Chapter Three
British Parliamentary Debate as a Model of Educational and Social Debate

Educational debate usually is modeled on some legislative system such as a congress or a parliament. In some cases, it is based on a legal model. The format of educational debate that this book will take as a model is modeled after debate in the British Parliament and is called, not surprisingly, *British Parliamentary Debate* (BP debate). This format is the most popular form of educational debate in the world. Beyond its popularity, it has been chosen for as the format for this book for a variety of reasons. First, BP debate is a lively and energetic format involving four teams of two people not only giving persuasive speeches, but also interacting with each other through questions and comments throughout the debate.¹ Second, BP debate is a format in which students can practice a variety of advocacy skills ranging from argument construction to refutation to organization to delivery. Third, because each BP debate involves four, two-person teams, eight people have the opportunity to actively participate in each debate. Eight participants stand in contrast to the two to four people that participate in other forms of debate. So for educational and practical reasons, BP debate provides an excellent format for educational debating and for this reason, is the focus of this book.

The Parliament of the United Kingdom consists of members of various political parties. Currently the major parties in the Parliament are the Conservative and Unionist Party, the Liberal Democrats, and the Labour Party. Sometimes one party or the other will hold a majority of seats and therefore will be able to better control the outcome of debates and of policy in general. In other situations, no party may hold a majority and a coalition may arise wherein two or more parties agree to cooperate in order to achieve a majority of the seats in the Parliament. As of this writing, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative parties have formed a coalition to create a majority in the British Parliament. This is the first coalition since the era of Winston Churchill eighty years ago. The coalition has not been particularly cooperative, but they have formed a majority to control the government.²

In the British Parliament, the party or parties that command a majority of seats (whether a single party or a coalition) in Parliament are generally referred to as the *Government*. The party or parties in the minority are referred to as the *Loyal Opposition*. The Parliamentary form of government including both the Government and the Loyal Opposition is the model on which the educational style of debate called *British Parliamentary Debate* is based.

A British Parliamentary Debate consists of four teams arguing two different sides of a motion³. Two of those teams are assigned to represent the Government and the other to represent the Opposition. Whatever the motion, both Government teams are expected to support the motion such that the two Government teams’ arguments are consistent with one another even though the

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¹ The interaction takes place in what is known as points of information that will be discussed later in this chapter.
³ A motion is a statement that will be the subject of the debate. Sometimes a motion is called a debate topic, a resolution, or a proposition.
arguments may be different. In other words, the two Government teams are expected to support a similar position even though their reasons for doing so may differ. Similarly, the two Opposition teams are expected to argue against the motion in ways so that the two Opposition teams are consistent with one another although their arguments also may be different.

To extend the analogy between the kind of debate that actually happens in the British Parliament and the kind of educational debate called British Parliamentary Debate, assume that the two teams from the Government side consist of persons from a coalition government consisting of, say, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. In our analogy, these two parties have formed a coalition in order to maintain a majority. Other parties might be a part of the loyal opposition, say, the Labour and Unionist Party along with the Democratic Unionist Party. Imagine that a bill is being proposed in the Parliament and that the Government—in this case by Conservative and Liberal Democrats—supports the bill. These two parties may both support the bill but they may do so for different reasons. Similarly, the Labour and Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Parties may oppose the bill although for different reasons. In this situation, the two Government parties remain loyal to one another by providing support for the bill. Similarly, the two Opposition parties are loyal to one another by opposing the bill. The two parties that constitute the Government may support the bill for different reasons as do the two parties that combine to be the Loyal Opposition. In fact, sometimes speakers from one Government party may be motivated to use a different argument for supporting a bill because that argument appeals more to the party’s constituents. The same is true for speakers from each of the parties. Thus, we may find a situation where Members of Parliament from different parties support a bill for different reasons because those reasons are more persuasive to their particular constituencies. The same is true for Members of Parliament from the Loyal Opposition.

An analogical situation is created in the educational debate format called British Parliamentary Debate. Two teams of two persons each, assigned to the Government side will support the motion although the teams may not support the motion for the same reason. Similarly, the two Opposition teams will oppose the motion perhaps using different reasons to do so. Thus, the British Parliamentary Debate format, a very popular format of educational debate world wide, consists of two Government teams and two Opposition teams. The Government teams are loyal to one another’s positions and arguments although each may support the motion using different arguments. While in an actual parliament, speakers from the same side may choose different reasons to appeal to their constituents, in the British Parliamentary format used in educational debate, different teams may choose to support (or oppose) the motions for different reasons in order to make sure their particular team appeals positively to the adjudicator.

