

# Full Parliamentary Debate: The Glasgow Model

CHRISTOPHER RUANE

---

**Abstract:** With the advent of the popularity of parliamentary debate in US intercollegiate debating, it seems important to return to the "roots" of that form of debate, the British system. North American speech literature tends to talk about "British parliamentary" debate as if it were done in a homogenous style. Actually, following Rodden (1985), it is more than one style. The most common form, and that referred to in North America, is "modified parliamentary" debate. A more complex form is "full parliamentary" debate. This is closest to the style actually used in the British parliament and today is only practiced at the University of Glasgow, which has been notable for its competitive success. Elements of full parliamentary debate are unique to the format and will be of interest to North American debaters for the additional insight they provide on parliamentary debating. To fill a gap in the literature on this topic, a substantial narrative overview of full parliamentary debate is provided, with limited subjective judgment of its merits.

---

## INTRODUCTION

With the recent rapid increase in popularity in the United States of parliamentary debate, there has been an increased interest in the different formats of the debate.

Discussion of "British parliamentary" debate suggests that there is a homogenous style of debating common to the United Kingdom or the British Isles. As Rodden pointed out, this is not the case: parliamentary debating can be subdivided into what he termed "Full parliamentary debating" and "Modified parliamentary debating" (309 - 312). The most common form of parliamentary debate in the United Kingdom is the Modified Parliamentary debate, more commonly known simply as "parliamentary" (Sather and Hutton: 9). This is essentially the format now used at the World's Universities Debating Championships and is not dissimilar in feel to an enlarged version of the U.S. format.

Today full parliamentary debate is practiced only at the University of Glasgow; however, that institution attracts interest amongst forensics coaches since it has enjoyed an unparalleled level of success in debating tournaments, holding the record for the most victories both

---

1. In the *Observer* "Mace" and Worlds Universities Debating Championships respectively.



on a national and international level.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the full parliamentary system has a number of unique features which may be of interest to the wider debating community. Elements of the full parliamentary system which are currently absent from the modified system used in the United States may profitably inform its development in an amended form.

The full parliamentary system has received little attention in North American speech literature, with the most extensive description of full parliamentary debate being over a half a century old (Temple and Dunn: 51 - 52). For this reason, this analysis seeks to outline exactly what the full parliamentary system used at Glasgow involves, both in terms of the organizational structure which supports it and in the debate format itself. This narrative will allow the reader a better understanding of the basic principles of the full parliamentary system in order to enable him or her to make a qualitative judgement on its merits and demerits.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### *Overview*

In order to understand the functioning of debating in the full parliamentary system at Glasgow, it is necessary to comprehend the organizational structure which supports it. This is relatively complex compared to equivalent structures at other British colleges.

Unlike most British campuses which support only one student union, Glasgow supports two: the Queen Margaret Union and Glasgow University Union. Most students hold membership in one of these unions. The student unions form the center of student social activity on campus as well as supporting a range of activities, such as charity and social events. In addition to these umbrella unions, a large number of predominantly student-run clubs and societies operate in specific fields as at similar universities both in the U.K. and North America.

As a result, debating at Glasgow is organized at two levels. First, the student unions conduct their own debating activities. Queen Margaret Union formerly ran a debating society, although this has fallen somewhat by the wayside in recent years. The Glasgow University Union (G.U.U.) is very active and it is its parliamentary system which will form the subject under consideration in this paper.

The second level of organization is a cross-campus debating society called the "Dialectic Society." This is a supra-union body in that it is independent of the two main student unions, but loosely affiliated with both. The Dialectic Society needs to be examined so that its role is understood prior to an examination of the full parliamentary system run by the Glasgow University Union.



### *The Dialectic Society*

Rather than competing with full parliamentary debating for students' attention, the Dialectic Society is, in fact, an important complementary organization for it. Initially, the Dialectic Society was responsible for the foundation of the G.U.U. which led to the introduction of full parliamentary debating, at the end of the nineteenth century (Oakley, 1950; Warner, 1985). Today, most active debaters at the University retain a membership in both organizations although it is fair to say that they often gravitate more towards one than the other and will apportion their effort accordingly.

The Dialectic Society is funded by a mixture of subscriptions, sponsorship, donations and a small amount of central funding. It is run by a committee of unpaid student officers elected annually by its members.

