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Intelligence Squared U.S.
New Podcast: The State of Debate on Capitol Hill
and The American Health Care Act

In Conversation:
John Donovan & Mickey Edwards

Start Time: (00:00:00)

John Donovan:

Hi, this is John Donovan with a podcast this time that is a little bit of a new direction we're trying out at Intelligence Squared U.S. to mix in with our usual lineup. Most of the time, you know, you get a podcast that is a debate. This one is more about debate. We thought we would take a moment to give a zoomed out picture of how debate in Congress works or is supposed to work and to get an insiders perspective on how that's been changing over time.

Okay, so here's our jumping off point for this. As many media outlets are reporting, Trumpcare gives us a way into an important but persistent question about the quality of Congressional deliberation with the much reported fact that when Senate Republicans were having a hard time getting its version of a healthcare bill hammered out, they went behind closed doors to get most of it done and they announced that when it was ready they would allow for 20 hours of full debate on the bill. And then, what both the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* noted was, "whoa 20 hours, the bill that became Obamacare back in 2010 got 25 days," that is a paraphrase. But technically it's true.

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And it could make the GOP side appear to be shrinking away from debate. And debate is a thing that we love here at Intelligence Squared, and we know that you do too.

So, I reached out to one of our past debaters, former Oklahoma Congressman Mickey Edwards, who right now is directing a program at the Aspen Institute that is designed to foster bipartisan thinking among elected officials. Mickey loves what we do at Intelligence Squared, and he loves the process of seeing ideas pulled apart out in the open and then put back together again. When he debated with us the motion was the GOP Must Seize the Center Or Die, he argued in the affirmative and boy did he argue. Listen to this:

[clip playing]

[applause]

Mickey Edwards:

James Madison is my hero, I love Madison. They champion a limited government. But he was also for government. The Constitution was not just to put constraints on government, but to empower government to act in a reasonable rational way as a nation.

[clip ends]

John Donovan:

Oh, rationality. I do like rationality.

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So, that's why I'm going to Mickey to ask his view on what his party is up to in seeming, seeming, to duck on a debate. Mick Edwards, thanks so much for connecting with us.

Mickey Edwards:

Sure John, I'm glad to do it.

John Donovan:

So, Mickey, you're a Republican, you're a conservative. You served 16 years in Congress. You've also debated with us, Intelligence Squared, and you're a good friend of the organization so thank you very much for that.

I want to ask you to put into context this numerical comparison that was reported by both the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* where they were pointing out that the debate on Obamacare back in 2010 was spread out in public over 25 days, but the Republican Senate healthcare bill was scheduled to get only 20 hours. So, I want to analyze that with you. But not just yet, first, help us out with this. Talk to us about what the term debate actually means in the context of Congress.

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What is a debate when we're talking about senators and representors or maybe what is debate not in that context?

Mickey Edwards:

Right, I think when people think about a debate they imagine one person debating against another or two against two or whatever it is, a group of people, presenting argument A and another group countering with argument B. And then, there's an audience and the audience is listening to both sides and trying to determine, you know, which one they're going to come down with. And that's the debate we think about in terms of college or things like that.

Now, in Congress it's a very different thing. So, by the time you actually arrive at the House floor or the Senate floor, you have spent a lot of time thinking about these bills, talking to your colleague about them. Talking to your constituents about them. You pretty well know where you're going to come down.

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You arrive on the House or Senate floor knowing that you are for or against a particular bill. So, what actually has happened, what you could, I guess, call a debate is something that is played out over a period of time. Where I go to you John, and I say you know this is what I'm trying to do, I know I don't have you on board what is your concern? Help me figure, you know, how I can address your concern so I can bring you on board.

So, it's really more of a process of deliberation where you come to the floor now ready to cast your vote and to make you're -- the reason you see it as a debate is most of the people are making an argument to the country. They're there laying their case out to the media, to the voters, so that they have support and if the debate drags on for a while, hopefully people who listen to you; hear you on television, the radio, or read about what you've said in the paper will call their member of Congress and urge them to support you.

