

THE DECLINE OF AFFIRMATIVE PLAN CONSTRUCTION: A SOURCE OF CONCERN IN CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

by
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It seems perfectly clear that a very real change in the nature of the affirmative proposal or plan has occurred in the last few years. In contrast to days of yore, affirmative policy proposals are today, more often than not, bereft of any logistics, any reasonable mechanism for implementation, and any explanation regarding the policy actors who will be involved. The plan might mention how the proposal is to be paid for. However, undoubtedly this constitutes more of a plan spike than an illumination about policy. Then contemporary debaters will conclude the plan presentation with something about how counterplans should be presented in full text, or about how future affirmative speeches will clarify intent. Both of these are anti-intellectual debate constructs which inform no one about how the plan operates. This affirmative practice is becoming so common that one rarely hears a well-developed and articulate plan. Poorly developed and inarticulate proposals for change do not serve the best interests of debate, or those of the student participant. They diminish our policy focus and our credibility to the larger constituency.

Early this season, a fine Georgia school ran a one sentence plan that resolved the Russian prostitution problem by sending 100,000 U. S. military personnel to Russia. That was it! No additional information was forthcoming. Nothing about what they would do while in Russia, where they would stay, who they would report to, or how U.S. Army men and women would be able to render meaningful assistance given the fact they don't speak the language, and would be seriously unbalanced patrolling the streets of a foreign land. The affirmative then presented some amorphous solvency evidence that suggested that U.S. help was necessary in dealing with the scourge of Russian prostitution. Then, of course, the advantage that is attained by having clamped down on Russian prostitution is compellingly offered. After the 1 AC, I sat back awaiting the barrage from the negative that would surely be oriented toward demonstrating the fundamental foolishness

of the idea. The cross-examining 2N did ask a question that implied that he was not altogether comfortable with the plan mechanism. But when he was told to just read the 'something' evidence, he backed off. To my chagrin, the 1 NC then rose to indicate she has problems with topicality. Additionally, as memory serves, she proclaimed her intent to offer an observation suggesting Norway could better deal with the problem, and also that the affirmative will create a Clinton popularity disaster of epic and global proportions. My heart sank. These are two intelligent young people on the negative. Surely they see how nonsensical the plan is. Or even if it makes some sense, how ill-defined and poorly articulated it most obviously is. Any credible indictment should result in an absolute take out of solvency given that the plan is the foundation on which the solvency and advantages depend. But no challenge is forthcoming and, alas, the debate boiled down to whether President Clinton becomes popular enough to do something stupid.

When my debate career began some 15 years ago, plans were reasonably intelligent and relatively detailed proposals for change. That was considered necessary in order for the affirmative to be regarded as *prima facie*. There existed certain criteria for the presentation of the proposal. In fact, *fiat* demanded some specificity. The word 'should' could not be actualized without a reasonably detailed plan. There seemed to be an implicit deal. The affirmative developed an intelligent and detailed proposal in exchange for the right of *fiat*, which allowed the affirmative not to have to defend negative workability or circumvention arguments. Not any more. These days *fiat* exists even when there is almost nothing to *fiat*. In the prostitution case cited earlier, nothing credible exists post-plan, yet the affirmative gets the full rights of assumed implementation. This in effect is the right to *fiat* solvency. No wonder the affirmative wins as much as it does. What must be understood is that there is an undeniable difference between an idea and a policy proposal.

An idea should not command *fiat*, a policy proposal should. Clearly the Russian prostitution case cited above is just an idea. To elevate it to policy credibility is a titanic leap of faith, if not a total suspension of coherent thought.

The question naturally arises as to why affirmatives should present a well-developed plan when they can easily win without one. This is a perfectly reasonable question from a debate standpoint, but it certainly raises larger concerns regarding the direction of our activity. It's probably not too bold to say that in nine out of ten policy rounds, plans are offered that have no possibility of accruing the advantages. The plans are so vague and unspecific that anyone outside of our activity would dismiss them as both non-implementable and non-credible. But debaters are not tone deaf. They sense what works and what does not. They don't present poorly and simplistically written plans because they are just instinctively inclined to do so. But rather because it doesn't hurt their ability to win rounds. So many judges have such low demands regarding plan construction, yet such high demands regarding nuclear catastrophes and body counts. Most college students judging high school rounds could care less about the plan as long as something is offered. If judges do not shift some focus to the plan itself, and are unwilling to assess the reasonable impact of it, then no debater will risk the time necessary to present a detailed plan. Thus the recommendation offered below may represent a moot point. Certainly absent negative argumentation, a critic should not unilaterally dismiss even the most thoughtless plan. But if we, as judges and coaches, consider ourselves thoughtful assessors of policy, then we should be true to that description and reward negative debaters who dare to question the connection between the plan and the implications. If we look critically at *fiat* as being a construct to be earned rather than simply being bestowed, plans will inevitably become more sophisticated.

