

The key feature of this style is your ability to ask questions, known as Points of Information, while your opponent is speaking. You can also heckle when someone else has the floor, making for some humorous and spontaneous moments. (It's less raucous, though, than the barrage of simultaneous heckles commonly seen in actual legislatures.) Other than these elements, the skills discussed in previous chapters apply to parliamentary style as well.

LEARNING THE LINGO

One of the first features you'll notice about parliamentary debate is the difference in language compared to other forms of debate. Like functioning legislatures, parliamentary style has its own lingo. Making mistakes relating to appropriate language won't weaken your case. But it's important to use the right terms, because doing so shows that you're familiar with how the style works. Here are some of the basic parliamentary debate terms that you should get to know:

The Speaker is to parliamentary debate what the Chairperson is to other styles of competition. The proper way to refer to this person is "Mr. Speaker" or "Madame Speaker." As in real legislatures, the Speaker has the final authority over rules and procedures. Everything you

say flows through the Speaker. For example, "Madame Speaker, today we will show you why gambling should be banned."

The Government is essentially the Affirmative team—the side that supports the motion. Rather than a first Affirmative speaker and a second Affirmative speaker, there is a Prime Minister (P.M.) and a Minister of the Crown (M.C.), respectively. These positions don't imply rank or authority within a team. They're used simply to identify roles.

The Opposition, sometimes called Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, is like the Negative team in that it argues against the motion. Unlike the titles first speaker and second speaker used in other styles, the team members are called the Member of the Opposition (M.O.) and the Leader of the Opposition (L.O.).

The Bill is another term for the resolution. In addition to resolutions and motions, parliaments also pass Bills. A Bill usually refers to a policy. However, the term used to describe the topic will vary with different versions of parliamentary style.

The House is the chamber in which the debate takes place. You'll hear phrases like, "This House is now adjourned" or "We've made three points before this House today."

The Honorable Members are the debaters arguing for or against the issue. This phrase is commonly used as a respectful way to address the opposing team's debaters. If addressing everyone in the room, it's a more fitting alternative to the less formal "ladies and gentlemen."

To provide you with a clear understanding of what parliamentary language seems like, here's an example of a passage from academic style debate 'translated' into the parliamentary lexicon:

• *Academic style debate*: "Mr. Chairperson, the Negative told this round of debate that the resolution must fall because of what it claims is an inconsistency in the first Affirmative speaker's arguments."

• *Parliamentary style debate*: "Mr. Speaker, the Opposition told this House to vote against this Bill because of what the Honorable Member claims is an inconsistency in the Prime Minister's arguments."

PARLIAMENTARY SHAPE AND STRUCTURE

Like the style of debate discussed in previous chapters, there's no common shape and structure for parliamentary debate. Depending on where you are, what level you're at, and what tournament you're debating in, the times and roles will vary. Here's a basic structure that applies, in a general sense, to most parliamentary styles of debate:

Prime Minister (P.M.)	5 minutes
Member of the Opposition (M.O.)	8 minutes
Minister of the Crown (M.C.)	8 minutes
Leader of the Opposition (L.O.)	8 minutes
Prime Minister (P.M.)	3 minutes

Although everyone has the same amount of speaking time, you'll notice that the Prime Minister's time is split. The first speech is a constructive speech, and the second speech is a rebuttal speech. Also, the first five minutes of the Leader of the Opposition's speech is the constructive portion, and the last three minutes is the rebuttal portion. There's no clear break, though, between these two parts. The roles of each speaker are generally comparable to the Affirmative and Negative roles outlined in Chapter 6:

Prime Minister
- *Define* the terms of the resolution.
- *Present* the Government's case, including specific arguments.

Member of the Opposition
- *Clash* with the Prime Minister's arguments.
- *Present* the Opposition's case, including specific arguments.

Minister of the Crown
- *Clash* with the Member of the Opposition's arguments.
- *Continue* the Government's case with new arguments.
- *Defend* the Prime Minister's arguments, if necessary.

Leader of the Opposition
- *Clash* with the Minister of the Crown's arguments.
- *Continue* the Opposition's case with new arguments.
- *Defend* the Member of the Opposition's arguments, if necessary.

- *Refute* the Government's case as a whole.
- *Summarize* the Opposition's case as a whole.

Prime Minister
- *Clash* with the Leader of the Opposition's arguments, if necessary.
- *Refute* the Opposition's case as a whole.
- *Summarize* the Government's case as whole.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF A POINT?