The British Parliamentary Debate format used in educational debate differs from actual debate in the Parliament because the British Parliamentary format defines very strict speaking times for each of the speakers. A debate format consists of a description of the teams in the debate and the order and times for the speeches that make up that debate. The British Parliamentary debate format\(^4\) differs from many other educational debate formats because it involves four teams rather

\(^4\) British Parliamentary debate sometimes is referred to as Worlds-style debate or simply four-team debate.
than two. As already stated, the choice of four teams is consistent with the kinds of debate that we might envision in the British Parliament involving a coalition government.

In the British Parliamentary Debate format, two teams, called the “First Government” and the “Second Government” teams, are charged with the responsibility of supporting the motion while two other teams, “First Opposition” and “Second Opposition,” are charged with opposing it. Two speakers represent each of the four teams and each speaker gives a speech of seven minutes. The following chart describes the basic format and time limits. Usually a debate tournament consists of at least four “rounds” of debate. In the first round, teams are assigned to the four positions at random then are rotated through the other positions until each team has had the opportunity to debate in each of the four positions.

Each team consists of two persons each with a unique title. The chart below shows the title that is given to each speaker. The members of each team can decide which of the team members will speak in which position. So for instance, the members of the First Government team can decide who will be the Prime Minister and who will be the Deputy Prime Minister.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st speaker for 1st Government:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader of Opposition</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st speaker for 1st Opposition:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Deputy Prime Minister</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd speaker for 1st Government:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Deputy Leader of Opposition</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd speaker for 1st Opposition:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of Government</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st speaker for 2nd Government:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of Opposition</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st speaker for 2nd Opposition:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Whip</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd speaker for 2nd Government:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition Whip</td>
<td>7 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd speaker for 2nd Opposition:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from the above chart, the First Government and the First Opposition teams deliver the first four speeches then the Second Government and Second Opposition teams delivers the last four speeches. Therefore, the First Government and First Opposition teams
generally are responsible for the first half of the debate (sometimes called the “upper house”) and the Second Government and Second Opposition teams have the responsibility for the second half (sometimes called the “lower house”).

The table above describes all of the formal speeches but it does not describe one of the most important and dynamic parts of the debate: points of information. Points of information provide opportunities for members of each team to interact with members of the teams defending the opposite side of the motion. Points of information can be questions to the opposing speaker, brief arguments in refutation of the speaker’s position, brief arguments directed against the motion in general, or any other kind of statement that the person making the point of information wishes to make. So for instance, if the Prime Minister is speaking, any member of either Opposition team may request a point of information. Similarly, if a member of the opposition team is speaking, any member of either Government team may offer a point. Points of information can be offered after the first minute of a speech and prior to the last minute of the speech. The first and last minute of each speech is “protected” against interruption. The point of information can last no more than fifteen seconds and may take the form of a question, a statement, or an argument. The speaker’s time continues during the point of information, so the fifteen seconds becomes a part of the speaker’s seven-minute speech.

Only a debater defending the opposite side of the motion as the speaker can request a point of information. In other words, the debaters supporting the motion can request points of information of members of the opposition teams and vice versa. To request a point of information, a debater rises and politely says something like “point of information please,” or “on that point.”

The debater giving the speech has the authority to accept or to refuse the request for a point of information. If the request for a point of information is accepted, the person who has requested the point has a maximum of fifteen seconds to make the point. As stated earlier, the point can be a question, a statement, or an argument. Sometimes points of information are made to force an opponent to clarify a position but more commonly, they are made to attempt to undermine an argument being made by the speaker. More will be said about points of information in Chapter Sixteen.

