

An Introduction to Parliamentary Debate

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE, with its opportunity for wit and Parliamentary interruptions, is a lively debate format. It offers rewards to those who think on their feet and can remain confident and good-natured in the face of criticism. It also gives the debater with a flare for policy a chance to show off this talent. Because of the opportunity for a debater to be interrupted at any stage of his remarks, it is particularly important that he be well organized and that his remarks be visibly structured, so that the audience is able to follow his thread of thought despite interruptions during the course of the debate.

Features of Parliamentary Debate

Educational Parliamentary debate attempts to transform the detailed discussion that occurs in the House of Commons (sitting as the Committee of the Whole House) to a format that teaches principles of reasoning, research and argument. In this style of debate, “[O]pponents are not referred to as opponents. The other team is called the Government or the Opposition, as the case may be. The Prime Minister’s full title is ‘The Honourable the Prime Minister’ (the definite article is used twice). Ditto for the Leader of the Opposition.” (Gray-Grant, *Remarks on Parliamentary Debate*) The other members of the teams are the second Government member (or the Minister of Finance, Defence, etc.) and the first speaker for the Opposition. (The Leader of the Opposition is the *last* negative speaker.) Similar titles are used for additional debaters in three-a-side debates.

Parliamentary debate, in addition to taking place in a Parliamentary setting, also differs from other styles of debate in its convention that resolutions be *questions of policy*. The Government does not merely express an opinion (“Health care costs are unacceptably high”, “Capital Punishment is an effective deterrent to murder”, “The level of unemployment is unacceptably high”); it also proposes a change in policy (“The federal government limit the availability of medicare”, “Capital Punishment be reinstated”, “The government devote greater resources to the retraining of the unemployed”). Except in impromptu Parliamentary debates, where a Plan is optional, the Government is required to produce a detailed *Plan* outlining how the proposed changes in policy are to be implemented: Rule 2 of the Canadian Student Debating Federation’s (CSDF’s) General Rules of Debating.

The Government in a policy debate, then, must show that:

1. The value statement [goal] is desirable and is not being satisfactorily achieved; and
2. The Government plan will substantially achieve that goal, and will do so better than the alternatives.

In the examples already discussed, a value statement is that “limiting medicare would be ‘good’ (for whatever reason: perhaps because health care costs are unacceptably high)”; the plan might be that medicare be limited to individuals whose family income is less than \$18,000.00 a year who suffer from a chronic illness, with an annual per-family deductible of \$200.00. Or, in the third example, “It is desirable to retrain the unemployed (for whatever reason: perhaps because the level of unemployment is unacceptably high)”, the Plan might be that the government establish fourteen centres, one in each of the following cities (list them), staffed by the following sorts of vocational counsellors (describe them) to be available to the chronically unemployed (define them) under the following conditions (define them).

It is the Government, not the Opposition, that proposes the change to the existing state of affairs (the “status quo”); this is accomplished by the rule that requires the resolution (the “Bill”) to be worded in a positive manner. The proposed change will be measured against the status quo or any counter-proposal offered by the Opposition (a “Counter-Plan”). To succeed in discharging its burden of proof, the Government must therefore show that there is something wrong with the status quo (a need for a change) and that the Government proposal (the “Plan”) will remedy that wrong. In the event that the Opposition proposes an alternative means of remedying the wrong, the Opposition assumes the burden of proof and the debate focuses on which Plan will better succeed. Because debaters have only a limited amount of time, the Government (or, in the event of a Counter-Plan, the Opposition) does not need to present a perfect case, answering every possible objection: it is enough to establish that, on balance, its case is more likely right than not (proof on a “balance of probabilities”). As well, while a Plan or Counter-Plan must be proved to be feasible, it need not be shown to be legal or constitutional: CSDF General Rule 10. On the other hand, inclusion of “should” in the resolution does not relieve the Government of the duty to present a Plan or prove that the course of action entailed in implementing the Plan is warranted.

The rules of Parliamentary debate differ only slightly from those of Academic and Cross-Examination style debating.

The main differences are:

1. Parliamentary interruptions (Points of Order, Privilege) and heckling may occur at any time during the debate.
2. Unlike Cross-examination debate, there is no opportunity to cross-examine members of the opposing team (though questions may be raised by heckling, rhetorically during speeches.
3. “[A]ll remarks are addressed to the Speaker. Debaters should begin their speeches with the introduction, ‘Mr. Speaker, ...’, not ‘Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members ...’ It is an effective rhetorical device to refer to the Speaker in one’s debate: ‘... and can you believe, Mr. Speaker, the illogical plan of the Government?’” (Gray-Grant, *Remarks on Parliamentary Debate*).