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That's what you're trying to do and you're also making a public record. But it's never the idea that when you are having this discussion on the House floor or the Senate floor that the primary purpose is to change the mind of other representatives or senators. That train already left the station. That isn't going on.

John Donovan:

Interesting. So, that tells us, in a way, we should not really be using the term "debate" in that common sense way when we're talking about this process.

Mickey Edwards:

Well, that's right. I mean, it is, you know -- there is very little chance that Mitch McConnell is going to by his brilliance and whif persuade Chuck Schumer to support him and vice versa. And there are not a lot of people in Congress who just don't have an opinion about major issues. They hear from their constituents, they hear from their colleagues, they have a staff that reads the bills, and so that's not what they're trying to do.

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So, you're right, the debate, it's the deliberative and compromised, consensus seeking process as a much more accurate way to describe, you know, the process that you see going on.

John Donovan:

You're talking about something that is much more push pull than persuasion, it sounds like.

Mickey Edwards:

Right, right. And the debate has taken place in the public right. So, it's on the healthcare bill right now. There have been arguments put forth, and they've been debated in the *New York Times* Op-Ed pages and *The Washington Post* Op-Ed pages and Intelligence Squared. And all these people have weighed in on it, trying to -- but the number of undecideds are always very small. And you're trying to convince a few people, but it's not your colleagues in the House or the Senate, they're already -- sometimes -- let me be clear: I have seen debates where there were some people where the issues was very close and there have been members of Congress who show up on the floor not quite sure where they're going to come down.

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And I've been that way but that would not be on something like the healthcare bill. That would be on something more minor than that and where you don't have a lot of information and you just have to listen. But on no big bill will it ever be that way.

John Donvan:

Yeah, I was looking up some history on this and the argument was made that there are so many bills being brought before Congressman that they may not actually know what's in it. And the debate that's presented in the chamber actually tells them things they didn't know, and in that case, they might change their mind or they might be persuaded to vote for one side or the other.

Mickey Edwards:

I think that happens sometimes, but also remember that before I ever went down to the House floor you know I had a staff that was working on all these things so I never went down there without having been briefed. There were times when whatever side was in the majority, in my case it was never us, but the side that was in the majority would bring a bill to the floor that actually you've never seen.

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[laughs] And you didn't get a chance to read it before it was brought forth for a vote. But on most of the occasions John, when you go to the floor you've had a meeting -- I had every Monday morning, I would have a meeting with my legislative staff and a number of different legislative assistants in the areas that they covered would fill me in. At least, "this is the bill, here's who's for it, who's against it, here's what it would cost, here's what it would do, here's the argument absent it, so forth." So, you don't, you almost never go to the floor without some idea.

But sometimes the argument is very close. You know, there are bills that you don't know a lot about. Ever member of Congress, John, is a generalist. You know, you may be a writer, as I am,

you may be a physician, you may be an electrician, but you're something, and there's whole ranges of issues you don't know much about. And so, sometimes, you know, let's say it's a high tech kind of issue, internet kind of issue, you may show up not really understanding it very well, and then the debate might actually make a difference, but not ordinarily.

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John Donovan:

It's a little bit heartbreaking because we all, us civilians want it to kind of be the, you know, Mr. Smith goes to Washington scenes where truth is unfolding and persuasion and argument is proving really powerful in real time in that chamber where senators are bending over their seats, so it's not -- [laughs].

Mickey Edwards:

You know, John, that's a great example because, actually, if you remember Mr. Smith goes to Washington, as you obviously do, what happened is when the Jimmy Stewart character, Mr. Smith, gives his filibuster and he goes on and on, that is informing not the people in the Senate chamber, you know, but the people out there who are hearing it on the radio and reading about it. And then, they start writing to their senators and that's how it did.

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It wasn't that there are a lot of senators sitting there and saying, "Oh my, we've been wrong all this time," [laughs] it's more that he's able to raise the specter here, and if you're a senator you look and say how am I going to be able to justify voting for this, so you know.

John Donovan:

And I think a lot of our listeners know this, but probably some may not. When you see C-Span and you see a representative, you know, at the podium making a speech, making a grand speech, that often it's to a nearly empty hall, with maybe a few pages around. Have you -- have you been in that situation?

