

# DEBATING ABOUT DEBATING

by  
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The April 2004 *Rostrum* presented a veritable delight of articles for coaches and debaters who like to think about debate. I started with the Ocean Policy article from Center for SeaChange, reviewed Bauschard and Smith's latest UN article and realized I had only just begun delving into the world of contemporary debate.

Bob Bilyeu's Challenge to Debate Coaches opened so many issues, thought by me to be swept under the deep shag of an old carpet, that I positively quivered when I turned to Kate Shuster's detailed at-

presumption exist in favor or opposed to any of the authors? Is this all theoretical mumbo-jumbo with no real-world consequences? I am absolutely certain debate will evolve to something other than what we practice now. Will one of these authors guide us to that goal? My ever hopeful reply is, yes. Each author offers a solid solution.

I was completely taken in by the first half of Shuster's article. The mere use of the word Punditocracy caught my attention. Her critique of the deficits of Public Forum as a form of debate is point on. Especially telling was her critique about the artificiality of argument constraints. All arguments are a form of critique. Plans and counter-plans are a part of every argumentative situation whether explicit or merely implied. Shuster demonstrates these points conclusively in the form of her argument by critiquing and offering a solution. Shuster identifies how the lack of clear standards and traditions for Public Forum has resulted in coaches and students playing safe; presenting pat speeches instead of organized rejoinder. This lack of tradition for Public Forum opens the need for advocacy of adopting the parliamentary tradition as our own.

Shuster stands against Public Forum as a position of policy. Her argument is that Public Forum is bad policy, and she offers a counter-plan, an alternative policy – Parliamentary Debate. Parli meets the requirement of all good debate by fostering a broad choice of issue selection to both teams. She puts forth each of her attacking positions with a single goal in mind, finding the best activity to prompt critical thinking skills.

Copeland's response to Shuster on the prevalence of critique and use of plans in all debates forms, while telling, almost undoes his larger argument. Because Copeland had the full transcript of Shuster's argument prior to writing his own response, he is disingenuous when he contends that the coin toss is irrelevant to constructing the responsive constructive argument. Copeland used Shuster's proffered article to improve his ability to respond point-by-point. Someone must begin the debate; others ought to respond. When does the response start in Public Forum? While my own advice [Rostrum Jan 2003] was that the pro and con sides must by the very nature of the coin toss pre-write both of the first speeches, Bill Bennett's thoughtful response [Rostrum Mar 2003] suggested that each side must be ready to respond in their first speech to any opening argument. In practice student debaters have ignored both sugges-

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tack upon Public Forum Debate and Jim Copeland's scathing refutation in defense of same. I must say, I thoroughly enjoyed the read. However, having a bit of background in the history of all of these controversies; and seeing that Shuster and Copeland were actually debating many of the lingering issue raised by Bilyeu about policy debate; I decided to crystallize the issues in the following article to provide some focus for me, and perhaps for others who enjoy thinking about debate.

This article explores the rhetorical arguments of the Shuster/Copeland essays, with an occasional foray into the interaction of Bilyeu's analysis of debate ills and cures. The initial observation must be that all three authors composed solid arguments where the form of the analysis matches the primary thesis of the article. This is an important issue – all authors are masters of the form of debate. Their articles and this response, then, take the matter of serious debate, well, seriously. I must applaud advocates who examine what form of debate best serves the interests and needs of the debate community? And, I will step on toes.

It must be remembered that all authors referenced have the greatest goal in mind, what should be the state of debate? Each has a most thoughtful approach. All offer realistic alternatives. Is there a Status Quo? Does

tions. The crossfire period issues attacks, but these are not developed until very late in the debate into the ‘burden of rejoinder.’ Lack of clear speaker duties and agreed upon stock issues means Public Forum does not yield to a clash of ideas.

Copeland shows his lack of contact with the actual tabulation of debate in his contention that “This should cause no confusion for the judges.” At each of nine tournaments where I tabulated debate at least one ballot raised serious concerns about the intent of the judge with regard to the decision as written. At three tournaments, teams who had the ballot record to advance into elimination rounds did not advance based upon the judge verbally clarifying which pair ought to have been the winning team. Even at our national qualifying tournament, an experienced judge wrote a ballot giving the win to the team he clearly saw as the losing team.

Whether it is the coin toss option or a poorly designed ballot, the indeterminacy of pro or con does confuse judges. The coaches in my state have worked diligently to create a ballot which is proof against the assumptions of experience judges and the errors of the inexperienced. But does this confusion warrant abandoning an event which otherwise has useful promise? Copeland’s ultimate contention seems to be, confusion is human not systemic. Even though he does not understand the practical difficulties of the coin toss, perhaps this practically is a moot point. Shuster argues for a parli format where topics, and thus the affirmative and negative positions, are not known until fifteen minutes before the round. What real difference does fifteen minutes make? In reality, both debate formats remove strategic planning from debate.

