

Debating – A Short History

Debating used to be highly dangerous business and as you enjoy an evening at our club, consider the great tradition of which we are a part.

Our story really begins with the ancient Greeks who invented democracy, and with it, debate and the art of public speaking. Athens was the centre of this movement.

Here are some key dates:

436 BC: Birth of Isocrates, the first teacher of public speaking. He cared very much for free debate and when Athens was conquered by Sparta, which was an absolute monarchy, he committed suicide by starving himself. Isocrates was a great speech writer but a rather boring speaker.

439 BC: Socrates, the great philosopher, makes one of the first great speeches in his own defence. The Athenian assembly cannot answer him but still sentence him to death because they disagree with him. You can read his speech on the Internet at <http://socrates.clarke.edu/aplg0100.htm> or *The Last Days of Socrates* (Penguin Books).

384 – 322 BC: Demosthenes won damages pleading his own case as a boy, when robbed of his father's estate. Angered, he taught himself to speak by placing pebbles in his mouth and reciting verses whilst running. He stood on the seashore and spoke against the noise of the sea. Demosthenes became the greatest Greek orator and his works were studied in Universities and Law Schools as models of oratory. His demise was self-inflicted, as he poisoned himself after his attempt to keep Athens free of tyranny, failed. For his speeches see <http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Demosthenes.html>

After the rise of Rome, two major figures influenced debating and speaking.

106 – 43 BC: Marcus Tullius Cicero was a lawyer, philosopher and politician who studied the methods of actors to become an effective orator. He wrote *De Oratore*, which was a philosophical dialogue, or discussion of opposing views by two opposing characters. Cicero lived in dangerous times when Rome was turning into an imperial dictatorship. One view of him is that he tended to save his condemnation of his opponents until they had fallen. Selections from his work on oratory may be found at <http://www.towson.edu/~tinkler/reader/cicero.html> (translation by John F. Tinkler of the University of Texas).

43 AD: Birth of Marcus Fabius Quintilian who wrote *Intitudio de Oratorio*, another early work on public speaking. It was used for training politicians, religious leaders and lawyers until the 20th century.

After the fall of the Roman Empire around 400 AD, civilisation collapsed in the West and public speaking became a lost art, except for use by ministers of religion.

Speaking was revived in the Italian city states of the medieval period and the parliaments of that time. The longest lasting parliament has been that of Britain and it is with the founding of this our story continues.

1265: The first British Parliament was summoned. Many other European countries had them. Debates evolve as discussions for and against specific proposals, supported by organised factions.

1377: Sir Thomas Hungerford becomes the first Speaker of the British Parliament. His job was to speak to the King on behalf of Parliament and to Parliament on behalf of the King. This office (of Speaker) is later to spread around the Commonwealth and to the United States and become the symbol of orderly, free debate.

1410 – 1629: Nine Speakers were beheaded for giving opinions Kings disliked. From that time onwards, the tradition of dragging a newly chosen Speaker to their chair began. It is still observed.

1600: Most European Kings stop having Parliaments and rule absolutely. The British Parliament resists claiming it, alone, has the right to raise taxes.

1629: Members of Parliament hold Speaker Sir John Finch in his chair to stop him from standing up and suspending Parliament as the King has ordered.

1642: Five members of Parliament speak in favour of the privileges of Parliament against the King, who sends the army to arrest them. They go into hiding and Parliament orders their location kept secret. When King Charles I orders Speaker William Lenthall to disclose their whereabouts he replies "*I have neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak in this place but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here.*"

1642 – 1688: Repeated struggles end when Parliament appoints William III and Mary the first constitutional monarchs of Great Britain. Parliamentary government is assured but participation is confined to the privileged few who have the right to vote.

1688 – 1715: There is free speech in Parliament but Sir Richard Steele, a famous debater and early journalist, is expelled from Parliament by the corrupt government majority for being too effective at debating! His newspaper, *The Spectator*, is forced to close, along with many others, by a tax on paper equivalent to a day's pay.

1715 – 1755: People gather in the London coffee houses to discuss the news and read the few remaining papers. John Wilkes, their popular hero, is repeatedly elected to Parliament and expelled again by the government majority.

- 1755 A group called the Ancient Society of Cogers starts public debates in a London tavern. The name is derived from the philosophical maxim “Cogito ergo sum” (I think therefore I am). We should think of it as “I debate therefore I am.” This may claim to be oldest free speech forum in the world.
- The meetings had a forty minute opening talk on the events of the past week and then the meeting was open to all participants in turn, who could express any view about current events they chose.
 - They originally met to support Wilkes but also supported the United States’ Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution so they were not popular with the government!
 - Spies went into the meeting to arrest those who expressed these opinions. As a result of this, the opening speaker would always make a “loyal reference” to the monarch to confuse the spies! The practice continued throughout the society’s history. The re-founded society observes this custom to this day.
 - The society became highly respectable in the nineteenth century and many public figures learnt their speaking skills in this society. Politicians would attend the meeting to gauge popular opinion.
 - In the twentieth century, most people no longer lived in the centre of London, so Saturday night debates had fewer people present, until the society fragmented in the 1960’s and eventually closed.
 - In 1997, a member of the Association of Speakers Clubs, led by a dedicated survivor of the old society, revived the old society after a hugely successful demonstration evening. It now meets at the Old Bank of England on London’s Fleet Street on the second Monday of the month.

1815: The Cambridge Union Society formed at Cambridge University to allow students to practice Parliamentary style of debating. It was closed for being too controversial! It soon, however, reopened. Oxford University students started the Oxford Union in 1823. These two societies have trained many famous figures in the art of debate and still regularly attract famous personalities to their debates.

Public debate has become increasingly popular since that time. We are very fortunate to be able to enjoy this in the safe atmosphere of a Toastmasters club.

From Failure to Success

Benjamin Disraeli was booed and jeered the first time he spoke in the British Parliament. He was forced to resume his seat, but said “I sit now, but the time will come when you will hear me.” He later served twice as Prime Minister of Britain.

Winston Churchill was the son of Randolph Churchill who had been a great debater. Winston was a failure at school but surpassed his father as a speaker.

Great Speeches

Historic speeches may be heard at <http://www.historychannel.com/speeches/> .

A sample of a great debating speech by Edmund Burke, made in the British Parliament in 1775, before the United States declared independence from Britain, may be found at <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/D/1751-1775/libertydebate/burk.htm> . Burke lost the vote but it was regarded as a great masterpiece of speaking.

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