Mickey Edwards:

Well, sure, but actually what has happened, you know at a time when Newt Gingrich was in the minority, and a small minority, and he was, you know, he's kind of a bomb thrower and he started using this period of time at the end of the legislative day, what we called special orders, to just hold forth.

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Because you could do that and nobody else is there, you're just, you know, maybe a few friends, and you're just speaking to an empty chamber. And Tipp O'Neill seeing that he was using that for political purposes ordered the cameras to start panning the entire chamber so that the people back home could see that it was empty. However, you know, it's also true that

a lot of the time, in the House and the Senate where those debates are going on and you're watching it, there's not anybody there. You know, what they're doing is laying out for the public and for the record, you know, their argument.

John Donvan:

So, when we come back to the numbers that prompted this conversation, The Times and Washington Post reporting that the Obamacare debate, they say, took place over 25 days and the Republican Senate healthcare bill debate was scheduled to get only 20 hours, we're talking about really 25 days of what? Of hearings, of open discussion, if it's not strictly speaking debate.

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Mickey Edwards:

No, that's the amount of time that lapse between the time of Senate and you actually have a bill and it came up. The part, the reason for that was in that case it was the Democrats that were doing it and a part of the reason was the Democrats were split. It really took Obama and his leaders in Congress a while to get to the point where they had enough votes to pass it. Because there were people in his party who weren't ready to go along. So, it took a while to craft it.

Now, I must say, that I think that process is a much better process, to let it drag out. One of the things that bothers me a lot, John, is the impatience that a lot of people in the, not only in the public generally, but, you know, in the media, and other -- you know, I used to joke about this in speeches, I'd say, "Oh, well, you know, we're trying to build up the greatest military in the history of the world in order to defend us against you know the Soviet Empire with all of its weapons and all that."

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And the press is saying, "Oh it's been four days and they haven't solved it yet, it's." So, I think a long, prolonged process of deliberation, of compromise, of -- you know, is a good thing. Rushing something through is bad, and so, and it should be as open as possible. The public should see what's going on.

So, even though I am very well aware that the Democrats used to this to the Republicans, so there's complaints about it, tumorous complaints about it really sound a little hollow to me, because they used to do it to us all the time. But the fact of the matter is both sides are wrong and right now, the debate should be opened, the hearings should be opened, this all should be in the public. Now, sometimes when you try to reach your compromises you have to do that behind closed doors because otherwise people are watching to see, oh are you selling out, you know, and it makes it very hard to reach compromise you know when everything is out in the open.

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But there ought to be a lot more in the open than there is here. Doing this all behind closed doors is too much.

John Donovan:

And so, Mickey, you're saying the Democrats played some of the same game back in your period --

Mickey Edwards:

Oh, absolutely.

John Donovan:

-- Which was the '70s through the early '90s? But in some sense, I also think you feel it was a better time for the process back then.

Mickey Edwards:

Look, it was. So, yes, Democrats did it too. The example that I have mentioned is before, when I was on the House Budget Committee, and we were talking about supposedly debating deliberating over the Federal Budget. At one point, the Democrats said, "Okay, we're going to have a recess." And all the Democrats went off separately for a long time, and then they came back -- they were off in a separate room and came back later after quite a bit of time had passed, and said, "Okay we've worked it out, here's what we're doing, here's the budget, and let's have the vote," and they did it, they forced it through.

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So, that has happened, both sides have done it. But the thing that I have looked back at as a golden age, is when Tappan O'Neill was the Speaker of the House and, you know, he's a liberal Democrat and I'm a Republican and we didn't agree on very much. But during the time of the debates over what to do about Central America, the Reagan administration was very strongly supporting the rebels who were fighting against the government in Nicaragua which was close to the Soviets, we had in the House the Boland Amendment, Eddie Boland from Massachusetts and the Boland Amendment cut off all U.S. support for the Contras, who were the rebels fighting against the Nicaraguan government. Well, I happened to support the position of the Reagan administration, and I offered my own amendment that would sort of counter that and it would go back and provide money to the Contras.

