Polisi scientifi explors politics of open borders

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Modern practices of citizenship and immigration were questioned on the back of our morality during the 20th annual Distinguished Lecture in Political Science, which took place in the Human Rights Centre on 27 March.

The academic discourse, led by Dr Joseph Carens, a professor at the University of Toronto, raised the end of the 2008/09 Forum from the Cutting Edge speaker series hosted by the University of Alberta political science department.

In his presentation, entitled Who Belongs? Immigration, Democracy and Citizenship, Carens explored current immigration policies in post-industrial societies and advanced for an opening up of global borders.

"Who should be granted citizenship and why?" and "Who's morally entitled to be a citizen?" Carens asked while introducing his topic.

According to Carens, citizenship should be readily accessible for those born or raised in a country, as well as for legal adult immigrants who live in a state for an extended period of time.

Carens pointed to the relatively free records of Canada and the United States on recent policies regarding access to citizenship. But he stopped short of presenting these systems because of their treatment over issues of deportations, irregular migrants, and refugees.

"There's a wide range of legal rights that people ought to possess and norm- ally do possess, in a matter of law, simply [by] virtue of being within the jurisdiction of the state," he observed.

"Whether they have permission to be there or not, whether they're obeying the laws or not, we can lump these rights under the heading of basic human rights."

An author of numerous books and scholarly articles, Carens spent much of his time detailing the relationships between states and immigrants, emphasizing certain contradictions in state-based values of liberalization and democracy.

He pointed to the moot debates taking place in Quebec over reasonable accommodations, as well as the decision to ban hijabs in public schools in France.

"It's surprising how often contemporary liberal democratic states are willing simply to override their own principles out of fear and anxiety about differences of culture and identity," he said.

"As with citizenship rights and so on, people sometimes say, 'Well, control over immigration is a fundamental feature of sovereignty and self-determination and can't be subject to any normative constraints external to the community's will.' Carens argued. 'There's no such thing as moral carte blanche when it comes to the exercise of state power.'

In arguing for the validity of his open borders theory, where citizenship should be universally available and protected, Carens likened current policies of citizenship in the contemporary international system to the medieval practice of feudalism, where the global north and global south represent the stability and prestige respectively.

"Citizenship in western democracies is the modern equivalent of feudal privilege," he noted. "Like feudal barthony privileges, restrictive citizenship is hardly justified." But Carens recognizes the difficulties inherent in his self-described "generous" policy proposals towards immigration, but challenged the audience to accept that generous behaviour is necessary to reconcile community and the injustices between "haves" and "have-nots."

"The idea of opening borders does defy common sense. That is precisely the point of the argument. It aims to challenge the conventional understanding and background pre-suppositions of our world."