Procedures that prevail in a Parliamentary debate are much the same as those in a Cross-examination or Academic debate, with a chairman (the “Speaker”) moderating and introducing each debater at the beginning of his remarks. Speaking times are similar to those used in Academic and Cross-examination debate, with all debaters receiving an equal amount of speaking time (apart from heckling and any Parliamentary points that may be raised).

In Canada, two types of Parliamentary debate are in use. The usual and traditional one follows the **Oxford rebuttal format**, in which each debater except for the Prime Minister must incorporate his rebuttal into his single block of speaking time. The speaking order and sample speaking times are set out below:

Prime Minister (constructive speech)	5 minutes
1st Opposition debater (constructive speech/rebuttal)	8 minutes
2nd Government member (constructive speech/rebuttal)	8 minutes
2nd Opposition speaker (constructive speech/rebuttal)	8 minutes
3rd Government member (constructive speech/rebuttal)	8 minutes
Leader of the Opposition (constructive speech/rebuttal)	8 minutes
Prime Minister (official rebuttal)	3 minutes

It is also possible, although unusual, to employ the **Cambridge rebuttal format** in Parliamentary style. In this case, the speaking order and typical maximum speaking times for two-person teams would be:

Prime Minister (constructive speech)	5 minutes
1st Opposition debater (constructive speech)	5 minutes
2nd Government member (constructive speech)	5 minutes
Leader of the Opposition (constructive speech)	5 minutes
1st Opposition speaker (rebuttal)	3 minutes
2nd Government member (rebuttal)	3 minutes
Leader of the Opposition (rebuttal)	3 minutes
Prime Minister (rebuttal)	3 minutes

(The constructive speeches in two-person team debates are often 7 minutes.)

The Government Case

1. Necessity for a Plan

As previously noted, CSDF General Rule 2 requires the Government in a prepared Parliamentary debate to propose a Plan. Such a Plan is optional (but may be highly desirable, as it can provide extra content) in an impromptu debate.

Because Parliamentary debates focus on questions of policy, it is important that the Government team give careful attention to the preparation of a detailed Plan. In particular, the Government should consider addressing the following issues in its Plan:

- (a) **Cost** involved, and how it will be afforded;
- (b) The **mechanism** for implementing the plan; (For example, will there be a new government agency, or a change in existing legislation?)
- (c) **Timing** (Over what period will the Plan be phased in?);
- (d) **Consequences** and what will be done to alleviate disadvantages of the Plan; (For example, what will be done about those displaced as a result?)
- (e) **Structure**. (For example, the manpower required, enforcement measures, penalties for violation.)

Certain issues take particular prominence in different debates. In a debate on the resolution, “Be it resolved that the federal government take steps to reduce Acid Rain”, for example, all of the above issues are relevant: cost, mechanism, timing, consequences (What will be done for those thrown out of work by the closing of offending factories?), and structure (What is to be done to violators?) By contrast, a debate on reinstating Capital Punishment will probably focus on the value statement (whether it is desirable) and not on the Plan. In such a debate, it would still be necessary to detail briefly how the Criminal Code would be amended, for what crimes capital punishment would be imposed, whether conviction of a capital crime would require particular rules of evidence or jury selection, whether the execution would be performed by lethal injection, hanging, gassing or electrocution, when the change would come into force and what provision would be made for those awaiting trial at the time of the new law.

Government teams lose many debates by poorly thought-out Plans, and win many by anticipating potential Opposition arguments and Plan objections and tailoring the Plan to overcome these objections. Government debaters should therefore craft their Plan carefully and Opposition debaters should be vigilant to spot Plan weaknesses.

CSDF General Rule 10 requires that a Plan must be introduced in the first Government speech and be completely described *before* the last Government constructive speech; thus in a two-person team debate, the Prime Minister must both introduce and completely describe the Plan in his opening address while in a three-person team debate, the second Government member may complete the description of the Plan. (The rule makes similar requirements for Counter-Plans.)

2. Elements requiring Proof

Each issue that arises in the debate presents three parts to consider:

- (1) the value statement,
- (2) the need for change, and
- (3) the effect of the Plan.

In a debate that “Canada withdraw from all military alliances”, the value statement for a particular issue might be that “military alliances are too costly”, “military alliances are unnecessary”, “military alliances endanger world peace”, or “military alliances offer Canada inadequate protection”. (These may be linked: for example, the cost may be too great given the level of protection we receive.) These statements can actually be broken down further: when we say “military alliances offer inadequate protection”, we are really making two assertions: that some (particular) level of protection is necessary (or desirable) and that the

present level of protection does not reach that standard. Together, these two assertions may establish the need for change.

