

MORE THAN 100 YEARS OF DEBATING

To emulate Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – to debate or not to debate – there is no question! Despite being a rigorous academic co-curricular activity for the past century, debating at Cranbrook has increased in popularity exponentially in the last five years – even a pandemic could not curb the growth of lively Friday night competitions! This year 140 students in the Senior School tried out for debating teams, with the option to participate in this inclusive programme either socially or competitively.

Skills beyond the technical

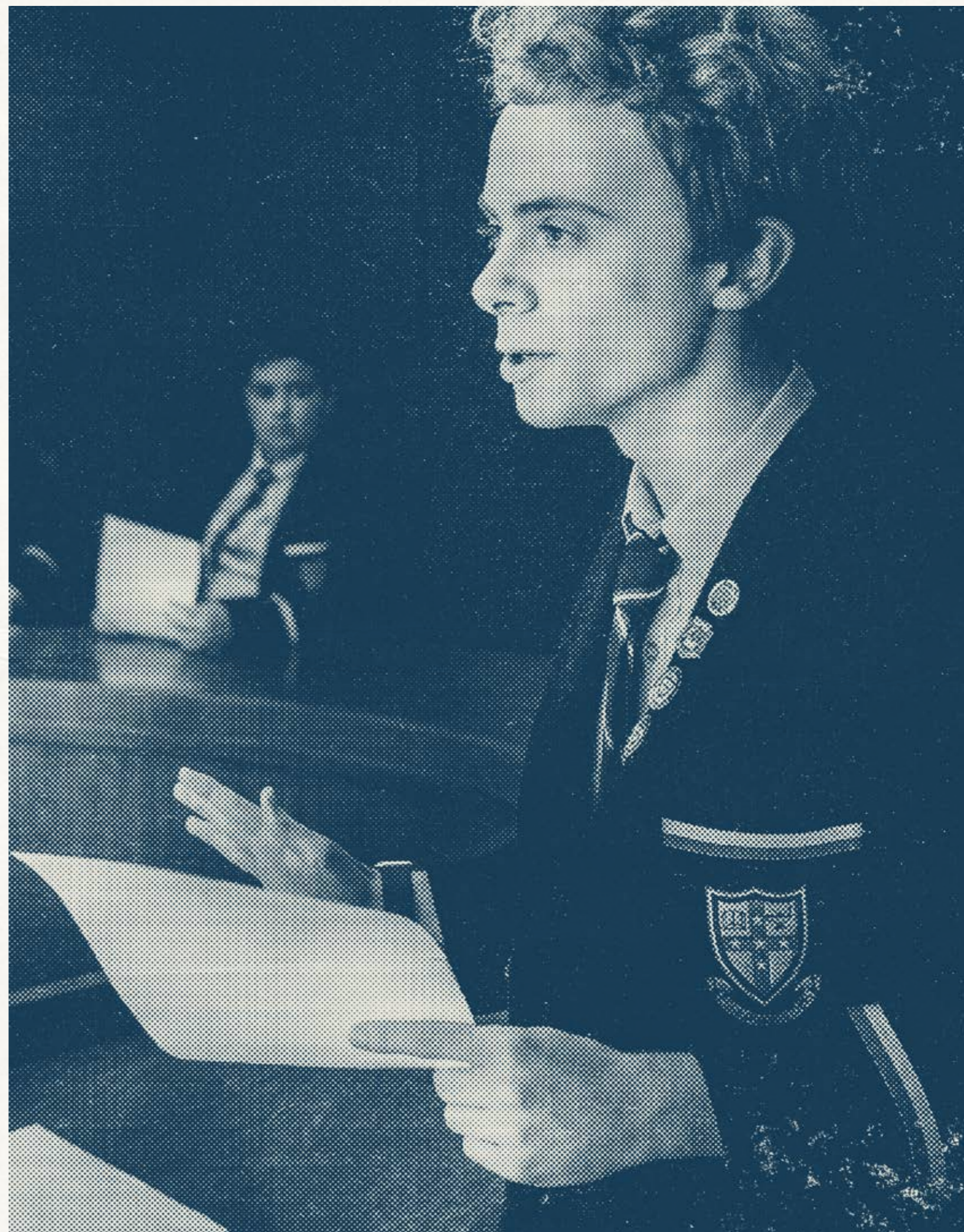
DEBATING IS REVERED for its ability to hone skills including public speaking, teamwork, critical thinking, persuasive writing, logic and listening. Yet debating coach Jeremiah Edagbami says the skillset goes well beyond the merely technical. “What we teach is how social issues build empathy and how economic issues build an understanding of the practical impacts of policies. For example, we put ethical decisions forward – would you rather give \$1 to one hundred wealthy people who live in Vaucluse, or would you give \$100 to one person who is struggling to make ends meet? Debating teaches students about humanity and how philosophies affect policies. As leaders of the future, Cranbrook boys can look at global issues, and learn to be better thinkers and more humanistic business and political leaders. Students are also exposed to knowledge about the world – for example they will need to know about topics such as the war in Yemen, and how this has impacted global policy. They learn not everything is black and white,” Jeremiah says.