However, Copeland loses his distinction between contest events, apparently the fun fluffy stuff, and real debate when he argues that the coin toss is the moment of high drama in the round. For a moment I was puzzled by this comment. Then I realized, he is advocating an entertainment format; debate as high drama. Do debaters need lessons in the dramatic arts? We adopted Public Forum to sharpen our public entertaining skills. It is an interesting side note that an organization which in its district tournament manual refuses to permit a coin toss for side determination in the pairing of the debate events insists upon a coin toss every round of Public Forum, even when the two teams have previously met.

Shuster shifts grounds as she initiates advocacy of Parliamentary debate. Why has her discussion turned to the English language arts viewing standard? She shifts from advocating the teaching of critical thinking, her lens in dismantling Public Forum debate, to advocating a form of academic debate attractive to students; and fair to all. Copeland identifies this weakness in Shuster’s advocacy.

Copeland devastates Parliamentary debate. Debate where research and pre-tournament preparation are non-existent is not debate. The contrary value, Copeland asserts, is that we have an exportable forum of ‘public debate.’ Copeland issues his own plan side in advocating a media savvy debate style. It appears that Copeland mistakes television for the real world; while we may be training future talking heads, television commentators are rarely hired for their brains. Can media debate ever be ‘real’ debate? Copeland shifts his own ground on this topic, relying upon our sympathy with the hard work of a committee to mask the absence of evidence or analysis in his argument. Actually, neither Shuster nor I have a response to having a debate event on television. While a media focus undermines his own argument about counterplans, critiques and the nature of ‘real’ debate – why not permit all arguments, it challenges Shuster’s second major premise; aban-

don Public Forum for Parliamentary debate. Shuster advocates the teaching of Viewing as a debate goal. Does not a debate event grounded in television crossfire place Shuster at her weakest when she advocates a different form of debate without providing an dependent warrant for why Parli better meets the media goal of Public Forum. She is excellent in attacking Public Forum, but what is her warrant for her proposed alternative?

Copeland is in the position to respond, and respond he does. All debate is focused upon real issues, not the silly stuff of Parli debate. What purpose does Parli debate fulfill? Shuster does not preemptively answer this question to Copeland’s or my satisfaction. Copeland’s four point critique of Parli: length; arcane topics; glibness; and opinion versus fact must ultimately be persuasive to coaches who do view debate as the key tool to future power, Bilyeu’s position. Is there a post-graduation goal to this activity? Copeland and Shuster are focused upon the here and now of the respective formats for which they advocate: promote the activity, level the playing field. While Copeland contends that Parli does not meet the needs of a public event, which it does not – it is too silly – he avoids answering her key challenge: that Public Forum debate offers no useful skills.

Shuster’s most telling critique of Public Forum is her analysis of what happens to women and non-English speakers. I must agree with her analysis that unmoderated cross-fire disadvantages certain groups. Copeland misses her key point, by dismissing it, ignoring the concern over the open forum. Some groups are silenced in open exchanges. No study contradicts this critical issue. Those trained to not interrupt in public exchange are at a disadvantage in Public Forum. In policy debate and in LD debate, this is not at issue. Turn taking is regulated by the format. Even in Parli Debate, heckling is limited by form. Only in Public Forum Debate does the form of the debate silence competitors. Copeland’s glib assertion that Shuster is ‘out of date, if not sexist’ simply does not accord with the reality of his extemporaneous example. Extemporaneous speakers are not required to interrupt, to violate turn taking. It may be that Copeland’s dismissal of this issue comes from his years as the paterfamilias of NFL.

So where am I? Where has this wandering analysis led? As Copeland and Shuster so clearly demonstrate, Parli debate is not debate and Public Forum debate is an exercise in glib argumentation. What then? Don’t forget Bilyeu. Perhaps Bilyeu lies outside the mainstream of current debate practice, but what does he advocate? At heart he advocates what both Shuster and Copeland advocate, but with more optimism. Shuster offers an option which Copeland clearly devastates. Parli debate is fun, but is no replacement for analytical debate. Public Forum is an alternative, but is it debate? Shuster leaves us in no doubt: Public Forum debate is not debate. Bilyeu, without writing to either author, offers a third point of view. Why not restore policy debate as the premiere debate event? Does current practice hold presumption?

While I do not absolutely agree with Bilyeu; I so enjoy rapid debate delivery where a wide diversity of issues of importance are considered: he is mainly correct. I don’t know if this happens in your state, but in mine when coaches gather in business meetings to fix some problem of the state tournament or of competitive practice we adopt so many fixes that what was once a sensible and manageable method of conducting business now has the completion of a Rube Goldberg structure. No one can follow the rules, because they have become unworkable. It appears to me that the synthesis of Shuster and Copeland is that we can have the Rube

Goldberg of Parli or of Public Forum. We just need to decide which format is least shaky.

