British National Debate Tournament

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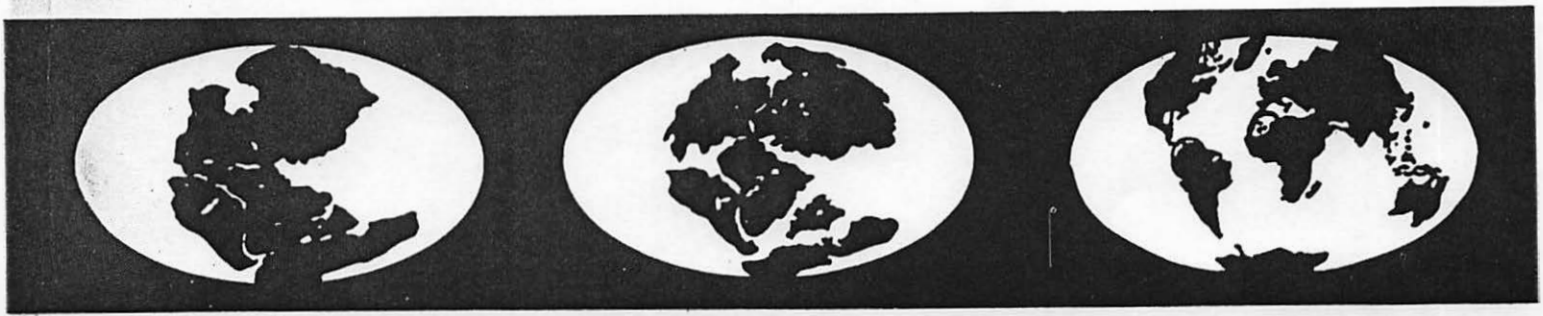

Japan English Forensics Association

BRITISH NATIONAL DEBATE TOURNAMENT

Narahiko Inoue

Student debating in the United States is quite familiar to Japanese students of debate. An increasing number of American textbooks are available here in Japan. There are exchange programs between Japanese and American debaters. We can even read a transcript of the American National Debate Tournament with extensive Japanese notes.[1] But British debating is hardly noticed in Japan currently although many American textbooks do give some accounts of it. They have a national tournament in Britain, which was started by the influence of American debating.

History

American debating originated from British debating; however Americans have since developed the activity in their own way. These two debating styles had become quite different when they met again in 1921. In June of that year, Bates College in Maine, U.S.A. sent a debating team to Oxford University. The three-man style debate was on the motion: "This house approves the American policy of non-interference in European affairs." It presented differences noted by both Americans and British people. Then Bates Instructor Craig Baird who accompanied the team wrote:

> Big differences between the techniques and philosophies of the rival teams quickly appeared. These differences have diminished after fifty years but still exist. The first noticeable contrast was in the audience adaptation and appeals. The home speakers relied much more heavily than did the Americans on complete audience adjustment and response. . . .
> . . . They were obviously more casual, extempore, and conversational than were the Americans. From start to finish they released their personalities in their gestures and bodily

activities. They apparently relied little on memory and used no evidence cards.

> The Bates debaters tended to speak fast, with comparatively level pitch and unvaried intensity. . . . . . Britishers, as I implied above, articulated their ideas more completely with emotional appeals. Their logical organization was not very thorough or consistent. The Americans in rebuttal found difficulty in pinpointing the specific propositions to be replied to. Precise definition and limited interpretation of the issues and the supporting evidence were only loosely followed. The Bates debaters, by contrast, followed closely the textbook patterns for debate as expounded by George Peirce Baker of Harvard and by most teachers and students of forensic discourse since then.[2]

The same debate is described by a British writer:

> They came armed with a card index which would provide for them the rebuttal with the answer to any conceivable point that their opponents might raise. As the Englishmen were speaking there was a constant click-click from the other side of the House as Bates turned up the appropriate point in their card index. They were deadly serious. They expected the verdict to be awarded not on the merits of the motion but on the merits of the debaters. By contrast the Oxford speakers, of course, appeared casual, flippant and inconsequent. Each of them said what it came into his head to say without caring too much whether it tallied with what another speaker might have said before. They cracked jokes some of which were of an only marginal relevance. Factually they were far less well prepared than the American speakers and in American eyes were shockingly indifferent to their lack of preparation.[3]

The differences continue to exist in more or less the same way.[4] British students' debating is more casual and humorous.