Simply put, Points of Information are your opportunity to ask tough question to your opponent during his or her constructive speech (they're not allowed in rebuttals). Points of Information take your competitors off their game plan, forcing them to respond to your challenge. To ask a question, stand up during your rival's speech and say, "Point of Information" or "On that point." Your opponent may either allow you to ask your question or signal you to sit down. Ask questions with one or more of the following goals in mind:

Dispute the member's argument. This purpose is the most common use of a Point of Information. If you believe that your opponent's point is either flawed or illogical, ask a question that forces the issue. For example, "If a judge is supposed to interpret the law without regard to what's popular, wouldn't electing judges essentially force them to cater to the whims of public opinion?" Even if the debater finds a way to defend the point, at minimum you've planted seeds of doubt into the minds of your judges.

Contest the evidence presented. A word of caution: don't waste your Point of Information on an evidence dispute unless it will inflict serious damage to your opponent's case. If used carefully, disputing evidence can weaken a key foundation of the other team's case or hurt its credibility on the issue. For example, "How can you use the 2000 economic data to argue that 11% unemployment is a serious problem, when the 2005 report from the same source indicated that the rate had dropped to 7%?" You would certainly have them on the ropes with that one.

Suggest the point's irrelevance. A great way to oppose a point without countering it directly is to challenge how closely it fits with the issue at hand. If asked at the end of an argument, your question can

throw off your opponent. For example, "Okay, so you've told us how an American drug company can distribute this medicine in Africa, but how is that even relevant if you've specified that the case is about funding arrangements *between governments*?" Well, there goes the past minute of your opponent's speech.

Introduce an upcoming argument. It's always nice if you can combine a question on an argument that the member has just made with a hint of what's to come in your speech. Doing so alerts the judges to what you're going to say, shifting the focus of the debate closer to your team. For example, "If we were to follow your plan and end the space shuttle program, wouldn't we also be cutting off the scientific and medical experiments that have proven so valuable in the recent years?" If delivered during the Prime Minister's speech, this point would get you into the debate early.

Provide a reminder of a past argument. It's easy for your points to be forgotten, especially if they're introduced early in the debate. Bringing up one of your previous points in a question on your opponent's argument reinforces your case. For example, "But we've already shown that standardized exams encourage schools to improve their performance compared to others schools. If, as you now suggest, we simply stop making the results public, wouldn't it defeat this very valuable motivational purpose?" This question counters your opponent's new argument while reintroducing a past argument.

Clarify a confusing definition. Only ask for an explanation if what your opponent said is both unclear to everyone and is critical to the debate. Otherwise, save your opportunity for a more significant question. If, however, you use this type of Point of Information wisely, it can win you points by clarifying the debate for your team and for the judges. For example, "Just to be clear, when you talk about banning 'the violent sport of boxing', are you referring only to professional competition or also to Olympic competition, which involves helmets and softer gloves?" This way, everyone will be debating the same issue.

Point out a contradiction. Catching an inconsistency on the spot can be a great way to discredit an argument. This is true both for consistency within a speech and between partners. For example, "Okay, so you're saying that the government should fund theatres because

they're so popular, but your partner said that the case for subsidies is that most theatres don't sell enough tickets to stay afloat on their own. Which one is it?" Placing a 'wedge' between partners can steal your opponent's thunder in the middle of its speeches.

RISE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Success Tip!

Think carefully about the timing of your questions.

You've got a question that you're itching to ask. When do you jump off your chair to ask it? There are two factors you should consider. Firstly, when it will have the most impact, and secondly, when the speaker is most likely to accept it. Timing is more important than most debaters will appreciate. A well-timed question helps you seize the agenda and take control the debate. On the other hand, poor timing makes your question seem out of place—a distraction to the debate. The following are good places to ask a Point of Information:

After a key part of a constructive point. Each main argument usually consists of a number of explanations that help form the point. Rising after one of these explanations may be to your advantage, since a tough question can throw off the flow of the argument. If the speaker rejects your point, you may have an opportunity to persist at least one more time before he or she moves to an entirely new argument.

At the end of a complete argument. Rising at the end of an argument allows you to damage the entire point at once. It gives you time to take in all of explanations and evidence used to support the argument. Listen very carefully for what appears to be the speaker's concluding sentence to the point in question. The speaker is most likely to accept your Point of Information when the argument is complete, since he or she will feel confident that the argument has been justified fully.

In response to damaging refutation. Let's face it, sometimes your opponent will make a great counter-argument to what you thought was a bullet-proof point. Rather than accepting it lying down, show that you're confident by rising on a Point of Information. This will give you an opportunity to challenge refutation that would otherwise inflict serious damage to your case. Even if your question isn't accepted, at

least you'll be making it clear to your judges that you have something to say about your opponent's refutation.