Debating coach Millicent McKendry says debating teaches students how to combine the art of speech, physical demeanour, intelligence, and empathy to be a convincing advocate. “In the younger years, the creative elements of debating and the encouragement of teamwork is paramount. With a plethora of constant news, a contemporary challenge is helping the boys analyse and discern current commentary of today’s volatile and intertwined political, social, and economic issues,” she says.

Millicent believes the nature of debating demands diligence, rational thinking, and organisation to develop convincing arguments in a one-hour prep session. “Students embrace these high expectations to grow as a debater. Furthermore, the ability to speak publicly is a fine attribute in any calling; by staying committed, students will be nurturing their mind and developing highly transferrable skills,” she says.

English Teacher and Debating Coordinator Ben Smith believes debating is also unique in that it attracts such a breadth of personalities. “Debating is a place where quirkiness is embraced. This makes it really interesting and attracts unique perspectives to arguments – you are forced to consider other people’s perspectives using civil reasoning,” he says. “When debating you need to be openminded. You need to prioritise arguments and ensure every person has a voice. I refer to the words by poet John Donne – ‘No Man is an Island’ - it is a team activity in every sense,” he says.

In the same vein as the International Baccalaureate, debating celebrates having a global mindset, a skill that is transferrable beyond school. Ben says debating also connects Cranbrook to schools all over the world. “Engagement is global,” he says. In the last few years, Ben has facilitated Cranbrook’s involvement in international debating competitions – held online – against countries including Japan, China, UAE and Uganda to name a few.



Year-round approach to debating

BEN SMITH HAS PUT TOGETHER a year-round debating programme to cater for all levels of confidence – from social debates to CAS, ISDA, Eastside, House debating, Inter-State and International competitions.

Ben has adopted a strategic debating schedule across every term and has hired specialist debating coaches to lift the competitiveness of Cranbrook debating teams. “The year-round competition has been instrumental in helping students maintain skills across the year,” Ben says. “We have also created partnerships with other schools, such as James Ruse, Melbourne Grammar and Churchie in Brisbane, and we now hold an annual Debate of Origin against Queensland and Victoria. This inclusive and collaborative environment has taken Cranbrook’s debating teams from strength to strength,” he says.

Debating success

IN 2021 AND 2022, Cranbrook won the junior and senior divisions of the University of Sydney Union Schools Debating Tournament, and in 2022, Cranbrook came second by one debate in the CAS competition, which Ben says is the School’s best result ever. Two Cranbrook teams also reached the semi-finals for ISDA in the past two years: “To reach the levels in competitions we are achieving is absolutely fantastic,” he says.

In 2022 and 2023, Cranbrook has debated in a higher standard of pool of schools, which Ben says makes for an even more competitive and tougher environment for our school.

Over the past three years, Cranbrook has entered the International Debating Championships, run by New York University and the Brewer Foundation. Cranbrook was the only Australian school team to reach the top stages of this global competition – making the Top 64 teams in the International Public Policy Forum in 2022 and Top 32 teams in 2023.

Cranbrook’s debaters often go on to achieve great things. The 2022 Debating Captain Jack Zheng was nominated to the University of Melbourne’s First Grade National Debating team, which made the semi-final of the Australian Interschool Debating Championships. The 2021 Debating Captain Emil Droga ranked 30th in the NSW State Debating Trials, receiving a ‘highly commendable’ from the adjudicators. Emil has continued debating at Harvard University where he is currently studying.

Topics

DEBATING TOPICS CAN BE EXTREMELY CHALLENGING, and Jeremiah says any topic must be controversial. “Topics must be about a subject people disagree about. For example, we look at current affairs such as the recent State election and analyse whether or not people are good at voting, by looking at the topic of donkey votes versus democracy. A topic might be something like: *‘All people should be allowed to sell their rights to vote’*. A topic like that provides an interesting and balanced argument for both sides,” he says.

Millicent says debates also give teenagers a voice on topics they might not speak up on naturally, and to learn the skill of setting personal opinions aside for the benefit of the team. “As a teenager, you are not always invited to discuss current affairs in a structured way. To this end, debating is valuable because a legitimate defence has to be built to support one’s thoughts. My school debating team was on the affirmative side for the topic *‘That we should ban the Melbourne Cup’*. Although I would have preferred to be in support of the Melbourne Cup, I had to set my personal opinions aside and see the debate from a different perspective if I wanted my team to win,” she says.



In their own words

GUS ROBINSON, YEAR 9

What skills has debating taught you?

The main skill is the ability to be able to think critically about current world issues. Critical thinking is an important tool: it allows us to make sense of and unpack the world around us, which in turn helps us with formulating coherent and interesting arguments which is the whole point of debating.

What has been your favourite debate topic?

One of the most interesting topics I had was: *‘That we should allow vigilantes to capture criminals in Australia’*. We were on the negative side. I found this debate particularly enjoyable because of the strangeness of the topic and the arguments that came out of that.