They use much fewer quotations. The decision as to which team has won is made by audience votes on the merits of the motion(the British equivalent to proposition) and so they cultivate appeal to the audience.

The British-U.S. exchange, however, produced a somewhat different style of debating in Britain. In 1953 The Observer(a major Sunday newspaper company) sponsored a national debating tournament for students of higher education in Britain. This has been much influenced by the Anglo-American debating; the purpose was to promote a kind of debating "based on argumentation and to be judged according to categories of marks not by audience vote but by judges regarded specially qualified for the purpose . . ."[5] The tournament is in its 29th year and the same purpose is pursued.

Present Tournament

The objective of the tournament is reaffirmed in the 1981-82 Handbook of the event by Kenneth Harris.[6] He wrote in the introduction: "When, twenty-eight years ago, The Observer agreed to sponsor a national debating tournament for students at places of higher education, it was with the object of giving them an incentive to train themselves in the process of exchanging reasoned arguments by which an educated democracy should be governed." The GUIDANCE TO SPEAKERS in the Handbook shows that the tournament's emphasis is on argumentation. It begins: "A good debating speech is an argument, the object of which is to persuade people either that a state of affairs exists or that a course should be taken or rejected." It further says that persuading people requires building up a case and making a "careful selection of points which support the case," and "all need to organize their speech for audience consumption in some way." Too much "humour or drama" in the speech is discouraged, though it admits that the audience will want them. It stresses the need "to support the opinion by reference to an authority." It calls for "the ability to anticipate an opponent's argument and to undermine or refute it."

The above listed qualities are in a way common to American

academic debate, or at least to that of a few decades ago, which Japanese E.S.S. debaters are familiar with. But some differences emerge. Although the Handbook says organization is necessary, it also makes a reservation that "Some speakers consider direct signposting like 'I want to make five points . . .' clumsy." Using notes is admitted to be necessary for "not-so-experienced" debaters but reading or reciting them are strongly discouraged. Humor is still an effective part of debating. Harris remarked at another occasion, when he was commenting on a high school debate, "Debaters should also show a touch of humour--preferably irony--be punchy, and be destructive of the opponent's case without being cheap."

Now let us examine more details of the tournament based on the Handbook, instructions distributed by the British Isles Debates Committee, and the Observer articles.

1. Eligibility

Students from institutions of higher education in the British Isles(including those in Ireland and the Open University).

2. Organization

A student body called the British Isles Debating Association (BIDA) and its National Committees(or Regional Covenors in England) are responsible for the organization and administration. The tournament is sponsored by The Observer.

3. Size

In 1981, 105 teams participated, which was the largest number ever(one institution is allowed to enter the maximum of three teams).

4. Season

The last date for entry is early November. In mid-January preliminary rounds start. Regional finals are at the end of January. The International Final is held in the first half of March.

5. Motion

British debating societies to some extent model themselves on the procedures of the British Parliament so topics used there are referred to as motions. The usual wording is: "This House . . ." BIDA is responsible for selecting motions but The Observer has a right to veto them--this has never been exercised. Motions are sometimes different from round to round; the motion and which side a team is drawn to take are known to the teams well in advance. In 1960 a new rule was introduced as an experiment and "competitors did not know which side they would speak on, and in which order they would speak, until lots were drawn 30 minutes before the debate began."[8] This experiment was thought to be unsuccessful and the side and the order(there are more than two teams in one round) are now published beforehand.

Motions of British debate vary very much and they sometimes sound strange according to the standards suggested by American textbooks. Examples are:

This House would pay students a living wage.
This House believes that permissiveness has gone too far.
This House would legislate to curb the power of the Trade Unions.
This House would scrap Britain's nuclear deterrent.
This House would withdraw from the E.C.C.
This House would introduce proportional representation.