WHEN TO STAY PUT

Unfortunately, even seasoned debaters are tempted to ask questions when the timing isn't right. The question may be brilliant, but the effect is seriously weakened because of poor timing. It's important to understand why asking questions at other times isn't a good idea:

During the introduction. In most parliamentary debates, the first minute of a speech is 'protected time'. This means that it's against the rules to rise on a Point of Information. Even if it's allowed, you accomplish little by rising on a Point of Information when your opponent has just introduced the case theme. How can you challenge a case that hasn't yet been developed?

During the conclusion. Since a Point of Information is meant as a targeted challenge of a particular argument, asking a question when the debater is talking about broader themes is poor timing. Note that the last minute of someone's speech, like the first minute, is protected time in most parliamentary debates.

Immediately after an argument is introduced. It's best to wait until your opponent has developed at least part of an argument before you jump all over it. The answer will probably be some variation of "Well, thank you for the question. I was just about to get into that."

In the middle of a sentence. It may be tempting to throw off the member in the middle of a statement, but doing so makes it seem that you're intentionally interrupting your opponent. Also, you could miss an important part of the argument if you rise prematurely.

When the debate has moved on. Sure, you may have a burning question to ask concerning your opponent's previous point. But once the debate has moved to the next argument, it's too late. Your question will seem out of place.

If you've been rejected several times. There's nothing wrong with persisting a couple of times when you have something important to

ask. But if you're told to sit down repeatedly over a short period of time, the member is making it very clear that your point will not be accepted. Continuing to rise will make it seem like you're needlessly interrupting your opponent's speech.

STANDING UP TO STAND OUT

When you stand up hoping to ask a Point of Information, the focus of the debate momentarily turns to you. It's important that you have a good 'stage presence' when you do so. Below are some tips that will help you make a strong impression when you rise to ask a question:

Success Tip!

Make sure that both you and your partner ask questions.

State your request in a simple way. Some debaters prefer to foreshadow questions which phrases like "On democracy" or "On rationality." While appropriate if used occasionally, it certainly isn't necessary. The best ways to request an opportunity to ask a question are saying "Point of Information" or "On that point." Trying to make a full argument is pushing it too far. For example, saying "On the need to punish people who pose no harm to society" makes it look like you're trying to deliver part of your speech during your opponent's speech.

Stand up quickly and confidently. If you're going to rise on a Point of Information, be decisive about it. Rising slowly or in a hesitant way conveys uncertainty to your judges.

Address the member by name. We're naturally more receptive to other people when we're called by our names. Saying "On that point, Greg" or "Point of Information, Ms. Jones" can be a subtle way to increase the chances of your Point of Information being accepted.

Stand up one person at a time. There's no use in standing up with your partner, as it's needlessly distracting. It may even look like you're trying to compete with your partner for attention.

FIELDING THE BARRAGE OF QUESTIONS

While you may prefer to speak without interruption, it's inevitable that your opponents will rise to ask Points of Information. Although it's important to show that you're capable of defending your arguments, you don't want to let the questions get you off track either. Here are some tips to help you manage Points of Information:

Accept two Points of Information. If you accept one question, you're at least showing a willingness to face criticism. But especially during an eight minute constructive speech, it could still seem like you're trying to minimize challenges. Accepting two points is the norm. Allowing more than two questions gives your opponents too much control over your speech.

Watch Out!

Don't let Points of Information control your speech.

Allow reasonable time for the question. If you've accepted a point, it's usually inappropriate to cut off your opponent before the question has been asked fully. The exception is if the questioner is rambling excessively, taking up more than 10 to 15 seconds of your valuable time. In this scenario, be polite but firm in order to regain control of your speech. For example, you could say, "Thank you, I understand what you're getting at."

Answer the question completely. Some debaters will shrug off a question as irrelevant or weak, without actually answering it. This may suggest that you're unwilling or unable to defend your argument. Always provide a clear and decisive answer to a Point of Information.

Transition back to your speech quickly. It shouldn't take you more than a couple of sentences to answer a question. Going on for longer allows the question to dictate your speech. Once you've answered the question, make a smooth transition to stay on track. For example, you could say, "Coming back to my second point …" or "I'd now like to move on to my third argument."

Success Tip!

Keep your answers short and move on.

