

A Coach's Notes¹

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This House believes that the modern feminist movement does more harm than good.

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Introduction

This is the last edition of the 2011-12 CDA season. Previous year's editions can be found through the [Training Materials](#) page on the [CDA web site](#). Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Osterweis 2012 presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Sometimes Definitions Do Matter

This was a great round, and the 8-7 decision indicates how close it was. You can look at your notes (or mine, if you weren't there) and consider the arguments on your own. I want to look at something that both teams missed.

If you look at my notes for the final round at Osterweis 2012, you will see the Government never bothers to define "the modern feminist movement." The Opposition

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never comments or exploits this, and debate progresses around some vague, imprecise idea of feminism. But a little thought shows Gov left a big hole in their case that would have been very easy to exploit.

Before I explain the hole and how to use it, let's review some truisms about definitions:

1. Most of the time definitions are not particularly important in a debate. Generally the teams have a tacit understanding of what the debate is about. The Government case further clarifies the terms through use. Teams that explicitly define terms rarely use them either strategically or tactically; teams that challenge definitions are usually just quibbling. Most of the time, neither affects the decision.
2. Arguments over definitions, especially topicality, are excruciatingly boring. There may be debaters who love to argue terms, and judges who love to listen to them, but I've never met any.
3. Unless Gov is doing violence to the English language or running a tight case², arguing over definitions is very risky for Opp. One of the few rules of debate is that Gov (or the Affirmative) has the right to a reasonable definition of terms. Most judges, in order to avoid an excruciatingly boring debate about definitions will give a lot of leeway on "reasonable," especially in Parli where the concept of a³ linked resolution provides even more leeway than other forms of debate. Arguments over definitions may be wasting time that could be better spent on substance; annoying the judge is just a bonus.

But one of the most fascinating things about debate is that at times everything you've been told is wrong, and this is one of those times.

In their contentions, Gov tacitly defines the "modern feminist movement" as women trying to convince men that they deserve equal opportunity for education, jobs and pay, using tools like quotas. How 1960's of them! Women currently make up more than half of all college students and graduates, and employment discrimination based on sex is illegal.

(How do I know these things? A better question is, as a debater, why don't you? You can look them up if you want. While parli generally bans research or evidence, knowledge is still power. Nine times out of ten—or more often—the better informed team wins.)

So Opp can do something like this:

The Prime Minister never defined the modern feminist movement. They talk about equal educational and employment opportunity, but that is all in the past. More than half of all college students and graduates are currently women; employment discrimination is illegal; and, by the way, women have had the vote for almost a century, so we can leave that one off too.

No, the modern feminist movement, and by that we mean today's feminist movement, has very different goals: protecting women's reproductive rights, making it possible for women to have

² A "tight case" is one that is based on a restrictive definition of the motion that leaves the Opposition no grounds for argument. For example, defining the modern feminist movement as "motherhood" would be a tight case.

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both a family and a career, helping women develop the informal networks that make high positions in business and politics possible. That is modern feminism.

Our contentions are...

You can work out your own variations on this, as well your own Opp contentions and rebuttal to the Gov contentions. You still need to reply to the Gov contentions in detail, mostly to explain why their disadvantages don't apply. But at this point Gov doesn't have much of a case left.

Win the Crowd

Breakout rounds are different from qualifiers: you have an audience that consists of more than the judge and the opposing team. Winning the crowd never hurts, and it can make a difference in a close debate. Judges are affected by the tone of the room. If your comments, humor and oratory are consistent with your arguments, they can help persuade a judge who thinks the arguments are running even. And no judge wants to be part of a decision which, when announced, the crowd goes "Huh?" especially if the crowd is full of fellow debaters.

If you look at the preface to my notes on the final round, you will see that the two debaters on Gov are male, and the two on Opp are female. My notes don't record humor or crowd reaction, though there was some in this round. For example, the Gov point about feminism annoying men was one attempt at an argument both serious and humorous.

The argument presented above would be doubly effective in the hands of a woman. One opening statement: "Well, once again men have demonstrated they have no idea what women want!"

It's easy to descend into silliness or to give offense, so don't overdo it. Debate is about making arguments not jokes. But you are allowed to have a good time, and to share it with your audience, when you have one. If the entire audience is one judge, be careful: if he doesn't like your humor you're toast. But if you make it into the breakout rounds and the room begins to fill up, look for the opportunity to win the crowd.

As an exercise, consider how you would enhance the argument presented above (or the actual arguments presented in the debate) depending on your gender. If you are male on Opp, how would you tell a female PM she doesn't understand feminism? If you are female, how do you argue for Gov? Remember, you may be the person up in front of the room someday.