This is not a comprehensive list but some points should be noticed. First, the question to be debated is not limited to policy. Second, in policy questions the word "should" is not used but "would" is used. American debate textbooks tell us that the policy proposition includes "should" to avoid unnecessary debate whether the proposition would be adopted in the real world. In British debating among students, pupils or in other debating societies there will be no such problem of actual adoption of the policy in the real world even if the motion includes the word "would" instead of "should." For the agent of the motion is always "this house." It

means that the policy will be adopted in that "house" where the debate takes place if the proponent of the motion wins the debate. The team does not have to prove that the policy will be adopted in the real world.

6. Procedure

a. Opening

The entrance of the speakers, the chairman and the clerk, when the House(audience) shall be upstanding.

The chairman shall introduce the speakers and judges.

The chairman shall announce the order of speakers, Standing Orders, etc.

The order of speakers are as follows:

Proposition(affirmative)	Opposition
1. 1st speaker of team A	2. 1st speaker of team B
3. 2nd speaker of team A	4. 2nd speaker of team B
5. 1st speaker of team C	6. 1st speaker of team D
7. 2nd speaker of team C	8. 2nd speaker of team D

Continuing this will make it possible to have as many teams as necessary in a single round. For example, the final round consists of four teams.

The alloted time for each speaker is seven minutes.

b. Points of Order

Any member of the House may call upon the chairman to enforce the procedure if it is infringed. The House consists not only of the represented speakers but also of all members of the host Union and of any Union represented in the debate.

c. Points of Information

Speakers on the Order Paper, not all the members of the House, may interrupt the speaker and ask questions or give information, if the speaker is prepared to give way.

The chairman may disallow Points of Order and Points of Information as he or she sees fit.

d. Floor debate

After all the speeches are over the judges retire and discuss their decision. During the time the debate will be opened to

members of the House. On one ocasion two ex-Cabinet ministers were invited to speak. In 1960 at the final, Mr Harold Wilson supported the motion and Mr Enoch Powell opposed it.[9] After the debate the vote takes place--it does not affect the judges' decision.

7. Judging

a. Judges

In Britain there are no professional debate coaches, though there are some public speaking instructors. There are no department of speech in universities. Hence the judges are selected from those experienced in public speaking and debating in the real world, such as MP's, journalists, lawyers, etc. The judging panel of the final debate of the 28th Tournament in 1982 was made up of Professor A.M. Duncan, clerk of the Glasgow University Senate, Mr James Gordon, managing director of Radio Clyde, Mr Charles Wilson, editor of the 'Sunday Standard,' and Mr Kenneth Harris of 'The Observer.'

b. Criteria

The criteria discussed in the Handbook are consistent with the objective of the tournament. The first of these says that "the Tournament is a debating competition, not a public speaking contest." Some of the qualities to be considered are "refutation," "analysis," "evidence," "delivery." Score-sheets are also used to give marks to each speaker. Reading notes or reciting a speech is heavily penalized, which is different from an American style. This is from the practice in the British Parliament. One of the judges at the final of Schools Debating Tournament(at the secondary school level) in 1980 commented, "You can't do it[reading a speech from a text] in the House of Commons. If you tried, there'd be shouts of 'He's reading it'."[10]

Schools Debating

Along with the tournament for university level students, there are two other competitions in debating sponsored by The Observer. One is a "Mooting Competition" in which law students

argue a hypothetical case before a judge. The other is the "Schools Debating Association's Annual Tournament for The Observer Mace," which is for secondary school pupils, beginning in the early '50s as the Public Schools Debating Association's Tournament.

The format used for this competition is slightly different from that of the university level tournament. One debate is contested by two two-person teams, each of which has 15 minutes for their two main speeches. The first speaker may use not more than nine minutes. During the main speeches only Points of Order(not Points of Information) are allowed. After the four main speeches the debate is open to the floor when members of the audience are allowed to speak. After the period one of the two speakers of each team gives a three-minute summary speech. Then the second debate follows. After the second debate the judges retire to discuss the decision.[11]

Final Remark

The style of these debating tournaments seems strongly influenced by Kenneth Harris, who travelled the United States in 1947 as a member of the Oxford debating team and who recognized the value of the American way of debating. He only shows his surprise at American debating in his book written just after the tour, and does not show any evaluation in it.[12] But his positive evaluation is clear from his 1972 speech at the CIDD luncheon and from the fact that he has been in charge of the tournament in The Observer.