DON'T HECKLE FOR THE HECK OF IT

Heckling can be an interesting, spontaneous, and humorous part of parliamentary debate. Unfortunately, it's also the most misused. A heckle is a short and witty comment that gets to the point in a few words, usually five or less. It's not your opportunity to hear yourself talk. It's not your opportunity to continue your speech during your opponent's speech. Since heckling is more often used poorly than well, perhaps it's appropriate to focus on weak ways to heckle:

Shouting "shame, shame" or "that's wrong." You'll have your chance to plead your case when you speak. This type of heckling is a rude interruption, as tempting as it might seem.

Demanding "proof" or "source." It's up to the member to present the evidence how he or she sees fit. The judges will decide whether the opposing team has supported its arguments well. Heckling in this way makes you seem petty.

Asking questions. If your Point of Information is rejected, it doesn't give you a license to get it through the 'back door' by heckling. A heckle isn't meant to start a back and forth dialogue.

Making arguments. Refutation should go in your speech, not your opponent's speech. Trying to argue over the voice of your rival is ineffective at best, and disrespectful at worst.

Heckling repeatedly. Undoubtedly, the occasional good heckle can lighten up the debate. Doing so over and over again, though, interrupts the flow of debate excessively and may cause the judges to deduct points from your individual score.

HOW TO HANDLE HECKLING

There is one, simple rule for responding to heckling: don't respond to heckling. Never start a 'side debate' with your opponent during your valuable speaking time. Responding to heckling serves to legitimize or give undue attention to your rival. Simply ignore it, and move

on as you normally would have. Even looking at your opponent while he or she is heckling diverts attention away from you.

RULINGS ON THE RULES: POINTS OF ORDER

Parliamentary debate has countless rules that participants are supposed to follow. In real parliaments, there are thick books describing all of these rules in detail. You're not supposed to put your hands in your pockets (you could be hiding a weapon), nor are you allowed to have a pen in your hand (that could be viewed as a weapon). Debaters aren't supposed to cross onto the other team's side of the floor, and standing in a place that obstructs the Speaker's view of any of the parliamentarians is a big taboo. And the list goes on.

If you want to accuse your opponent of a rule violation, you would rise and say, "Mr. Speaker, I rise on a Point of Order" or, more simply, "Point of Order." At this juncture, the person who has the floor must sit down while the Speaker decides "Point well taken" if in agreement or "Point not well taken" if in disagreement.

Should you follow all of the time-honored rules of parliamentary procedure? Yes. But should you demand enforcement if another debater doesn't? Probably not. You may think that doing so makes you seem sophisticated and intelligent. But at the same, you'll be interrupting the flow of debate for frivolous reasons. Most judges won't be impressed. Only raise a Point of Order for the most serious of violations. This will probably never happen, but it's helpful to know about this feature of parliamentary debate in case it comes up.

Watch Out!

Don't raise frivolous Points of Order or Personal Privilege.

NO OFFENSE: POINTS OF PERSONAL PRIVILEGE

In addition to following parliamentary rules, debaters are expected to speak honestly and respectfully. One reason to raise a Point of Personal Privilege is if a member of the opposing team makes a personally offensive remark. Another cause is if your opponent seriously misquotes you. The process is similar to a Point of Order. You say, "Mr. Speaker, I rise on a Point of Personal Privilege" and the Speaker rules, "Point well taken" or "Point not well taken."

While it's useful to be aware of this feature, you should rarely, if ever, have to use it. Surely, if you're about to break into tears because your opponent made a vulgar remark, you could decide to raise an objection. A blatant misquotation that could seriously harm your case might be another exception. Hopefully, none of these instances will come up. In any case, it will probably be quite clear to the judges if someone is being rude or is misrepresenting your case. Let your opponent's behavior speak for itself.

By following the basic guidelines presented in this chapter, you'll be well on your way to navigating a parliamentary debate. This style can be lively and interesting, and how you use these techniques will play a significant role in how well you do.

Chapter 9: Keys to Success

✔ **Ask challenging, well-timed Points of Information**. A strong question on an argument made immediately beforehand is a great way to counter your opponent's case. You'll also force your opponent to go on the defensive.

✔ **Answer Points of Information directly and move on**. Don't let a question get you off track. Be concise in your response and transition back to your speech quickly. It's essential that you maintain control over your speech.

✔ **Keep heckles short, witty, and to the point**. Heckles aren't meant for you to make arguments or to ask questions. They're usually humorous, spur of the moment jibes. If you aren't sure you can do it well, remember that heckling isn't a requirement.

✔ **Follow the conventions of parliamentary debate**. In particular, make sure to address the Speaker and your opponents correctly. You should also follow specific rules, such as not holding a pen in your hand (it's poor form in any style). However, don't rise on a Point of Order for this type of petty rule violation.