We have a clear warrant to alter the Status Quo of high school debate. The April *Rostrum* provided three plans. While Bilyeu was the only author attacking the state of policy debate, we all know that Parli and Public Forum are counter-plan efforts to return debate to its pristine state. Public Forum debate must, ultimately, be grouped with Parli debate. Each is an attempt at reform without a necessary purpose in mind. What we all want is what Bilyeu wants, good policy, CX or mainstream debate. And by all, I mean all. But by all, I also do not mean all. Many of the most powerful debate programs in our various states are vested in reducing the number of teams competing in policy debate to only a few. The coaches of these programs are not necessarily aware of how vested they are in seeing debate wither to a couple score of national level players. They get frustrated completing at tournaments where local judges expect students to communicate, in addition to winning on the flow. They manifest this attitude by withdrawing from local tournaments because they disdain the poor quality of teams who only travel regionally. They smile when their teams beat an ok regional team which is then verbally excoriated by a college debate judge with the only comment on the ballot, oral.

Bilyeu is right. We can make a change. It takes courage for a coach from a team without a reputation to vote against the big name team. It takes a willingness to see the 'best' teams lose and the ok teams win. Can you sacrifice the allure of the national circuit? Can you stand the odium of being a good judge for all teams? Can you eliminate your state judge test or refuse to require that school bring a qualified judge in order to compete? No, you don't need to bring judges: We have plenty of parents and administrators eager to judge. Could you return to the practice of requiring the local host to furnish all the judges? Would this hurt you excellent students? Many regions have a powerhouse team which threatens to abandon local tournament for better competition if the judges are not 'qualified.' Will this help us or them be better debaters?

Can Parli or Public Forum meet the need of an alternative to an inbred professional debate community? Both Copeland and Shuster confirm that the answer is No. Lincoln Douglas Debate did not need to be suckled by offering first one free district entry, and now two bonus entries. This enticement itself provides a negative warrant. Are we giving our students the tools of power as team debate did in Bilyeu's memory? The answer is NO. We are failing in this task. Can debate recover from the assault of mindless, expensive, irrelevant and inbred debate has presented to team debate? Probably not. The dominance of this style of debate has confronted real debate and its advocates have won. Parli and Public Forum are feeble responses to the loss of actual debate..

Bilyeu does offer a solution. But, how many of us believe his message? Are you willing to advance inherency as an important issue? Are you willing to sacrifice a national circuit team's irrelevant off-case to a novice team who actually debates the topic? Should our 'best' teams debate out of state in order that the rest of the debate community can enjoy a real debate experience?

In my state we have maintained what I consider a nice balance of what might be versus what it ought to be. We continue to use the judges desired by the Public Forum advocates in Policy Debate. We use community judges who listen to issues. We, also, use university students who compete on the national level who reward speed and arcane off-case arguments. The solution Bilyeu seeks is pretty simple. Stop paying judges. Stop requiring teams to provide judges. Let the local folks decide the winner. While I will never be able to stop programs addicted to the glamour of national travel from undermining local efforts to sustain quality debate, we can, perhaps, have a tier of debate where local hosts offer regional teams meaningful debate.

Instead of Parli or Public Forum, why not offer two types of policy debate, regional and national? Regional debate would agree to use a balanced judge pool and limit arguments to policy advocacy. National debate would permit unlimited off-case and require judges to be certified in National debate.

NFL offers two forms of extemp, why not two forms of debate. This is the solution all sides have been searching for. Defining the difference would take time and thought. The benefit would be simple. The search for an alternative to current practice in policy debate would be two forms of this premier event. If coaches and teams are self-respecting enough to recognize good regional debate focused upon the merits of an affirmative case as a better option than the groundless Public Forum or the thoughtless Parli, coaches who still appreciate the values of arguing an opponent's case would have an alternative to the national circuit devolution of policy debate into spurious issues.

We have a perfectly good debate event called by the NFL Debate. There is no need to settle the disagreement about which is worse, Parli and Public Forum? Both are silly debate events. The rules for the district tournament admit its failure by offering this year, two free teams to last years one free team. Will we see three free teams next year? Let us set the grounds by establishing two forms of the main event, Debate. Then we can leave behind the search for the best of awful options, and shift our focus back to teaching debate as the stepping stone to the world beyond.

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## **EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN FORENSICS-- OBSERVATIONS OF A PROUD AND GRATEFUL MOM**

- Good friends can be found outside your own circle.
- You don't always get what you want, and that's okay.
- Excellence deserves respect and enthusiastic acclaim, so stand up and make a lot of noise for every winner.
- Your team loves you no matter what.
- For one person to win, a lot of others have to lose.
- Comfort them, and don't be ashamed to be one of them.
- If something needs doing, do it.
- Be eager to be taught how to do better, and be humble when deemed worthy to teach.
- Opponents don't have to be enemies.
- Even when you're waiting, you can have fun.
- The more friends you make, the more victories you share.
- Practice makes superior.
- When you have more than you can carry, call in a friend.
- Recognize the Honor of being called on for help.
- When the band plays, DANCE!
- At the end of the day, there's no place like home.

Written by **Melanie Vliet**