Although points of information are a common occurrence in every speech in the debate, each speech contains elements that are unique to that speech. The following table explains the basic responsibilities of each debater. Following the table is a fuller explanation of the responsibilities of each speaker.
### Speaker Responsibilities for British Parliamentary Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
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| **Prime Minister**                          | • Defines and interprets the motion  
• Develops the case for that interpretation of the motion  
• A case consists of one or more arguments supporting the Prime Minister’s interpretation of the motion  
• A case must be *prima facie*—strong enough to be accepted on its “first face.” |
| 1st speaker for 1st Government:             |                                                                                                                                                           |
| **Leader of Opposition**                     | • Refutes the case offered by the Prime Minister  
• Constructs one or more arguments against the motion as the Prime Minister interpreted it.                                                      |
| 1st speaker for 1st opposition:             |                                                                                                                                                           |
| **Deputy Prime Minister**                   | • Refutes the arguments presented by the Leader of Opposition.  
• Rebuilds the case presented by the Prime Minister.  
• Adds new arguments to the case of the Prime Minister.                                            |
| 2nd speaker for 1st Government:             |                                                                                                                                                           |
| **Deputy Leader of Opposition**             | • Advances important aspects of the refutation of case presented by the Prime Minister.  
• Refutes any new arguments presented by the Deputy Prime Minister.  
• Rebuilds arguments of the Leader of Opposition  
• Adds new arguments to those presented by the Leader of the Opposition.                           |
| 2nd speaker for 1st opposition:             |                                                                                                                                                           |
| **Member of Government**                    | • Defends the general direction and case of the 1st Government team.  
• Continues refutation of 1st Opposition team’s arguments focusing on new arguments introduced by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition.  
• Develops a new argument that is different from but consistent with the case of the 1st Government (sometimes called an extension). |
| 1st speaker for 2nd Government:             |                                                                                                                                                           |
The following sections briefly describe the speeches given by each of the eight speakers listed in the previous table. These are very brief descriptions that will be expanded in later chapters.

**Prime Minister**

The debate begins with a seven-minute speech by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has two basic responsibilities: to define and interpret the motion and to develop the case for the proposition. The first of these responsibilities, defining and interpreting the motion, is particularly important because it sets the stage for the entire debate. Defining and interpreting the motion are related although subtly different processes. When defining the motion, the Prime Minister will explicitly define any ambiguous terms that might be contained in the motion. When interpreting the motion, the Prime Minister will then use those definitions along with the motion as a whole to focus and narrow the motion so that the rest of the debate can be productive. Sometimes, the Prime Minister’s interpretation of the debate will consist of a brief description of some course of action that the Government team will defend. When the Prime Minister’s interprets the motion by describing a proposed policy or course of action, that explanation sometimes is called a “model.” The Prime Minister is not required to present a model but may choose to do so when he or she wants to present a clear outline of their proposed policy or action.

So, the process of defining and interpreting the motion consists of defining any ambiguous terms then focusing and narrowing the debate. Remember, the Prime Minister has the right to define and interpret the motion and the responsibility to do so in a reasonable fashion. Therefore, if the
Prime Minister’s interpretation is a poor one, the likely result will be a poor debate. In order to properly define and interpret the proposition, the Prime Minister should do the following:

1) Define any ambiguous terms in the proposition.
2) Show how these definitions are reasonable ones.
3) Interpret the motion by appropriately narrowing it in a way that will lead to a good and productive debate. In some cases, this interpretation will include a model of a proposed policy or action.

More will be said about defining and interpreting the motion in Chapter Eleven on constructing arguments for the First Government team.

The second responsibility of the Prime Minister is to construct a case for the proposition. Simply stated, a “case” consists of one or more arguments supporting the Prime Minister’s interpretation of the motion. Therefore, the Prime Minister will outline the arguments supporting the interpretation and begin to develop each of those arguments. The Prime Minister need not present all of the arguments for the First Government team. In many cases, the Prime Minister will state that the First Government team will have a certain number of arguments, that some will be presented in this speech and others by the Deputy Prime Minister.

The basic responsibility of the Prime Minister is to present what is called a prima facie case. The phrase prima facie means literally “first face.” Thus, the Prime Minister must present a case that on its first face is convincing enough to support the motion. That the arguments presented constitute a prima facie case does not mean that they are so strong they cannot be refuted. Simply put, a prima facie case is one that is strong enough to convince a reasonable audience prior to any refutation being brought against it.

**Leader of the Opposition**

Before considering these primary responsibilities of the Leader of Opposition, a few words about how the Leader should react to the Prime Minister’s definition and interpretation of the motion are in order. In most ordinary situations, the Leader of the Opposition should explicitly accept the definition and interpretation of the motion as presented by the Prime Minister. In extraordinary cases, when the definition is completely unreasonable as to preclude meaningful debate, the Leader of the Opposition has the right to reject the definition. The problem with rejecting the definition is that such an action will ultimately lead to a very bad debate for which the First Opposition team likely will be blamed. Therefore, even in the event of an unreasonable definition, the Leader of the Opposition should point out to the judge and the audience that the definition and interpretation presented by the Prime Minister is unreasonable and then should go ahead and accept the definition for the purposes of the current debate.