Imagine that proposals for change

were suddenly thoughtful and carefully constructed. Certain obvious effects come to mind. **Initially**, it would clearly add intellectual credibility to policy debate. If policy debate is to be about policy, then the policy has to be rational to the critic or observer, who should demand nothing less. Thinking individuals outside our activity would view our current proposals for change as silly if not insulting. They might immediately discern that no reasonable person in a policy-making position would view the proposal as anything more than the simplistic thrashings of an under-informed and angry citizen. What other conclusion would they draw from the prostitution case cited earlier? **Secondly**, the well-explained and carefully constructed plans would allow the debate over solvency to be informed and specific. In contemporary debate, solvency is argued so generically, that negatives usually ask the critic to flow it separately. This reveals clearly that the argument, perhaps too generous a term, has nothing really to do with what solvency should have to do with, the connection between the proposal and the resolutorial goal. Quite an offense to propriety, the negative may term the solvency position as a 'dump'. The vulgarity of the term highlights the obligatory and non-substantive nature of the argument. With better developed plans, and critics who will demand reasonable specificity, solvency will become a credible issue and have the effect of illuminating the search for truth rather than bypassing it. **Thirdly**, the well-developed and thoughtful plans would better prepare the student competitor for other challenges in life. Imagine the results that would inevitably occur in business, education, the military, or government from former student debaters proposing change in the manner performed in a debate round. If our debaters are led to believe that these simplistic proposals are routinely accepted, then they are led in the wrong direction. Demanding a multi-planked plan that has intellectual and policy credibility sends pre-

cisely the right message and empowers our students rather than handicapping them.

So what elements should a proposal have in order to earn the right of *fiat*.

It would appear that the reasonable plan should contain most of the following elements:

First, what agency of government is reasonable for plan implementation? Ideally that agency should have experience and expertise in the area. If a sub-agency within the department is really in physical charge of implementation, then that sub-agency should be identified. If an agency or board is to be created, then a fuller explanation of its functions and make-up are required,

Second, the process of policy implementation should be articulated. How exactly will the agency conduct the policy? Who will be the actors on the scene? What will they actually be doing? How might they deal with contingencies and natural obstacles that may present themselves when a policy is being implemented?

Third, what will be the penalty for noncompliance? Our pluralistic society fails to just roll over for government action. Resistance and outright defiance often occur. And they do not emerge just from the citizenry, but from other agencies. How will the affirmative structure compel compliance with what might constitute significant changes in society and public policy? Some clarification seems essential to the plan's policy credibility, and of course the plan's solvency requirement.

Fourth, how will the costs be provided for specifically? The current budget agreement in Washington demand offsets for any new spending programs. What programs will be offset? Or if taxes are to be raised, what taxes and how much? The current debate practice of occasionally saying 'normal means' means absolutely nothing except that the money is attained constitutionally.

Fifth and last, what will be the du-

ration of plan? Most policy proposals set a time limit, or at least can posit an estimation of the time involved. Simply saying that the policy will be in effect as long as it takes is enough reason to suggest something is wrong with the basic concept behind the proposal, unless of course, the proposal represents a permanent change in policy, which should also be stated.

This list is not meant to be all-inclusive. The nature of the plan should dictate many of the logistics. Certainly the more ambitious the plan, the higher the burden of specificity.

As a coach who worries about the direction of the activity we all care so much about, I can't help but conclude that a return to a real policy focus is critical to our survival. Other contributions to this magazine have highlighted other concerns such as the absence of any inherency debate, the demise of an effective public speaking component to debate, and my own contribution regarding the diminished contribution of the 1 NC. We need to take a step back and acknowledge what so many of us know is true. That is that we are thickening the walls between our activity and our natural constituency. Unless we relink ourselves with the citizenry, we have reason to fear for the future. If we can't proudly display our craft to various groups in society, if we respond to criticism with scorn for our critics, and if we assume that society simply is not sophisticated enough to appreciate our current conventions, we are in trouble. We can change without losing an analytical focus. We can gain the broader constituency necessary for survival. But to do this, we must honor our role as illuminators of policy. We can be so much more, but we certainly should be no less.

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