



A Higher Form of Debate

By Pat Horan - November 13, 2014

Since 2006, Robert Rosenkranz has been working on elevating public debate in this country. His project is a program called Intelligence Squared (IQ2), a debate series among equals structured to solicit genuine arguments.

Based on an incredibly successful series in London, Intelligence Squared uses the Oxford style of debate, which allows for authentic arguments that are both topical and substantive. The debates take place in front of a live audience in New York City and air on NPR. Every debate has a clearly stated proposition with two sides, pro and con. The proposition is a topic directly relevant to current day politics and culture. Each side consists of two participants, who are able to make seven-minute opening statements, answer questions from both the moderator and the audience, and conclude with two-minute closing remarks. Meanwhile, the audience is exposed to well-reasoned opinions supported by facts as they decide who made the more convincing case. The audience votes before and after the debate. Whichever side has swayed more votes is declared the winner.

The moderator is news correspondent John Donovan. Donovan masterfully steers the night to keep the discussion both fascinating and on topic. He's respectful and impartial, but he's also not afraid to step in if the conversation veers off course. Given its ability to hold a truly provocative event, Intelligence Squared should host the final presidential debate with Donovan as moderator.

Intelligence Squared produces something critical (and frequently lacking) in a democracy: civil argument. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once wisely remarked, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts." With IQ2 debates on subjects ranging from Common Core to fracking to Iran's nuclear program, the gap between opinion and facts is clearly tight on both sides, and the audience benefits immensely.

The United States is indebted to the Rosenkranz Foundation and its co-sponsors for providing this wonderful program. While there is currently not a commercial market for this forum, there is a democratic hunger and need for it.

Intelligence Squared's [last debate](#) took place on October 22. The proposition: Income inequality impairs the American Dream of upward mobility. Arguing for the proposition were Elise Gould, Senior Economist and Director of Health Policy Research at the Economic Policy Institute, and entrepreneur Nick Hanauer, who was an early investor in Amazon.com. Against the motion were Scott Winship, a scholar at the Manhattan Institute, and Edward Conard, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a former partner at Bain Capital.

Gould and Winship were the policy wonks. The Economic Policy Institute is a prominent think tank with a liberal outlook that advocates for poor and moderate income families and publishes prolifically on the challenges facing working class America. The Manhattan Institute is the premier free-market think tank for urban policy, having re-negotiated the failed social compact that the Great Society struck with New York's urban poor through fixing broken window policy, workfare, and school choice. Gould stressed the widening gap between rich and poor and the stagnancy of wages, while Winship argued that it's inequality of opportunity, not inequality of outcome, that's the problem.

Hanauer and Conard were the capitalists – one with a guilty conscience and the other one's clear. The Amazon investor bemoaned what he saw as the rise of a new feudalism. The former Bain partner maintained that the American dream and economic mobility are very much alive.

Both sides spoke with facts, eloquence, and respect. Before the debate, over 60 percent agreed with the proposition that income inequality hinders the American Dream, and only 14 percent disagreed. Afterward, only a little over half still agreed, while 36 percent disagreed. While they still had fewer votes total, Winship and Conard had won by persuading more members of the audience – which was initially inclined to the Krugman/Stiglitz view on income inequality – that the connection was not so clear.

The debate went to the heart of Thomas Picketty's best-selling *Capital in the 21st Century*. Although Donvan kept the conversation strictly to the question of whether income inequality hinders the American Dream, there are obviously related questions that must be answered: If income inequality is harmful, what are its implications for capitalism and democracy? Is Picketty right to argue for a global income tax. If he is not right, what should we do to assist the working poor? These are the questions IQ2 wants people to continue to discuss after the formal debate.

The next debate will take place tonight. The proposition: Legalize assisted suicide. Australian utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer and psychologist Andrew Solomon will argue for the affirmative, while medical ethicist Daniel Sulmasy and the Baroness Iora Finlay of the British House of Lords will argue against the motion. With Brittany Maynard's recent choice to die by drugs rather than brain cancer, this is a relevant and important discussion. As with all of IQ2's debates, tonight's event starts at 6:45 p.m., and it will be [live streamed](#).

Behind these contests is a treasure trove of research. The debate series is today's equivalent of the Lincoln-Douglas debate – thoughtful and substantive. The United States would be able to save high school civics if teachers just built their classes around this great free resource. In a world of screaming partisans and ideologues, Intelligence Squared is an intellectual oasis surrounded by a desert of talking points.

For those who are interested, IQ2's website contains an [archive](#) of past debates dating back to 2006.

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