

2004 CUSID BP Debating Championships

Mini BP Style Guide: Issues for Canadian Debaters

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This is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to debating in British Parliamentary style for Canadians. It is simply the aggregation of comments I received from several CUSID debaters (thanks, guys!) who have had success at Worlds. I have simply put the information together, with a few observations of my own along the way. Hopefully, this is helpful in preparing for Ottawa Worlds Prep, BP Nats, and Worlds. If you are looking for an introductory guide to debating in BP, it is probably best to check out Colm Flynn's website:

www.debating.net/flynn.

1. Making Good Arguments

Debating always starts and ends with making good, compelling arguments. That, I think, is quite self-explanatory. However, often times what constitutes a good argument in Canada may not necessarily be received quite as well in BP debating. To be fair, at the end of the day all that matters in any debate round is what the judge thinks of your arguments. Nonetheless, there are some general observations that can be made about the difference between CP and BP with respect to argumentation.

The most consistent comment that I received from successful Worlds debaters was that good arguments in BP require substantial amounts of development and analysis. What often happens in CP is debaters make shallow, "one-liner" type arguments (sometimes referred to as the "shotgun" approach) that remain part of the round and the adjudication. In BP, this is not the case. Judges are looking for sophisticated, "deeper" arguments. In fact, many judges will simply ignore arguments they felt were irrelevant or poorly made. It is recommended debaters choose 2 or 3 broader arguments that require a longer time to develop and that are generally more "meaty." Use examples and evidence to support your arguments. Take the time to place the argument in the context of the round and the issue, demonstrating how it is relevant. Essentially, show off how smart you are, not how fast you can speak.

2. Picking the Right Argument

Many debaters will speak of the importance of strategy in BP debating, ie. shutting teams or speakers out, "taking the second" by hiding from strong teams, etc. This, I think, is not exactly accurate. The key to the "strategic" dimension of BP is finding out where the most important arguments or issues are and then moving your team as close to that area as possible. It is true that strategy plays a role, but only in so far as it allows your team to stake out the important analytical ground in the debate. Most successful BP debaters frown on shutting teams out or avoiding strong teams just for the sake of doing so. Rather, it is better to engage the best teams in the round on the best and most interesting arguments—if that results in a team being excluded, then so be it. In addition to making "good" arguments (see above), take the time to think about which arguments you want to make and choose the most compelling. Basically, make yourself as relevant as possible.

3. Knowledge

Much has been said of “knowing stuff” in order to be successful. Obviously, having a lot of knowledge will be helpful, as it would be in any debating round. That being said, many debaters have done very well without doing any in advance preparation, and many debaters have not done well in spite of doing lots of preparation. Many debaters think having knowledge is essential, while some think it is simply a bonus. I tend to think that a good debater will remain a good debater at Worlds regardless of her knowledge level, but preparing simply reduces the chance of running into something you would otherwise not be prepared for. In the end, know your own capacity. It is fair to say at least 50% of the motions at Worlds will have to do with international political issues. Many teams from other countries will have literally bags of information they cart around. If you want to ensure you know about the issues, it may be worthwhile to spend some time reading magazines or newspapers, or watching news broadcasts. Or even preparing a “Worlds binder.”

If you are going to prepare, make sure to do it right. If you want to make a binder or something equivalent, know how to use it. Don't put stuff in there unless you or your partner has read it and understand it. You have got to understand the material that you are preparing, and understand it in the context of a debating round. Perhaps brainstorm a list of potential issues that might come up *and that are debatable*, and then organize your research around that list. Most importantly, do not become reliant on your research. Remember, debating is about your analytical and critical thinking skills, not what you can read off a piece of paper (it may just be that the piece of paper helps your critical thinking and analysis).

4. Taking a Position

An essential part of BP debating is being clear on what your “team” position or stance is in the debate. No matter what position you are in, you will only be better served for staking out a clear, discernible position. The judges should be able to say at the end of the round, “that team stood for [blank]”. That position should be able to be stated in 1 or 2 sentences, and it should be obvious. Now, that does not mean in Opposition you must run a counter-case or new policy. Rather, just be clear on what principle you are standing for—it could be the status quo, a new proposal, or simply that the Government plan is flawed. But make sure to take the position and not waver.

Part of taking clear position, or standing on a principle, or planting a flag, or whatever, is being consistent. In CP, especially in Opposition, debaters often “cut their partners loose” and are not penalized. The LO can stand up and make 7 new arguments, perhaps mention a word the MO said, and still win. In BP, it is essential to back up your teammate by supporting the broad stance he or she took in the first speech. I know this sounds pretty straightforward, but many good debaters still make this mistake.

Finally, all debaters commented on the need for themes. When staking out a position, ensure that position advances a general principle, concept, idea, or—yes, that's correct—theme. Also, when making arguments in support of that position, ensure they all relate to that general principle or theme. Sometimes in CP, teams will just throw a whole bunch of arguments on the table and see what happens. Unless you can create a broader unifying theme tying everything together, be wary of such an approach in BP.

5. Case-building in First Proposition

One thing everybody mentioned was case-building as First Proposition. First off, remember that dealing with straight motions is difficult for everybody. You don't have three

days to prepare a case—it's going to be somewhat harder to manage than a squirrely case in CP. The key is to know what strategy to implement when presented with straight motion. Two main strategies were identified: 1) running a wide open, straight up, super-contentious case, and 2) narrowing or limiting the debate. Now, I think we all know that doing the former is more fun and more true to the spirit of debating. However, you must be careful. A lot of people will say, "going balls-up, that's the way to go." That's fine, but you have to ask yourself, am I exposing myself too much to opposition benches? If you feel confident that you know where the debate is going to go, and you can respond in an appropriate way, do it. At the same time, do not be afraid to limit the debate if you feel you are capable of doing so. Many teams at Worlds are very successful when employing this model.

