

Professor analyzes climate change politics



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Martin Bunzl, a professor in the Department of Philosophy, speaks about the landscape of climate change politics yesterday evening at the Eagleton Institute of Politics on Douglass campus.

Even though climate change has been a controversial topic concerning the science community in recent years, a seminar hosted last night by the Eagleton Institute of Politics shed light on these topics, including Arnold Schwarzenegger's contributions to environmental legislation.

Martin Bunzl, a professor in the Department of Philosophy, addressed the political repercussions of enacting or avoiding climate change legislation in his presentation, "Climate Legislation: Do California and Britain Offer Global Models?"

Drawing content from his book, "Uncertainty and the Philosophy of Climate Change," Bunzl strived to inform his audience on how short-term agendas prevent politicians from being proactive in passing climate change legislation.

"I'm trying to show ... the way in which politicians are driven by short-term political interests," he said. "[They] make it very difficult to shape policy with regard to something as long-term as climate change."

Bunzl, who is the founder and former director for the Rutgers Initiative on Climate and Social Policy, spent a significant amount of time researching climate policy and legislation that has either taken or avoided taking action to protect future generations, according to the Eagleton website.

Describing it as "the central problem" of climate change, Bunzl said politicians have a tendency to make decisions based on what will please their constituents, not what will have the greatest long-term benefit.

"[Many] politicians are driven by the interests of those that support them," he said. "Climate policy is going to affect people of many generations to come. That's the issue. How do you harmonize the short-term horizon that politicians work in and the long-term interests of climate policy?"

Bunzl, who also used to be a former senior scholar at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, said even though it is more common for liberals to promote climate change policies, it can only be successful with the mutual acknowledgement of its necessity by all parties.

Citing Great Britain and the state of California as two models for climate legislation, he also discussed how unusual it was for conservatives such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, the former governor of California, and David Cameron, prime minister of England, to support proactive policy.

Bunzl also marked New Jersey as a potential model, but retracted that statement after mentioning Gov. Chris Christie's actions that revoked the state's commitments to a climate change initiative passed during Jon Corzine's governorship.

Bunzl essentially summarized his presentation when he said supporting climate policy means sacrificing potential voters. While the benefit certainly does outweigh the costs, policymakers may not be alive to see a positive outcome from such legislation.

"The pain of dealing with climate change comes now, but the payoff comes later," he said. "For a politician, [climate policy] is costing political support from voters, but the benefit is going to come to future generations who won't vote for you because you'll be dead."

Eagleton Director Ruth Mandel said the "existential threat posed by climate change" calls for collaboration from the scientific community and the political arena in order to find reasonable solutions.

"As an institute of politics, [I] hope that Eagleton can provide a supportive space for the campus community to come together to ... undertake collaborative quests for promising, practical solutions," she said.

Coinciding with Mandel's commentary, Bunzl's presentation was also used as supplementary education for students who were willing to attend the seminar to obtain content for an extra credit essay assignment.

Sagarika Rana, a School of Arts and Sciences senior, said she was interested in learning about the political implications of aligning herself in the climate change debate. By listening to Bunzl, Rana hoped to cite his discussion in an extra credit essay for her "Energy and Society" class.

"I'd like to get a greater understanding of [these] issues ... [and] I just want to have a very good paper," she said. "I just want to understand the issues and see some of the stuff [Bunzl] is presenting."

At the end of the day, Bunzl said the most important first step politicians need to take is acknowledging the long-term benefits climate change policy can have on future generations.

In order to convince policymakers to take decisive action, he concluded that climate change is "the most important social issue that humanity faces" and particularly difficult, too, with many obstacles to overcome.

"The problem is a lot more serious than people think and a lot more resistant to a solution than people think," he said.