The Dialectic Society performs three main roles in promoting debating in the Glasgow system. First, it provides a forum for regular campus debates on current political topics. These follow a modified parliamentary format and tend to be more informal than full parliamentary debates. As well as encouraging participation from novice student debaters or guest speakers, this enables students to watch more debates than the limited number of full parliamentary debates which are held each year. Emphasizing its close links with the Union, these debates are invariably held on the G.U.U. premises.

Secondly, the Dialectic Society provides training for debaters. Under the full parliamentary system, the only official training is *ex post* commentary in the form of "crits" (discussed later in this article). Training in advance of the debate depends on the whim of the leader of the parliamentary club in which a speaker chooses to position herself. The Dialectic Society provides a more consistent form of advance training with occasional lunchtime workshops and training evenings which are open to all. These are usually led by a mixture of Dialectic officers and senior full parliamentary speakers. Aspirant parliamentary speakers are usually strongly encouraged by their club leader to attend.

The third and crucial role of the Dialectic Society is a social one. It organizes a substantial calendar of social events from introductory meals to formal dinner and day trips, most of which center around the Union. These are timed to fit around rather than clash with full parliamentary debates. This calendar provides an opportunity for debaters to forge strong, long-lasting personal bonds which underlie the essentially social nature of the debate program in Glasgow. It is also important as a way of maintaining the interest of a large enough group of freshmen each year to ensure that there is a sufficiently large phalanx of students involved in debating to sustain the full parliamentary system, with its need for a substantial number of participants. The Dialectic Society is not the only organized social forum for debaters: individual clubs from within the parliamentary system dis-



cussed below, for example, may have an annual formal dinner. The Dialectic Society, however, is the fulcrum for social activity. Like the central organizational structure of a collegiate university, it is a way of ensuring that members of the different parliamentary clubs quickly become acquainted with debaters from all of the other clubs.

### *Glasgow University Union and full parliamentary debating*

G.U.U. debating supports an organizational structure designed especially for a full parliamentary system. Key to understanding this is the explanation that there are a number (usually six, but in some years only five) of parliamentary debating clubs within the Union. These clubs are organized along ostensibly political lines but exist for the sole purpose of full parliamentary debating. They are, therefore, unaffiliated with the political organizations which some of them nominally represent and which are usually represented by proper campus societies. Leadership of each of the parliamentary clubs rests exclusively in the gift of the present leader. This sometimes leads to clear nepotism and often to political horsetrading which sees future club leaders switch clubs in the months prior to leadership changes being announced.

The ideologies of these clubs vary over time, but they tend to spread around the political horseshoe in a way which will ensure a spectrum of positions for a full parliamentary debate. Thus, for example, the Tories and Whigs typically follow an agenda to the right of center, selectively following the lead of their nineteenth century precursors. The Independent Socialists (reformed Communists) and Scottish Nationalists are usually to the left of center. Two other clubs, the Distributists and the Social Credits, in theory follow now obsolete political philosophies of broadly left-wing persuasion. In practice, this gives them the ability to "swing" between left and right, dependent upon the subject of the debate. This gives full parliamentary debate both a breadth of clash and a depth of policy detail which finds no parallel elsewhere in British parliamentary debating, as former American touring debater Rodden noted: "The full parliamentary is a thoroughly serious affair, albeit laced with humor and invective. Generalizations from touring Americans about the lack of substance and 'clash' in British debate do not apply to the full parliamentary debate" (Rodden, 1985, p. 310, references omitted).

The organizing body co-ordinating the full parliamentary system is the Union's Debates Committee. The Convenor of the Debates Committee is therefore the central position in the organizational structure. This unpaid role is part of the Union's student-dominated Board of Management and is filled on an annual basis by open election of members in March of each year.

As well as the Convenor and each of the parliamentary club leaders, Debates Committee membership extends to the President of the Dialectic Society and the Clerk of Debates. The Clerk of Debates is an honorary position, the holder of which is selected by the Convenor of



Debates, whose role in assessing debates and speaker development is explained in more detail below. Usually Debates Committee membership will also be open to senior debaters who are still on campus and who filled one of these positions in former years.

The Union's debates focus on the full parliamentary system but it is worth noting that it is also responsible for the organization of a number of other forms of debate. These tend to be either show debates - such as the biennial John Smith Memorial Debate named for a former Convenor of Debates and late leader of the Labour Party - or debating tournaments, such as the annual Ancient Universities tournament and the British Individual Speakers' Championship (Ruane, 2001). These will be organized by the Convenor of Debates in conjunction with members of the Debates Committee. In this way, debaters at Glasgow are exposed as spectators to top-level competitive debating from early in their debating career, regardless of whether they are sent to participate in intervarsity tournaments.