The Government must also show how the Plan meets this need - in this instance, by increasing the level of protection. Sometimes the value statement may be obvious but the need for change difficult to show; at others, the need for change will be obvious but the success of the Plan difficult to demonstrate. In the above example, one of the value statements is that “world peace is a good thing” - something with which most people would probably agree. It is not at all clear, however, that military alliances endanger (rather than safeguard) world peace. So the need for change is unclear. In order to win a particular issue, the Government must show that its value statement is correct, that there is therefore a need for change, and that the Plan answers the need. For the Opposition to win an issue, the Government need only fail in one of these tasks (unless the Opposition introduces a Counter-Plan, in which case it assumes the full burden of proof from the Government).

The Opposition Case

1. Generally

A Parliamentary debate offers distinct targets for the Opposition to attack: the value statement and the Plan. The Opposition, however, cannot forecast exactly what the Government Plan will be. It is therefore essential that the Opposition research thoroughly. Only then can it hope to anticipate all potential Government Plans and know the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Once that is done, the Opposition must evaluate the six arguments available in response to each value statement and decide which it will use in the debate:

1. The Opposition may disagree with the value statement. (This will rarely happen.) In the earlier example, that Canada withdraw from military alliances, one reason suggested was that the alliances offer inadequate protection. This could be analyzed as “X level of protection is desirable” (value statement); “Military alliances now offer only Y level of protection to Canada” (taken together, the need for change); “Therefore Canada should withdraw from alliances and place her military expenditures in Z over a three year period” (Plan). The Opposition in this case might well disagree that X level of protection is desirable.

2. “Prove it.” The Opposition argues that whether or not the value statement is true, there is a need for change, or the Plan is sound (and it might stop short of denying

this), the evidence is insufficient to justify the conclusion. The case is unproved. (Without the support of one of the other arguments, this is not a very powerful attack. As with any rebuttal, however, the Opposition will probably discover that parts of the Government case have not been logically proved. A specific attack on these parts may torpedo an otherwise successful Government case.)

3. If the Opposition agrees with the value statement (as they probably will), only four arguments remain:

A. Deny the need for change. The Opposition maintains that the Government has not shown a need for change: the status quo adequately achieves the value statement identified, and therefore no problem exists. (In practise, this tends to blur with Attack 1, above.) Even a weak Government team will normally have identified some need for change in coming to its Plan - so it will be rare that the Government will be so inept that you are able to make this attack. Occasionally, however, the Government will assume agreement on the need for change which does not exist. For example, in a debate on increasing military expenditures, the Government might rely on Canada's obsolete Armed Forces as sufficient justification of the value statement; the Opposition, however, might maintain that the current level of expenditure is adequate because it denies that increased defence spending would increase national security, or because the country simply cannot afford any further expenditure *on anything* at this time.

B. Admit the need for change (the status quo needs to be improved) *but suggest*:

i. Repairs - Minor changes (perhaps more funding, manpower or more effective monitoring for violations) will correct the problem and so no major change is needed (which is otherwise too costly, radical or unwieldy). The significance of the Government advantage is challenged and the inherency of the need for change disputed. (For example, parole violations may not justify the reinstatement of Capital Punishment; instead they may call for tighter parole procedures.)

ii. Counter-Plan - There is a need for change, but the Opposition has a plan that will meet the need better than the Government's Plan. A Counter-Plan has two essential requirements: the Counter-Plan must be superior to the Plan in some respect (for example, cost, efficiency, or fewer disadvantages) and it must differ significantly from the Plan. (See Part 2. C., below.)

iii. Plan Objections (short of a Counter-Plan)

a. No solution. The Opposition admits there is a need for change but denies that the Government's Plan solves

the problem.

b. Disadvantages. The Opposition admits there is a need for change (and sometimes, although not necessarily, that the Government Plan achieves its purpose) but argues that the disadvantages make the change undesirable on balance.

One of these six attacks deserves special discussion.

2. The Counter-Plan

A. Formal Requirements

If the negative desires to introduce a Counter-Plan, it must do so during the address of its first speaker; this may be done informally (that is, it requires no formal motion of amendment or seconder). The negative must prove that such a Counter-Plan is an alternative solution to the problem with which the resolution is concerned, that it is significantly different from the affirmative proposal, and that it is demonstrably more desirable than the affirmative Plan. A Plan or Counter-Plan must at least be outlined during the first speech of a team and be completely described before its last constructive speech. A Plan or Counter-Plan must be proved to be feasible but not necessarily legal or constitutional.

Rule 10, CSDF General Rules of Debating

It follows from Rule 10 that in two-person team debating, the Counter-Plan must be completely described by the first Opposition speaker. The essence of the Counter-Plan case is to admit the need for change and instead take issue with the Plan. The debate, in effect, then focuses on the relative ability of the Plan and Counter-Plan to meet the admitted need for change (though the affirmative team is at liberty to dispute the need for a change once a Counter-Plan has been introduced, as it no longer bears the burden of proof).

