

The British Parliamentary Debate Format
Robert Trapp, Willamette University
Yang Ge, Dalian Nationalities University

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 format¹ differs from many other formats because it involves four teams rather than two. Two teams, called the “First Proposition” and the “Second Proposition” teams, are charged with the responsibility of supporting the proposition 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. As you will see from the chart, each speaker is given a unique title.

British Parliamentary Debate Format

Speaker	Time
<i>Prime Minister</i> 1 st speaker for 1 st proposition:	7 minutes
<i>Leader of Opposition</i> 1 st speaker for 1 st opposition:	7 minutes
<i>Deputy Prime Minister</i> 2 nd speaker for 1 st proposition:	7 minutes
<i>Deputy Leader of Opposition</i> 2 nd speaker for 1 st opposition:	7 minutes
<i>Member of Government</i> 1 st speaker for 2 nd proposition:	7 minutes
<i>Member of Opposition</i> 1 st speaker for 2 nd opposition:	7 minutes
<i>Government Whip</i> 2 nd speaker for 2 nd proposition:	7 minutes
<i>Opposition Whip</i> 2 nd speaker for 2 nd opposition:	7 minutes

¹ British Parliamentary debate sometimes is referred to as Worlds-style debate or simply four-team debate.

As can be seen from the table above, the first four speeches are delivered by the First Proposition and the First Opposition teams then the last four speeches are delivered by the Second Proposition and Second Opposition teams. Therefore, the First Proposition and First Opposition teams generally are responsible for the first half of the debate and the Second Proposition and Second Opposition teams have the responsibility for the second half.

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 motion².

Points of information can be requested 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.

Only a debater defending the opposite side of the proposition as the speaker can request a point of information. In other words, the debaters for the proposition 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. In general, debaters should accept a minimum of two points during their speech so that the judges and the audience will know they are able to answer points quickly and directly. Accepting more than one or two points is not advisable because to do so may have the effect of disrupting the speech. To refuse a point of information, the debater may say something like “No thank you” or “not at this time,” or may simply use a hand gesture to indicate the person should take return to their seat.

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.

After accepting a point of information, the speaker should answer the question directly. The person offering the point of information is not allowed to follow-up with additional questions. Points of information are among the most important and most interesting parts of British Parliamentary debate because they introduce an element of spontaneity to the debate and give each debater the chance to demonstrate critical thinking skills.

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

² The topic for the debate is called the motion, proposition, resolution, or sometimes just the debate topic. All of these words are used interchangeably.

basic responsibilities of each speaker in British Parliamentary debate. Following the table is a fuller explanation of the responsibilities of each speech.

Speaker Responsibilities for British Parliamentary Debate

Speaker	Speaker Responsibilities
<i>Prime Minister</i> 1 st speaker for 1 st proposition:	Defines and interprets the motion Develops the case for the proposition
<i>Leader of Opposition</i> 1 st speaker for 1 st opposition:	Accepts the definition of the motion Refutes the case of the 1 st proposition Constructs one or more arguments against the Prime Minister's interpretation of the motion.
<i>Deputy Prime Minister</i> 2 nd speaker for 1 st proposition:	Refutes the case of the 1 st opposition Rebuilds the case of the 1 st proposition May add new arguments to the case of the 1 st proposition
<i>Deputy Leader of Opposition</i> 2 nd speaker for 1 st opposition:	Continues refutation of case of 1 st proposition Rebuilds arguments of the 1 st opposition May add new arguments to the case of the 1 st opposition
<i>Member of Government</i> 1 st speaker for 2 nd proposition:	Defends the general direction and case of the 1 st proposition Continues refutation of 1 st opposition team Develops a new argument that is different from but consistent with the case of the 1 st proposition (sometimes called an extension).
<i>Member of Opposition</i> 1 st speaker for 2 nd opposition:	Defends the general direction taken by the 1 st opposition. Continues general refutation of 1 st proposition case Provides more specific refutation of 2 nd opposition Provides new opposition arguments
<i>Government Whip</i> 2 nd speaker for 2 nd proposition:	Summarizes the entire debate from the point of view of the proposition, defending the general view point of both proposition teams with a special eye toward the case of the 2 nd proposition Does not provide new arguments.
<i>Opposition Whip</i> 2 nd speaker for 2 nd opposition:	Summarizes the entire debate from the point of view of the opposition, defending the general view point of both opposition teams with a special eye toward the case of the 2 nd opposition Does not provide new arguments.

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 is to define and interpret the motion for debate. The definition and interpretation is particularly important because it sets the stage for the entire debate. Remember, the Prime Minister has the right to define 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) Outline a model that will be used by all teams in advancing the debate.
- More will be said about these three points in Chapter 5 on constructing a case for the proposition.

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 Proposition team. In many cases, the Prime Minister will state that the First Proposition team will have a certain number of arguments and that some will be presented in this speech and the Deputy Prime Minister will present the rest.

Leader of the Opposition

The Leader of the Opposition has three primary responsibilities: to accept the definition and interpretation of the proposition, 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, 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 and the First Opposition team likely will get the blame. 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.

Second, 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.

Finally, 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 proposition.

Deputy Prime Minister

The Deputy Prime Minister has three primary obligations: to defend the case presented by the Prime Minister, to refute any independent arguments presented by the Leader of the Opposition, 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 argument 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 Proposition 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 the ability to construct arguments.

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) defend the refutation offered by the Leader of

Opposition, 2) defend the arguments offered by the Leader of the Opposition, and 3) add one or more new arguments to those being offered by the First Proposition team.

First, the Deputy Leader should defend 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 show 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 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 of the debate. The Member of Government needs to defend the general direction taken by the First Proposition team but needs to offer a new perspective from the Second Proposition team. In other words, the Member of Government needs to defend the thesis of the First Proposition 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 Proposition 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 Proposition team.

The first responsibility of the Member of the Government is to defend the general direction of the debate as started by the First Proposition team. In so doing, the Member of Government demonstrates a sense of loyalty to the other debaters defending the proposition. 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 Proposition 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 Proposition.

Finally, the Member of Government should develop one or more arguments that are different from but consistent with the arguments offered by the Prime Minister. These new arguments sometimes are referred to as an "extension." This extension is one of the most important

elements of the Member of Government's case as it provides an opportunity to distinguish the Second Proposition team from the First Proposition while simultaneously remaining consistent with their overall approach.

Member of Opposition

The Member of Opposition begins the second half of the debate for the Opposition side. Like the Second Proposition team, the goal of the Second Opposition team is to remain consistent with the First Opposition team while presenting a unique perspective of their own. To accomplish this goal, the Member of Opposition needs to fulfill three obligations: 1) Defend the general direction taken by the First Opposition team, 2) Continue the refutation of the case as presented by the First Proposition, 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 the Member of Opposition should make clear that the Second Opposition team 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 Proposition 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 proposition 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, this 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 Proposition side.

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 Proposition team and doing so 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 Proposition side. The summary may be accomplished in a number of ways. One of the most effective ways is to identify the most crucial issues in the debate and discuss how each side has dealt with each. The summary should, of course, be made from their side's perspective while being and appearing to be fair-minded. Similarly, the summary should be fair to the First Proposition team but should focus on the arguments pursued by the Second Proposition 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 Proposition 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 Proposition 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.

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