### ***Speaker Development***

Some explanation has already been given on the training of speakers by club leaders and through the Dialectic Society. In addition to this, participation in intervarsity tournaments will provide speakers with competitive experience. The most formalized element of development which the Full Parliamentary system offers, however, is through the system of "crits" which are provided by the Clerk to the Debates Committee and his/her team.

After selection by the Convenor of Debates prior to each year, the Clerk selects a Deputy Clerk and Two Assistant Clerks in conjunction with the Convenor. All of the clerks are usually current debaters. They will often participate in a round of debate, during which they will rejoin their club benches, but for the rest of each debate they will sit at the Clerks' Table from where they do not participate in the debate (although they may make Points of Order, which will generally be well received by the Speaker). By using sophomores as Assistant Clerks in most cases, there is a period of apprenticeship, which should mean that in future years there will be candidates for the position of (Head) Clerk who already have some clerking experience.

During the debate the Clerks make extensive notes on each speech. Immediately afterwards they meet in private and agree on scores and comments for each speaker and club in the debate, which they then write up. This extensive critique of the previous debate is known as a set of "crits" and these will be posted in the Union prior to the next set of pre-debates. This "crit" will contain comments and suggestions for improvement on each individual speaker. It will also consider the overall performance of each club and comment will usually be made on the quality of argumentation and intellectual support which has been used throughout the debate. Each speaker will be allocated a score based on a labyrinthine scoring system. These scores will be considered in making awards at the end of the year.



At the final debate of each year, after a recess when non-clerking members attend the habitual post-debate party ("PDP"), a number of prizes are awarded in a raucous atmosphere hours after midnight. The "Debates Trophy" will be awarded to the club which has garnered the most points throughout the year, based on speaking, attendance, information and "stunts." In addition, discretionary trophies may be awarded for the Best Maiden Speaker, Most Promising Speaker, Best Speaker and the best "Stunts."

## FULL PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE

### *Procedure*

A significant element of creating the atmosphere in which Glasgow's full parliamentaries are held has no connection to the debate itself but is the way in which the debate adheres to many elements of the procedure followed at the Houses of Parliament in Westminster.

The G.U.U. building has its own baronial-style debating chamber with a spectators' gallery which can comfortably seat several hundred. This is used for all full parliamentary debates.

Visually, the green baize tablecloths and leather-clad benches are clearly intended to recreate the atmosphere of the House of Commons. Glasgow adopts the style of a parliament and so refers to itself as a "House" (and, indeed, to the House of Commons as "another House"). Thus, address is made to "Members of the House," while visitors in the gallery are "distinguished strangers." At the beginning of the first debate each year, a long-serving debater will be designated "Father of the House," just as is done at Westminster.

As at Westminster, the Mace represents the authority of the House and the House is only in session when the Mace is inside the Chamber. Its entry, which is flanked by a formal procession of gowned debating officers, is an occasion for which all rise (and the stern cry goes up of "Hats off, Strangers!"). In session, the debates are chaired by a Speaker, usually the Convenor of Debates or a similarly high-ranking officer.

Members themselves are each designated as representing a "constituency." The constituency name is usually a light-hearted one created by the Clerk in consultation with the speaker's club leader. The constituency name is a simple way of helping participants to distinguish between the debating and non-debating persona of the students involved. This can be important because many debaters in the full parliamentary system join a club for reasons such as chances of advancement or social atmosphere, and so they debate against their convictions. This is unusual amongst British debaters (Rodden, 1985: 312).

Members who fail to refer to a member by their constituency name will receive a sharp rebuke from the Speaker of the House. All mem-



bers of the House are referred to individually as "the Honourable Member," but once a debater has made a Prime Ministerial speech, that person will be termed "the Right Honourable Member" as well as being entitled to certain other somewhat obscure privileges, such as resting his/her feet on the table of the House.

Each debate is accompanied by an order paper listing the motion and the club members.