What is your favourite speaker position?

Second - because it allows you to lay at least one point (unlike third) while still presenting rebuttal.

BRIAN NGUYEN, YEAR 8

What skills has debating taught you?

Debating has taught me confidence, collaboration and argumentation.

What is your best memory of a debating competition?

My first debate. The topic was, *‘Should learning to code be compulsory in schools?’* After I presented my speech, my teammates were really encouraging and told me that my speech was good. We won that debate!

What has been your favourite debate topic – and were you affirmative or negative?

My favourite debating topic was *‘That the captains of national sporting teams should be elected by the community’* and I was negative.

ALEX HONG, YEAR 11

What do you like the most about debating?

The coaching programme at Cranbrook has some of the highest quality coaches who are debaters of amazing calibre.

What is your best memory of a debating competition?

Probably the CAS competition last year, especially the last round against Barker. We won our CAS debating division.

What is your favourite speaking position?

Anything except first or second Affirmative. Generally, I prefer second Negative or third, but first Negative is ok.

ETHAN GOLDBERG, YEAR 7

What skills has debating taught you?

Debating has taught me the skill of arguing well. This is beneficial for all aspects of life. For instance if you want to become a politician the skill of arguing is essential to pass laws. It is also useful if you

want to be a lawyer and so many more opportunities and careers rely on this skill.

What do you like the most about debating?

I like the fact that we get different topics every week which allows us to inquire and think about a massive range of issues and parts of society.

What has been your favourite debate topic?

My favourite topic was *‘That schools should substantially reduce their reliance on paper’*. We were affirmative. It was my favourite because it was a really interesting topic to grasp.

OWEN MAGEE, YEAR 12 DEBATING CAPTAIN

What skills do you think you use in debating?

An essential skill that I use and can make or break a debate is the ability to communicate and work with your team. From many of my debating experiences in a range of different teams, clearly communicating and discussing the case with the rest of the team can make our substantive clearer and more consistent throughout the debate. I have to be able to think critically through comparative weighing of cases to prove that my side of the debate has an overall more significant benefit than the oppositions, as well as being able to actively adapt my case as the debate changes and evolves.

What skills have you developed in debating that could help you prepare for life outside the school gates?

Debating has developed my understanding of world issues and expanded my general knowledge. My ability to critically think, form clear and conscience arguments and present this in a confident way has also been significantly developed from the debating programme at Cranbrook and has prepared me for many experiences in life outside of and after school.

What is your favourite memory of a debating competition to-date?

My team in Year 7 had not had the best of luck throughout the start of the Eastside competition and were struggling to win debates despite our best efforts. Despite being one team member down we managed to win our first debate in Round 5 of the Eastside 2018 competition, and it was a truly joyous moment for myself and my team as all of our hard work from every Friday night had finally paid off.

What has been your favourite debate topic?

My favourite debate topic was *‘That we should have a Royal Commission into Media Diversity in Australia’* and I was affirmative. It was a topic I was already interested in outside of school and had been following it quite closely in the media, thus I already knew many of the arguments from both perspectives of the debate and I was able to form a rigorous, detailed argument and summary of the debate at third Affirmative speaker.

What is your favourite speaking position?

I really enjoy being either a third speaker on either side of the debate or being a second speaker on the negative side of the debate. These speaking positions allow me to look at the debate from a more macro perspective rather than being confined by specific pieces of substantive.

D’ARCY RICHARDSON, YEAR 10

Why did you decide to join debating at Cranbrook?

I find myself arguing a lot and I wanted to hone my skills! All debaters I’ve come across are very outgoing and outspoken people (comes with the territory) which makes for a very dynamic crowd.

What is your best memory of a debating competition?

The final rounds of last year where we were in the running to win the ISDA competition. Our whole team was working towards a handshake from our notoriously hard-line coach and with each win we were feeling more confident. Unfortunately, we got booted out at the semi-finals, but we still managed to score the coveted handshake.

What has been your favourite debate topic?

‘That all important sporting events should be televised on free to air television’ was an interesting topic. This is unique as a lot of topics grapple with big concepts such as international relations and feeling like I had a stake was an interesting and new way to view a debate.

PETER WANG, YEAR 7

What skills has debating taught you?

Having good reasoning and logic and translating this into powerful words. Debating is more about the logic and reasoning behind a point, rather than the statistics and studies. Statistics are easy to say to one another, but the logic is much harder to think about and makes you stand out.

What has been your most memorable moment when debating?

My most memorable and successful debate was last week in the debate against The Kings School. When they were about to say a point, we had already covered it and found a way to counter it before they had said the point.

What has been your favourite debate topic – and were you affirmative or negative?

‘That we should lower the voting age to be 16’. I strongly agree with this topic. Voting seems like a fun task.

What is your favourite speaker position?

I really like being first affirmative because I can set our model, say the definition, and decide many important things in the debate that the other speakers don’t get the privilege to do. ■