



I have just returned from an interesting World Schools Debating Championships (WSDC) in Cape Town, South Africa. Cape Town is a beautiful city and the organisers and the hosts were some of the friendliest people I have ever met. Going to the townships to judge was a very memorable experience and learning about the debating efforts of the schools in these poor neighbourhoods was a heartening moment. Although there were many hiccups, the organisers worked hard to make sure that everyone had a splendid time. That said, the 2012 edition of the tournament proper left me with mixed feelings. Although I am very happy to have had the opportunity to have accompanied an outstanding Singapore team to the event, I feel that many components of the tournament could have been improved. This report will focus exclusively on the debate related components of the tournament, namely, the motions, the debating and the judging. I personally believe that the quality of the motions could have been much better and that there are some puzzling and possibly detrimental developments in the debating and the judging as well.

Motions

2 I feel that the motions used in for WSDC 2012 could have been selected with more care so that they would have been more appropriate for a World Schools Tournament; one which features high school level debaters debating in front of audiences of a similar age. I do not know for sure if the outcome of the tournament would have been different with a different set of motions. I am also aware that it is not possible to come up with a perfect set of motions for an entire tournament. I also appreciate that the individuals setting the motions had done so with the best of intentions. However, I also believe an after-tournament evaluative process is critical to ensuring high quality motions suitable for future WSDCs. It is with this intent that the following observations are made.

3 The motions used in the tournament were as follows:

Round

Motion

1

THW ban alcohol

2

THBT newly democratised Arab nations should not allow religious parties to participate in elections (pre)

3

THW allow single parents in prison to raise their children behind bars

4

THBT developing nations should place limits on internal rural-urban migration (prepared)

5

THBT the police should use racial profiling when fighting crime

5R

Reserve: THBT government-run broadcasting stations should give airtime to racist political parties (Used)

6

THBT the feminist movement should seek a ban on pornography (prepared)

7

THS Child Labour in the Developing World

8

THBT states should enshrine legally actionable socio-economic rights (prepared)

OF

THBT the govt should create schools that teach in endangered indigenous languages

QF

THBT Gay rights organizations should out gay public figures

SF

THS a 100% tax on all inherited wealth

GF

TH regrets South Africa's decision to use the Truth and Reconciliation Commission rather than prosecute

4 The motions are limited to a narrow set of topics. The majority of these motions relate to social issues as well as possible measures to address these social problems. Missing at the tournament were topics ranging from sports, the environment, technology and science, war and terrorism, international relations and so forth. This narrow set of topics had the following effects:

1. **Punishing good preparation:** Debaters who had prepared for the tournament by reading up on a wide range of topics and examples were not able to take advantage of their hard work. Teams which happened to have been more comfortable within this narrow range of topics would then have had an advantage over more well-rounded teams. A possible concern should the motions continue along this trend is that teams stop trying to read up on a wide range of areas and instead try to focus only on social motions in anticipation of similar topics at the next tournament.

2. **Preventing growth as debaters:** Speakers are able to grow tremendously when they face off against teams bringing different national and cultural perspectives to a wide range of issues. When the topics are limited in range, the speakers are unable to learn as much from the

debates during the tournament.

3. **Preventing growth for judges:** Judges, especially those who are new to WSDC, benefit greatly by being able to judge different types of topic areas. They would learn how to assess arguments made on economic grounds in international relations topics as much as they learn how to evaluate speeches made on civil liberties on social topics.

5 **The motions were generally not topical and were esoteric:** WSDC and the Schools format have always had the interest of the audience at heart. This is partly why there is a strong emphasis on style (more on this later) and a tradition of bringing the debates to different parts of the community and in particular to different schools. However, many of the motions did not relate to issues which were likely to be on the minds of the audiences. This could thus lead to the audience members being more disengaged from the debates. Some motions were so obscure that even the teams did not know clearly what the main issues in the debate were. In Round 5, some teams even had to ask what “racial profiling” referred to as it was not a significant issue in their countries. The

worst

outcome was that the narrow and esoteric nature of the motions led to most teams not having many examples in their constructive and rebuttal arguments. This is not to say that all the motions must always be related to the host country or to current world events. However, at least half, if not the majority of the motions should have been topical.