The style is a mixture of British and American ways of debating. In British debating societies like the Oxford Union, the audience is persuaded to vote for or against the motion, and the debate is an evening entertainment as well as a training for future leaders of the society. American academic debate was not as sophisticated as that of today when Harris visited the United States. In The Observer tournament the debater's skill is rated by the judges, but the skill includes audience attraction, such as humor and irony which inflicts much injury upon the opponent.

The tournament sometimes provides a chance for the audience to speak, too.

Popularity of The Observer style of debating in Britain is not ascertainable, yet the fact that BBC radio broadcasts the highlights of the final debate every year evidences the degree of popularity to some extent. Most British people I met at Oxford University, including those tutors at the University, were not familiar with the tournament, except for one whose cousin has participated in the competition. It appears that the Oxford Union does not have much interest in the tournament; it has never won the tournament, despite the fact that it has been producing notable real-world debaters.[13] The Union probably did not take part in the tournament in 1979-80.[14] Cambridge, on the other hand, usually enters and does well. However, universities and colleges other than London or Oxbridge seem to be the most active. Among the past winners in twenty-eight years, Glasgow University have won nine times and University College in Dublin have won four times.

Other newspapers may also sponsor similar competitions.[15] But so far as I have discovered the only other tournament is one organized by the English Speaking Union Scotland for secondary schools.[16]

Since debating in Japan is limited to American academic debate, I hope, through this essay, that encouragement will be given to make interest in debating diversified.

Finally I wish to thank those who helped me in preparing this essay; Kinrankai Gakuen for sending me to Oxford in the summer of 1981 and 1982; Mr Harris of The Observer, Mrs Rymer, his secretary, and Mrs Theobald and Mr Griffiths of the ESU, for giving me valuable information about British debate; Professor Ratzlaff of Kinran Junior College for reading through the essay to give valuable comments; Father Scott Howell of JEFA for giving me an incentive to write about British debating.

Notes

1. Michihiro Matsumoto, ed., Korega Debate Da(Tokyo: Aruku, 1981), an extra issue of The English Journal has the transcript of the NDT final 1981.

2. Robert N. Hall and Jack L. Rhodes, ed., Fifty Years of International Debate 1922-1972 (N. Y.: Speech Communication Association, 1972), pp. 24-25.

3. Christopher Hollis, The Oxford Union (London: Evans, 1965), p.166

4. A more recent source is the report on the British tour by SCA-CIDD presented in the session 24.08 "Academic Debate: An International Perspective" at the 65th Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association. The two seemingly relevant presentations at the 68th Meeting are not available at the time of this writing.

5. Kenneth Harris's speech at the CIDD luncheon in Chicago on December 28, 1972, quoted from a recorded tape available from SCA.

6. The Observer Mace Debating Tournament: Handbook 1981-82 (available from British Isles Debates Committee or from The Observer), n.pag.

7. Kenneth Harris, "Debate final 'outstanding', The Observer, May 11, 1980.

8 "The Debating Mace Goes to Wales," The Observer, May 22, 1960, p. 11.

9. loc. cit.

10. Michael Havers, quoted in The Observer, May 11, 1980.

11. A three-page photocopied manual distributed by the Schools Debating Association, 1982.

12. Kenneth Harris, Travelling Tongues: Debating Across America (London: John Murray, 1949), pp. 12-19.

13. The first tournament was won by Ruskin College in Oxford but it is not one of the colleges of Oxford University.

14. "Big entry by debater," The Observer, November 4, 1979.

15. ". . . national newspapers organize annual competitions to encourage university debating societies . . ." Phyllis Bentley, Public Speaking (London: Collins, 1964), p. 118.

16. "The debates were first held in 1954, and attract a steady entry of around 100 schools." Open Mind (London: the English Speaking Union of the Commonwealth), July 1982, p. 6.