One debater gave me a good example of such narrowing. The motion is THW force news reporters to reveal their sources. First proposition limits the debate by arguing that only those sources that are able to identify and help convict international war criminals should be revealed by the media, with the stipulation that sources will have ready access to protection programs.

The major problem with this approach is that Canadian teams have very little practice doing this type of case-building. I have no hesitation in saying that this is very large trouble spot for Canadians at Worlds, and we need more practice. If you are going to Worlds, I sincerely recommend looking at motions from past Worlds and sketch out how you would argue the motions from 1st Prop.

6. Back-half Debating

For debaters new to BP, the second-half positions can often be quite difficult. While the only way to become more comfortable in the back-half is practice, here are two important pieces of advice that should provide some assistance:

(a) Extensions

When you are either 2nd Prop or 2nd Opp, you are expected to have an "extension." All that means is that you have to bring something new to the debate. It could be a new argument, a new perspective on the round, a deepening of arguments presented in the front half—it could be any number of things. I think the general rule is: contribute something new and interesting to the round that is not inconsistent with what your "partner team" has said. That may be too broad of a formulation, but it is the best I can do without listing off a hundred different examples. Remember two things: (1) be very clear on what your extension is—judges do not want to have "find" your extension amongst a pile of rubble, and if they have to do that it will undoubtedly count against you; and (2) the judges know you have had an extra half an hour to think about the issue—hit the yet-untouched obvious arguments, if there are any, and think of something good to say as well. It is kind of unfair, but judges expect a little more from you because you have had so much time to think.

(b) Summary or Whip Speeches

The last speaker on both sides are the Whips, and are expected to give a "summary" speech. The Government Whip is allowed to introduce some new positive matter, while the Opposition Whip cannot. Now, a summary speech does not mean literally summarizing the whole debate. Your goal is still to try and win the debate. In that sense, I think of it more as like a big-long Prime Minister's rebuttal. Your job or "role" is to identify what the major issues and arguments were in the debate, and to boil the discussion down to those issues and arguments. While doing that, you may realize

that one team contributed nothing to the round. In CP, if say the MO said nothing, you might just ignore the speech altogether and pretend it didn't happen. In BP, some judges will let you do that while others might not, claiming you have not adequately summarized the debate. My suggestion is to at least mention the team, say they have contributed nothing, and then move on. At least you are covering your bases.

There are two main approaches to a summary: (1) a team-by-team approach, finishing with your team's matter and why you win, or (2) a thematic approach, organizing your speech into major themes or questions that have been discussed in the debate. I personally think the thematic approach is much more effective, and much easier to organize. However, do whatever is comfortable for you, but remember your goal is to WIN (or not get a 4th).

7. Miscellaneous

There are also some miscellaneous issues that a number of people flagged.

Practice

As I alluded to before, practice is paramount in BP debating. Don't get me wrong—some people have just walked into Worlds or a BP tournament with very little prior experience and done very well. Chances are you will not do that. Therefore you need to practice. There is only so much you can read about debating, especially BP. In order to get better, you need to get inside a round and see how the mechanics work. There is not much more I can say about that.

Organization, Roadmapping, and "the flow"

One thing to keep in mind in BP debating—and any debating, for that matter—is that organization is **always** good. Some experienced BP debaters will talk about how BP debating lends itself to more free-flowing, less organized speeches. This is true—when compared to CP. In CP, debating has become somewhat formulaic. A person could stand up, say "I will construct, rebut, and reconstruct" and get a 38. In BP, especially at Worlds, there is no real formula. You don't have to do your speech a certain way. Obviously, you need meet basic requirements, which includes things like having an identifiable extension and doing a summary in the whip speech. However, you don't need to apply a formula to your speeches. Further, there is no such thing as "the flow" in BP. Judges are not looking to see whether you have hit all the points on their flowsheet. Rather, they are looking for who made the most compelling arguments with the most persuasive style. That being said, having a roadmap is very beneficial. In a round with 4 teams, it is essential for you to clearly demonstrate for your judges where you are planning to go. You don't have to spend 2 minutes outlining your speech, but you can let the judges know what the broad theme is and what your arguments are going to be.

"Staying in the round"

The use of POIs is not an added bonus in BP—it is a necessity. The "take-two, give-two" rule we use in Canada is generally the same in BP, but POIs are much more important in BP. When you are in the front-half, you want to make sure your matter stays relevant. When you are in the back-half, you want to draw attention to your team and your matter. The only way to stay active throughout the entirety of the debate is with POIs. It's pretty simple. Get up lots and ask good questions that relate to your team's "case" or position. Even if you are not getting your questions taken, get up anyway and look active. One of the worst things a judge can see is someone just sitting there and looking uninterested.

If you have any further questions about BP debating, the best time to ask will be at the debaters' briefing at either Ottawa or Hart House, or even Worlds. However, please feel free to contact me as well at rahoor.agarwal@utoronto.ca. If I cannot answer your question, I will find someone who can, as well ensure that it is addressed in the briefing at Hart House if necessary.