The rules of the House are governed by a set of "Standing Orders" which are equivalent to a very abridged form of *Erskine-May*, the procedural guide to the House of Commons (Limon & McKay, 1998). These are within the purview of the Convenor and often remain a mystery to most participants. Members may raise Points of Order with the Speaker following transgressions of the Standing Orders, such as the use of unparliamentary language or other breaches of the precise etiquette used in full parliamentary. Unlike the U.S. system, a point of order cannot be made during a speech but is made immediately after it (Trapp, 1997: 303). Substantive rather than procedural issues are not deemed to be relevant, since they are matters not for the Speaker but for the Clerks to comment upon in their "crits." The Speaker holds absolute power in all matters and will often wield it dictatorially: a favourite phrase in refusing Points of Order which the Speaker considers to be without merit at a given time is "The Right Honourable Member may be aware of the content of the Standing Orders, but he would be well advised to remember that I am the sole interpreter of them." This phrase delivered with a grin is often followed by summary expulsion from the chamber!

Points of personal privilege do not exist in full parliamentary debating, unlike in U.S. parliamentary debating, more commonly known as "parli" (Knapp and Galizio: 136 - 137). Indeed, *ad hominem* attacks within certain bounds are effectively seen as part of the cut and thrust of a strenuous parliamentary debate.

## Structure

Each debate is based on a bill presented by the club in Government. Bills follow a standard format of a pre-amble and three clauses. In U.S. terms, the pre-amble can most closely be equated to a resolution of value (Knapp & Galizio, 1999: 12 - 13). It is not, however, debated as a resolution, but rather usually forms the basis of fairly broad philosophical discussion with which most speakers begin their addresses. From the pre-amble flow three clauses, each of which is akin to a resolution of policy in the U.S. system (Knapp & Galizio, 1999: 12 - 13). These clauses should be seen as independent but sometimes a linked means of implementing on a policy level the value system proposed in the pre-amble.

For example, a typical bill from the (right-of-center) Tory club could read as follows:

"Her Majesty's Government, recognising its duty to protect law-abid-



ing subjects, will:

- (i). Re-introduce the death penalty;
- (ii). Introduce a national register of convicted pedophiles; and
- (iii). Arm the police."

During the week prior to the week of the debate, the club leader (Prime Minister designate) will present the draft Bill to the Debates Committee and speak to the clauses. At this stage, although the Government club leader will not want to reveal too much of his or her strategy for the debate, the leader may be asked to elaborate upon how he or she envisages the debate unfolding. Members of the Debates Committee will then pass judgement on whether or not they consider the Bill to be debatable and what reservations, if any, they have about it. In this way, unlike modified parliamentary, full parliamentary mirrors U.S. procedure in formally establishing the debatability of the resolution (Knapp & Galizio, 1999: 62 - 63). Unlike the U.S., though, this is regarded as a procedural point for the Committee stage in order to ensure a full debate, rather than a participatory tactic for the debate itself. Although the Bill will usually be polemical in line with the club philosophy, clearly it is important to ensure that the Bill allows room for compelling opposition as well as more polarized policy development further down the table.

If the Committee rejects a clause, it will often go into recess before the Prime Minister designate presents an alternative clause. On rare occasions, the whole Bill may be rejected and the Committee will usually need to reconvene over the next few days, at which point the Prime Minister designate will be expected to present a new bill.

Once the Committee has passed the bill, clubs negotiate for table positions at the debate. Each club is in government annually, so in any one year there are five or six debates (depending on whether there are five or six clubs that year). Clubs will rotate positions at each debate so that each club is in each position once during the year.

On the Monday and Tuesday of the week of the debate, each club will hold a "pre-debate" meeting. At this meeting, speaking positions will be allocated and a club "line" on the bill will be agreed. This is an agreed doctrine for the debate and specific policy initiatives for each of the clauses and will form the centerpiece of all of the club's speakers' contributions to the debate. This may involve extensive discussion on the part of the members, or alternatively the leader may simply decide a line in advance and use the pre-debate to deploy this to members. The most effective pre-debate meetings usually consider likely lines from opposing clubs and consider counter-arguments on the basis of this.

Following the pre-debate, club members will have a few days to prepare their speeches before the debate begins at one o'clock on the following Friday afternoon. This enables them to do research on a scale which is not found in other parliamentary formats. Thus, unlike the general research upon which most U.K. and U.S. parli speakers must



rely (Trapp, 1997: 295), in the full parliamentary system any factual assertion made by a speaker is expected to be backed up with documentary evidence submitted to the clerks during the speech. This information is then open to all participants for the duration of the debate.