The Leader of the Opposition has two primary responsibilities: to refute part or all of the Prime Minister’s case, and to present one or more arguments in opposition to the Prime Minister’s interpretation of the motion. First, the Leader of the Opposition should refute part or all of the
Prime Minister’s arguments for the motion. Because of the limits of time, the Leader of
Opposition cannot reasonably expect to refute all of the Prime Minister’s arguments. The proper
goal is to select and refute the most important arguments presented by the Prime Minister. More
will be said about refutation in Chapter Fifteen.

Second, the Leader of the Opposition should present one, two, or three arguments directed
against the Prime Minister’s interpretation of the motion. These arguments are different from
those arguments offered in refutation. They should consist of the most persuasive reasons that
the Leader of the Opposition can present to convince the audience to reject the
motion as interpreted by the Prime Minister.

Deputy Prime Minister

The Deputy Prime Minister has three primary obligations: to refute arguments presented by the
Leader of the Opposition, to defend the case presented by the Prime Minister, and to add one or
more arguments to the case presented by the Prime Minister.

First, the Deputy Prime Minister defends the case presented by the Prime Minister by engaging
any refutation presented against the case by the Leader of the Opposition. This task needs to be
accomplished in a very systematic fashion. The Deputy should take up the Prime Minister’s
argument one by one and defend each argument against any refutation by the Leader of the
Opposition. Thus, at the end of this section of the Deputy’s speech, the audience should see that
the case originally presented by the Prime Minister still stands as strongly as it did when initially
presented.

Second, the Deputy Prime Minister should refute any of the independent arguments presented by
the Leader of the Opposition. Like the Leader of Opposition, the Deputy should not try to refute
all arguments, just the most important ones.

Finally, the Deputy Prime Minister should add one or two arguments to the case presented by the
Prime Minister. The reasons for adding new arguments in this speech are two-fold: First, the
Prime Minister may not have had adequate time to develop all of the arguments that the First
Government team wishes to present and second, presenting these additional arguments gives the
judges and audience a way to judge the ability of the Deputy Prime Minister with respect to his
or her ability to construct arguments.

a particular order. The order is completely at the discretion of the debater. Sometimes a situation
will call for beginning with refutation and then proceeding to argument construction and
sometimes a savvy debater will begin by constructing arguments then proceeding to refutation.
In fact, especially advanced debaters are sometimes able to weave refutation and construction
into a tapestry that creates a seamless fabric of argument.
Deputy Leader of the Opposition

The duties of the Deputy Leader of the Opposition are similar to those of the Deputy Prime Minister. The Deputy Leader should 1) advance the refutation offered by the Leader of Opposition, 2) defend new arguments offered by the Leader of the Opposition, and 3) add one or more new arguments to those being offered by the Leader of Opposition.

First, the Deputy Leader should advance the refutation offered by the Leader of the Opposition. The Deputy Prime Minister will have engaged the refutation presented by the Leader of Opposition. At this time, the Deputy Leader needs to advance that refutation by showing that the original refutation is still sound.

Second, the Deputy Leader should defend the arguments presented by the Leader of the Opposition. The task of the Deputy Leader is to make sure that these arguments still stand firm in the mind of the judges and audience. To do so, the Deputy leader needs to consider each argument one by one, engage any refutation offered by the Deputy Prime Minister, and therefore rebuild each argument.

Third, the Deputy Leader should present one or more new arguments against the proposition. These arguments can be similar to those arguments raised by the Leader of the Opposition, yet they should be new ones to give the judges and audience the ability to judge the Deputy Leader’s argument construction skills.

Member of Government

The Member of Government initiates the second half (lower house) of the debate. The Member of Government needs to defend the general direction taken by the First Government team and needs to show how the Second Government team has a new and fresh position or somehow is adding something new and dynamic to the debate. In other words, the Member of Government needs to defend the thesis of the First Government team while doing so for different reasons. The obligations of the Member of Government can be summarized as follows: 1) Defend the general perspective of the First Government team, 2) Continue refuting arguments made by the First Opposition team, 3) Develop one or more new arguments that are different from but consistent with the case offered by the First Government team.

The first responsibility of the Member of the Government is to defend the general direction of the debate initiated by the First Government team. In so doing, the Member of Government demonstrates a sense of loyalty to the other debaters defending the motion. This part of the Member’s speech is important but need not be time consuming. One or two minutes devoted to this aspect of the speech will probably be sufficient.

Second, the Member of Government should continue refuting arguments made by the First Opposition team. The Member of Government should not use the same refutation as provided by debaters of the First Government team, but should introduce new points of refutation unique to
the Second Government team. To the extent possible, the refutation should focus on the arguments presented by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition.