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And all of the Democrats were opposed to it, the Democratic leadership opposed, the speaker strongly opposed, but, John, he allowed me to offer the amendment anyway. And we had a full discussion on the floor, we had quite a lot of time. The speaker, O'Neill, spoke forcefully against my amendment. Most of the Democratic leadership spoke forcefully against my

amendment, but, in fact, I got three of the principal Democrats to actually speak in favor of my amendment and I won. I beat the speaker.

John Donovan:

Now, did you persuade them in that moment or was that something that was?

Mickey Edwards:

No, it had been a process of sitting down talking to them saying, "Look here's how your constituents are affected, here's how your constituents feel. Here is what the affect is on our national security, because the Nicaraguan government, you know, has close ties with the Soviet et cetera."

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You know, I made my case and talked to them over time. And it was what I said, my friends said, and also their constituents cause them to say, "Okay we'll support the Edward's Amendment against our own leadership," and I won. Now, that is something that could not happen today.

John Donovan:

How come?

Mickey Edwards:

Well, two things. First of all, we have become so partisan. Polarization is not a problem, that's part of democracy, but partisanship, you stick with your team, has gotten so bad that I could not imagine three Democratic chairman standing up and speaking against and voting against their own party leadership. I just cannot imagine it. But it would be a moot point because I can't see the Speaker of the House, in this case Paul Ryan, ever allowing something to come to the floor that, you know, he is strongly opposed to. So, you know, the Democrats say, "We want to bring something to the floor that's going to completely undo a major Republican policy," you know there's no way Paul Ryan or Mitch McConnell is going to let that happen.

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So, one thing about Tipp O'Neill, he was a liberal, a liberal Democrat, I didn't agree with him on much, but he believed in the institution, he believed in the democratic process, he believed in deliberation and most members of Congress did then. That's gotten lost now as we're all sworn, you know -- I remember Mitch McConnell saying, as soon as Obama was elected, "My job is basically to make him a one term president." The Republicans are now seeing that the Democrats are going to oppose whatever Paul Ryan and the Republicans propose.

This is where we got and the golden age kind of fell through when Tipp O'Neill retired, Jim Wright became speaker and he started imposing closed rules and wouldn't let people, I could never could offer my amendment then. We wouldn't allow Republicans to offer amendments.

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Then it came to Newt Gingrich who was even more partisan and it began to unravel at that point. But there was a time, and I lived through it, when Republicans and Democrats could both be full participants in the debate, the majority would allow the minority to have its say, and that's really the way Congress ought to operate and it doesn't really operate that way anymore.

John Donovan:

Mickey, when you debated with us a little while back, you were arguing for the motion, the GOP motion The GOP Must Seize the Center or Die.

Mickey Edwards:

Yes.

John Donovan:

And I want to play a little bit of something that you said then. Let's take a listen to this.

[clip playing]

Mickey Edwards:

I would not suggest that moving to the center means finding some precise magical spot on the 50 yard line of public opinion but engaging in a rational politics that is within the range of reasonable and thoughtful discourse. A politics that stands for principal and Ralph and Laura do, but also stands for the principal that self-government, government of the people works, and that in a nation of 300 million people that means not just drawing a line in the sand, but fighting for what you believe, make your case, argue for it, get as much as you can, and then find the common ground so that we can move together as one people, as one America.

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John Donovan:

Mickey, that almost sounds -- could be taken to sound like you're saying that there's too much polarization but you've already said in this conversation that polarization is not actually the problem.

Mickey Edwards:

Right.

John Donovan:

So, what's so good about polarization, if anything?

Mickey Edwards:

[laughs] Well, there's 320 million of us and we come from all different places. We grow up in different circumstances, you know, economically, culturally, socially. We have people who believe very strongly and the progressive left ideas of government. People who believe very strongly in the traditional more limited form of government.