6 **The motions were limited to policies:** One of the best qualities of WSDC debating is that debaters are asked to handle two teams of motions:

1. **“change motions,”** where teams must advocate for a specific policy to address a problem or issue (This House Would Ban Firearms); and

2. **“judgement motions,”** where teams must make a judgement on a specific issue (This House Believes that the UN has failed or This House would rather national security than individual rights).

7 At WSDC 2012, the vast majority of the motions were policy motions, which generally required the proposition team to develop a “model” for their policy. In fact, one could argue that the only motion which was a judgement motion was the one chosen for the grand final. This uneven distribution would have the following effects:

1. **Rewarding teams more comfortable in policy debates:** The lack of judgement motions meant that teams which could not handle these types of motions were not punished. These teams could instead have benefited narrower type of motions at the expense of teams which would have been more comfortable with both types of motions.

2. **Lack of education on judgement motions:** This was the worst of the two outcomes. Teams lose the opportunity during the debates to learn from each other and from the judges on how to approach judgement motions. In fact, given the propensity for policies, teams could indeed come to believe that ALL motions needed to be policy motions. We had already seen this happen at a previous WSDC, where a team tried to run a policy on national identity cards on a civil liberties judgment motion. We saw this again at WSDC 2012 at the grand final itself, where I felt the proposition team ran a policy even though it was not needed. The judges also lose out as they do not get the opportunity to learn how to adjudicate different types of motions.

8 **Too many motions were Big, Red Ball motions** Big, Red Ball motions are those that require the Government to use a specific instrument to attain a specific outcome. An example would read: “This House would control population through legislation.” Big, Red Ball motions can often lead to good debates, since the focus of the debate is clear and both sides are likely to find areas of clash. At the same time, the proposition team generally has a lot more work to do, since they would have to argue in favour of both the outcome and the instrument. The opposition, in contrast, could choose to attack just one or the other. I argue that a typical should not have more than 1 or 2 Big Red Ball motions. WSDC 2012, however, may have had 5 such motions (R5, R6, OF, QF, SF).

9 **Some motions required extreme instruments:** One of the mitigating factors for proposition teams who are asked to defend a specific policy is that the motion is usually worded in such a way to provide some flexibility. Thus, the team could use the power of definition to make the policy as reasonable and debateable as possible. However, some of the WSDC 2012 motions forced propositions into advocating very specific and extreme instruments, which in turn made the job for the proposition significantly harder. For instance,

For R6, the proposition had to approach the issue of banning pornography from the specific angle of the feminist movement;

For the OF, the government not only had to defend that endangered languages had to be preserved but that they had to be reserved specifically through schools which taught in these languages;

For the QF, the proposition not only had to argue that it would be better for gay public figures to declare their orientation but that they should be forced into doing so if necessary;

For the SF, which really takes the cake, the proposition not only had to argue that inheritance should be taxed but that it should be taxed at 100%.

10 **Some motions were not balanced:** In addition to the above factors, some of the motions set were not balanced in terms of the arguments available for the proposition and opposition. This applied, in particular, to the motion in R1. The motion on banning alcohol completely proved to be difficult for many debaters and this motion had already been found to have been weighted at a previous WSDC in 1992. However, even though this motion was specifically mentioned in the WSDC Notes for Adjudicators as being weighted, it was once again used in Cape Town. The motions in the knock out rounds were generally a little more unbalanced as well.

Debating

11 On the whole, there tended to have been some unusual tendencies in the way the teams were debating. In general, I believe these tendencies could lead to poorer quality speeches and poor quality debates.

12 **Use of *lists* of arguments in lieu of deep analysis:** During the debates, some speakers tended to have multi-layered or multi-tiered substantive arguments. For example, the first proposition speaker in a round would say he has 2 substantive arguments. However, each of his arguments had 3 tiers. In actuality, each of these tiers would have been strong enough to stand on their own as arguments. Thus, this speaker really had 6 substantive arguments to deliver. However, with only a limited amount of time available, none of the 6 points were analysed and explained properly.

13 Some debaters also had this habit of merely listing several “responses” to a particular argument. However, if these were proper rebuttals, they would have taken way too much time to be articulated in full. Thus, each “list” tends to consist of one or two-liner counter-arguments and thus should have scored badly on content. This habit signalled to me that the debater was unable to make a decision on which rebuttal was the strongest for the argument. It generally also compromised the ability of the Third Speakers to demonstrate their ability to generate new rebuttals. Judges noted that they were increasingly having to “fill in the blanks” for the debaters to get a grasp of the arguments and rebuttals being used. The audience watching, without the benefit of significant debating experience, would have been at a loss as to what these points actually meant.