B. When to Use a Counter-Plan

The Counter-Plan is an attractive alternative strategy for Opposition teams to consider. It offers the following advantages:

1. It heightens the clash in the debate;

2. It allows the Opposition to take the offensive. It may force the second Government debater to throw away his prepared speech and deal instead with the Opposition Counter-Plan. This may catch the Government by surprise and thereby give an advantage to the Opposition;

3. It rewards teams with policy talents; and

4. It is content oriented and therefore may give an individual better point totals than mere denials of the Government case.

Opposition debaters are often uncomfortable with a Counter-Plan, however. In the first place, they are reluctant to assume the burden of proof in the debate, especially since the affirmative team will still have the last word. Opposition debaters may think they have an easier job of it if the Government has the burden of proof and all they need do is snipe at Government faults. It is true that in assuming the burden of proof the Opposition debaters increase the likelihood of losing the debate - they must now establish on balance that the Counter-Plan is better than the Plan. But they may improve their individual point scores in the process (by having more concrete content in their remarks). In most provincial tournaments (and at National Seminars) the competition is decided on individual scores, not win-loss results. So in some events, any apparent disadvantage caused by assuming the burden of proof is illusory and may be more than compensated for by the added content introduced, or the other advantages noted above.

A Counter-Plan is sometimes inappropriate: in debating a resolution which apparently focuses on the need for change (for example, that Capital Punishment be reinstated) it may be unwise to admit the need for change and instead argue about Plan details. Similarly, whether a Counter-Plan should be used depends on the cleverness of the Plan presented: if a very good Plan is presented, a Counter-Plan may be the only effective answer to the Government case. Ironically, if a very good Government Plan is presented, you may be unable to devise a better Counter-Plan and instead be forced to attack the need for change. So even though you intend to use a Counter-Plan, remain flexible until you have heard the Government Plan. If you decide not to use a Counter-Plan, you can still rely on the research you have done to show that the existing Plan details are weak or unsound (in those respects that they differ from the Counter-Plan you would have presented).

C. How Different must the Counter-Plan be?

Under CSDF General Rule 10, the Opposition must prove that a Counter-Plan is "significantly different from the affirmative proposal". This ingredient of the burden of proof assumed by the Opposition should not be overlooked.

Some Opposition debaters are concerned that the Counter-Plan they use will end up admitting too much of the Government case. In fact, such a strategy - admitting all but one key part of the Government case or Plan - is very effective. Typically the Government argument will be divided among all parts of the case. When the Opposition admits most of these points, it renders much of the Government arguments useless. The Opposition is able to fo-

cus its speeches entirely on one or two points - which the Government, needing to cover everything, could defend only briefly.

If a resolution requires the Government to propose a particular Plan, the Counter-Plan must deny the substance of the resolution. So, for example, in a debate on the resolution, "University tuition fees be abolished", the Opposition could present a Counter-Plan proposing that "University housing and accommodation costs be subsidized". This is an alternative solution to the problem (the high cost of attending university) and is arguably superior: housing is a larger expense than tuition, and less directly related to a student's education. By making a student pay his own tuition fees, he feels a stake in his education. The same is not true of mere living expenses. Accordingly, housing costs should be subsidized for university students, not tuition fees. This Counter-Plan denies the resolution. It would *not* be sufficient for the Counter-Plan to admit that tuition fees should be abolished but argue that housing costs should *also* be subsidized because this would not exclude the operation of the resolution.

When a resolution does not require a specific Government Plan, but merely outlines the need for change, it is submitted that a different result obtains. For example, the resolution "The federal government take steps to balance the federal budget" does not explicitly dictate the Plan (which could be to raise taxes or revenues from other sources, or to lower expenditures). Therefore, it would be proper for an Opposition team in such a debate to counter a Government Plan that expenditures be decreased with a Counter-Plan that expenditures remain constant but taxes be increased or revenues be raised from other sources. Such a Counter-Plan is an alternative solution to the problem with which the resolution is concerned and is distinctly different from the Government *Plan*; even though it does not deny the *resolution*. In my opinion, this should be sufficient to satisfy the spirit as well as the exact wording of CSDF General Rule 10, assuming that the Opposition proves the Counter-Plan to be "significantly different from" and "demonstrably more desirable than" the Government Plan.

D. How to Introduce a Counter-Plan

If you are going to introduce a Counter-Plan, do so firmly and clearly. The audience must not be left to wonder whether you are merely criticizing Plan details or whether this is a genuine Counter-Plan. Introduce the matter with words such as, "The Opposition admits (whatever the need for change is) but denies that the Plan is the best way to (meet that need). The Opposition proposes the following Counter-Plan, which we submit is superior to the Plan in respect of (cost, efficiency or whatever)." Then state the Counter-Plan details and present the Opposition arguments.