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I mean, in a democracy, you don't have somebody dictating what the results are going to be, you actually you know, fight it out. You know, so what I was saying -- by the way, [laughs] in my defense, I want to say this, the argument I made -- remember it was David Brooks and I were taking the side, GOP Must Seize the Center Or Die, while it was you guys who wrote the title of the thing.

John Donovan:

[laughs] It's true.

Mickey Edwards:

Right, so our position was either it's okay for the GOP to stay very hard right Tea Party as they were at that time, or you know, or not. But I don't really believe, necessarily, in the center. And the reason is, we -- the Civil Rights movement did not come out of the center. You know, there are a lot of things the justice requires that won't happen. But what we should be doing is having these debates about the different positions that people take. I mean, we are a large and diverse country.

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But at the end of the process, find ways to come together, to find a compromise. Compromise is not a dirty word, compromise is an essential word in a big democracy. And that is where we should be able to say, "John, I understand your concerns, I could give a little here, but I need this." And you can say, "Well, okay if you can give that, that's okay, we do this incrementally." So, incrementally we make process. You know, you don't get everything you want, I don't lose everything was afraid of losing, and you're able to make sure the bridges get built and the military gets funded and the things that have to get done get done. And now, we can't do that because people get punished if they compromise. They get taken out in primaries if they show that they are willing to talk to people on the other side.

So, it's not a matter of the center it's a matter of the ability to come together at the end of the process and say, "Okay, where can we find enough common ground to move forward" and that is what partisanship presents.

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Polarization is great, you know fight it out. But at the end partisanship keeps you from being able to reach compromise. Really, what's happening is kind of discouraging, is that there's a lot

of people in Congress now where it seems, it seems from the outside, that their party loyalty matters more than their loyalty to their obligations as members of Congress to serve the country, and that's a very disturbing thing.

John Donovan:

Last question, do you see any way out of this?

Mickey Edwards:

You know, I have a lot of people John who will say to me, you know, "Number one, it's very dismaying and I think I don't see any hope, I don't see any hope for the future." And usually what they will say is, "We've got these people up there, they're not willing to work together." I run a political fellowship program for the Aspen Institute and the people who have come through my program, Republicans and Democrats alike.

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People like Tom Perez who's now the Democratic national chairman, Mike Steele who was the Republican chairman, Eric Garcetti who's the mayor of Los Angeles, Pete Buttigieg from South Bend, Jason Kander from Missouri. People on the Republican side like Neal Love from Utah and -- you know, we've just got Doug Ducey the governor of Arizona, we've got a lot of really, really good people coming up.

So, if you look past the people who are now the members of Congress, for the most part, and you look to the people who are out there as our mayors and as our state legislators and as our state attorney generals and people who are coming up in the process, there are a lot of very bright, younger, political leaders who -- I've got over 300 of them in my program, who are coming together in a bipartisan way and trying to restore civility and bipartisanship to government.

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And so, I look at that, I look at the future, and I say you know we've got hope. Now I personally, this is my own personal bias, I think until we change the political party system, you know it's my own thing, until we change that, it's going to be hard. But there's some good people coming up, John.

John Donovan:

Well, I hope we can get some of them on the Intelligence Squared stage at some point.

Mickey Edwards:

Yeah, me too.

John Donovan:

Mick Edwards, thanks so much, this has been fantastic.

Mickey Edwards:

Thanks, John. Great to talk to you.

John Donovan:

Well, I learned some things listening to Mickey just then, and I hope you did as well. And by the way, if you like what you just heard: tell us. And if you have ideas for how we can keep going this way and talking at greater length with our debaters or discussing the state of national discourse overall with them, send those ideas along too.

One other thing, don't forget that Intelligence Squared U.S. depends on financial support from people like you who like what we do.

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Please consider making a donation of whatever size by going to our website IQ2US.org, or by using your phone to text the word "debate" to the number 797979. I would appreciate it, and so would the rest of our team which goes like this: Robert Rosenkranz is our Chairman, Clea Chang is Chief Operating Officer, Lia Matthow is Vice President of Programming, Jeannie Park is Director of Editorial Operations, Rob Christianson is our Podcast Producer, and I'm your host John Donovan. Thanks, everybody.

[end of transcript]