14 **Lack of examples.** With some notable exceptions, most teams did not have sufficient examples for their substantive material and their rebuttals. Granted, some of the motions were obscure and generating examples might have been difficult. However, the teams still had access to the almanac and 3-5 collective heads should have brought up more examples. What was surprising was that many of the teams did not have that many examples even for the prepared debates. However, some of the judges, in their oral feedback or the individual feedback, also failed to raise this issue entirely. Until this is addressed, the debaters are not likely to put more emphasis on examples. More on this issue later.

15 **Lack of style.** Again, with notable exceptions, many of the debaters were not speaking in the clear and persuasive manner associated with WSDC. In general, the speakers talked faster and with less variety and variation. This was compounded by the lack proper structure and sign posting to make the transition from point to point clearer for the judges. During some of the knock-out rounds at WSDC 2012, some audience members had trouble following arguments due to the lack of clarity and many of the audience members were switched off or asleep as a result. Even in the grand final, many audience members had difficulty following the arguments. Again, the judges could have given more feedback on this issue. More again on this issue later in para 19.

16 **Failure to get feedback.** It is understandable if teams failed to get feedback from judges due to time pressure. However, it is unclear why teams would not bother to get feedback from all the judges in the room if time was available. If the judge had given the team a loss, the team should check with the judge and see what it was that they did wrong. Even if the judge had given them a win, check to see if more could have been done. When I was a debater, I found that I didn't learn much from the judges who had nothing but praise. I did learn a lot from the judges who had criticism and advice on how to get better. Even if the team thinks the judge is an idiot, talk to the judge still, because the team could get the same idiot again in a later round and not know what the judge wants in the debate. Lastly, it's just common courtesy that the team at least have a chat with the judges, who had flown hundreds of KMs, often at their own expense, to judge the teams.

Judges

17 It is always important to have good quality judges at a tournament and WSDC 2012 may have suffered as a result of a number of judges withdrawing closer to the start of the tournament. However, this was not as big a concern as the divergent judging paradigms were.

18 **Single issue dominance.** Some judges at WSDC appeared to be focused on single issues during the debate and would often gave less weight to all the other elements in the debate as long as one team was able to find that single issue and talk about it. This got to the point where even though a team may lack style, evidence and structure, they may still be chosen as a winner by the judge just by being able to yell repeatedly about a single issue. The concern is that judges would ignore the examples being used by a team, even if they had not been challenged by the opposing team. WSDC should not be about single issue debating. It should be a balance of identifying the correct core issues, exploring the various elements of the motion in a thorough manner and ensuring that these elements are supported by analysis, style and structure.

19 **Ignoring Style.** Worryingly, some judges appear to put less emphasis on style. In fact, some were candid enough to state that they were just giving “average” marks on style and were instead determining the winner purely on content. This is a dangerous trend if it should become prevalent. First, these judges are blatantly ignoring the WSDC rules, which state that 40% of the score is to be given on style. Second, the judges are indirectly encouraging teams to ignore the style element of the debate, which makes them worse speakers than before. Teams are more

likely to be chosen on the basis of content alone and at the expense of clarity and cohesion and speech. The people who suffer the most are the audience members at WSDC, who attend the matches expecting the best orators in the world bringing ideas and clash to their classrooms. The lack of style would turn debates into insular little yelling matches in rooms occupied by no one but the speakers and the judges. This is not the way to go.

20 Since I am edging close to 3000 words, I shall draw this to a close. Again, I note and appreciate the efforts made by everyone, including the motions setters, the speakers and judges in trying to give everyone the best debates possible. It is also possible, that with many more tournaments on the circuit and debaters being exposed to different schools and formats of debate, there are bound to be difficulties in keeping the different debating and judging paradigms distinct and separate. However, unless we try to remember the core elements of WSDC and practise it in speaking and judging at the WSDC, the best qualities of WSDC debating may be lost. I genuinely believe that once upon a time, a random person walking into a WSDC debate would leave the match engaged, enlightened and entertained. I fear that if some of these trends continue, this spectator will leave the room disorientated, dismayed and disgusted.