Finally, the Member of Government should develop one or more arguments that are different from but consistent with the arguments offered by the First Government team. These new arguments—referred to as an “extension.” The extension is one of the most important tasks of the Member of Government’s speech as it provides an opportunity to distinguish the Second Government team from the First Government while simultaneously remaining consistent with the overall approach of the First Government. Debaters supporting each side of the motion (Government and Opposition) will be judged not only in comparison with debaters from the other side, but in comparison to the other team on their side. So for instance, the First Government team will be compared not only to the two Opposition teams, but also to the Second Government team as well.

**Member of Opposition**

The Member of Opposition begins the second half (lower house) of the debate for the Opposition side. Like the Second Government team, the goal of the Second Opposition team is to remain consistent with the First Opposition team while presenting a perspective unique to the Second Opposition. To accomplish this goal, the Member of Opposition needs to fulfill several roles: 1) Defend the general direction taken by the First Opposition team, 2) Briefly continue the refutation of the case of the First Government, 3) Provide more specific refutation of the arguments introduced by the Member of Government, and 4) Present one or more new arguments that are consistent with, yet different from, those presented by the First Opposition team.

First, the Member of Opposition should defend the general perspective taken by the First Opposition team. This need not be a time-consuming enterprise, but its accomplishment shows how the Member of Opposition is being loyal to the arguments of the First Opposition team.

Second, the Member of Opposition should briefly continue the refutation of the case presented by the First Government team. Again, this continued refutation should be brief and should involve new points of refutation not yet considered by members of the First Opposition team.

Third, the Member of Opposition should present more specific refutation of the arguments introduced by the Member of Government. Refutation of the Member of Government’s arguments is an important task because these are completely new arguments supporting the government side and have not yet been joined by the opposition side.

Finally, the Member of Opposition should present an extension—an argument consistent with, yet different from that presented by the First Opposition team. Like the Government’s extension, presenting the Opposition’s extension is an important responsibility of the Member of Opposition because it allows the Second Opposition team to show its loyalty to the First Opposition team while clearly differentiating themselves from the First Opposition.
Government Whip

The whip speakers for both teams have the responsibility to close the debate for their respective sides. The Government Whip should accomplish three goals: 1) Refute the extension offered by the Member of Opposition, 2) Defend the extension offered by the Member of Government, and 3) Summarize the debate from the perspective of the Government side. More will be said about Whip speeches in Chapter Fourteen.

The first responsibility of the Government Whip is to refute the extension offered by the Member of Opposition. This extension has yet to be discussed by the Government team and therefore its refutation is an important responsibility of the Government Whip.

Second, the Government Whip should defend the extension offered by the Member of Government. The Member of Government’s extension is a very important part of the Second Government’s case and in all likelihood has been refuted by the Member of Opposition. Therefore, defending this extension is an important responsibility of the Government Whip.

The final and perhaps most important responsibility of the Government Whip is to summarize the debate from the perspective of the Government side. The summary may be accomplished in a number of ways. The summary can examine the issue as addressed by both teams; it can regroup the issues into categories that are new to the debate; it can discuss the debate from a different or higher perspective than has been previously introduced. The summary should, of course, be made from the Government’s perspective while being and appearing to be fair-minded. Similarly, the summary should be fair to the First Government team but should focus on the arguments pursued by the Second Government team.

Opposition Whip

The responsibilities of the Opposition Whip are almost identical to those of the Government Whip except they are accomplished from the perspective of the Opposition side rather than from the Government side. Again, the Opposition Whip should 1) Refute the extension offered by the Member of Government, 2) Defend the extension offered by the Member of Opposition, and 3) Summarize the debate from the perspective of the Opposition side.

The details of this speech are exactly like those of the previous speech except that they focus on the Opposition side of the debate rather than the Government side. Once again, the primary goal of this speech is to summarize the debate from the perspective of the Opposition side, particularly from the point of view of the Second Opposition team. This summary should fairly support the Opposition side of the debate while focusing on the accomplishments of the Second Opposition team.

Summary

This then is the basic format of British Parliamentary debating: four teams of two persons each engage one another through a series of seven-minute speeches interspersed by points of
information. The teams from each side attempt to maintain loyalty with one another while simultaneously demonstrating the unique qualities of their own arguments. This format is analogous, although not perfectly so, to the kind of debate that one might envision in a real parliament.

Much has been introduced here that was not fully developed. Later chapters will further explore issues only mentioned here, such as case construction, opposition arguments, points of information, refutation and many others.