The debate is structured as follows in Figure 1.:

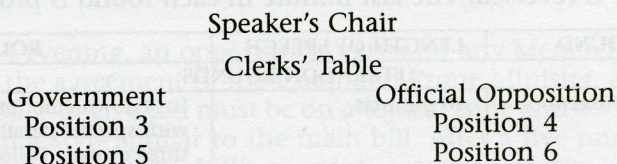


Figure 1 Physical Structure of the Parliamentary Round at G.U.U.

The Official Opposition is expected to provide robust and direct opposition to the Government case with a set of counter-proposals. Subsequent clubs on either side are supposed to provide a development of the line laid out further up their side. At the pre-debate, they will have surmised the most likely line and have built their own line around this. They will also need distinctive firm policy proposals.

The last club on either side is thus often forced into quite extreme proposals. This can help ensure that they stay within the body of the debate even with a table position removed from the focal point of the debate. To this end, it is acceptable for the final club to have a "wacky" line on at least one clause, with a policy proposal which would be so extreme it would not survive critical appraisal in many modified parliamentary rounds. Whereas the second club on each side has to support or oppose all three clauses in line with its side of the table, the third club must support its side on at least two clauses but can support the opposite side's position on one clause, ensuring a broad interchange of views between the two sides.

Club members sit together in club benches at their position at the table for all of the debate, or the parts of it which they attend if they are not there for the duration. They can offer points of information at any stage during the debate and this helps people to remain engaged in the debate even during rounds other than the one in which they are speaking. Both attendance at certain stages and the number of points of information taken from each club is considered by the clerks when they are evaluating the debate. This acts as a form of incentive for club leaders to ensure that their club members attend and participate in the debate.

Each debate is broken up into a number of rounds of varying duration. The exact configuration of rounds varies from time to time. For example, in the first couple of debates each year there are usually four "unpointed" rounds which are designed for maiden speakers. In later debates, however, as freshmen move into higher speaking positions, the number of unpointed rounds may be cut back. Broadly, though, the debate follows the format given in Figure 2.



The three main sorts of rounds are "opening," "mid-," and "closing." Each round fulfills a different role in the debate, as shown in Figure 2. In each round apart from the two Closing rounds, the Government speaker will make the first speech, followed by the speaker from Her Majesty's Official Opposition. The debate will then pass down the table in conventional fashion. For the closing rounds, this order is reversed. The last minute in each round is protected.

ROUND	LENGTH OF SPEECH	ROLE
<b>AFTERNOON ROUNDS</b>		
<b>Opening Afternoon</b>	10 minutes	Lays down club line for debate with specific details on all three clauses. Following the speech, after-speech questions will be asked by speakers from other clubs to clarify speaker's club's position.
<b>First Unpointed</b>	4 minutes	Maiden speaker speaks on one clause only.
<b>Mid-Afternoon</b>	5 minutes	Covers two clauses in line with development of debate.
<b>Second Unpointed</b>	4 minutes	As above.
<b>Ministerial Question Time</b>	N/a	Junior speakers may pose and answer questions of Government ministers on topical issues outwith the realm of the debate.
<b>Third Unpointed</b>	4 minutes	As above.
<b>Closing Afternoon (reverse order)</b>	7 minutes	Sums up afternoon's arguments and defends club line on all three clauses.
<b>EVENING ROUNDS</b>		
<b>Prime Minister's Question Time</b>	N/a	As per Ministerial Question Time, but questions are all directed in the first instance at the Prime Minister.
<b>Opening Evening</b>	10 minutes (Government); 7 minutes (other clubs)	Re-iterates line and clear proposals. Clarifies afternoon misinterpretations etc. Strengthens club line through expansion of case by reference to new information/support, etc.
<b>Evening Unpointed</b>	4 minutes	As above.
<b>Mid-evening</b>	5 minutes	Covers two clauses as per mid-afternoon.
<b>Question Time ("Stunts")</b>	N/a	Each club presents a short skit ("stunt") in the Debates Chamber.
<b>Closing evening (reverse order)</b>	Unlimited (Prime Minister); 15 minutes (Opposition leader); 10 minutes (other clubs);	Club leader (usually) or leader-elect (for final debate of year) summarizes club line, reinforcing weakened elements and highlighting key issues of other club lines. Provides clear summation of entire debate and lucid re-iteration of club line.