Gustavson Hosts the Victoria Forum

The Gustavson School of Business co-hosted its third iteration of the Victoria Forum with the Senate of Canada from August 28-30, 2022. The goal of the event was to encourage constructive and evidence-based conversations about bridging divides between diverse groups and perspectives. Forums and panels enabled a mix of academics, entrepreneurs, finance experts, public servants and politicians to discuss topics around Turf, Truth and Trust. The diversity of backgrounds enabled everyone in attendance to take a step back, listen to differing perspectives, and learn from topic experts.

Bridging Social Divides

The plenary session that kicked off the forum was on bridging social divides. The conversation between South African Medical Research Council senior special scientist Jill Hanass-Hancock, Cooperation Canada CEO Kate Higgins, Global Health Centre founder and chair Ilona Kickbusch and the director of UVic’s Centre for Global Studies professor Oliver Schmidtke were thought-provoking. Oliver Schmidtke, University of Victoria professor in political science and history, spoke to the growing social exclusion and marginalization that COVID-19 brought upon refugees. This development was driven by the dwindling access to fundamental services (most importantly the ability to claim political asylum in a world of securitized borders) and the political rhetoric hostile to refugees in large parts of the global north. The resurgence of populism and nationalism contributed to a politically increasingly hostile environment for asylum seekers seeking refuge from war and prosecution. However, Schmidtke pointed out that there are encouraging practices of solidarity and resistance to the us-versus-them rhetoric that has been associated with the rise of nationalism across the western world.
Bridging Environmental Divides

The second plenary session focused on bridging environmental divides. Balgis Osman Elasha from the African Development Bank, Kresse Wesling from Elvis & Kresse, Rosa Galvez from the Senate of Canada and Wendy Smith from the University of Delaware spoke to the moderator’s comment, “it appears we’ve built more walls than bridges.” As Wesling puts it, “People think we have to give up so much to solve the climate crisis. Actually, we have so much to gain.” Wesling is a sustainable entrepreneur with a love-hate relationship with capitalism. She claimed that businesses that make enough money to keep their doors open could do whatever they want with it. This is problematic when business owners don’t take responsibility for the impacts of their businesses. Wesling further argued that making a single penny should not be acceptable if it relies on social or environmental exploitation. As she put it, entrepreneurs are not doing their jobs, and they have the opportunity to change the way things are done. Wesling ended off saying, “We have to stop thinking of our footprint as a pie, and we can only have so many slices. We can have as many pies as we want. We just need to choose what kind of pie we have. Maybe the pie where everyone drives an SUV and is on Prozac is not a great pie.”

Bridging Economic Divides

In the third plenary session Pedro Antunes (The Conference Board of Canada), Ricardo Hausmann (Growth Lab), and Carol Anne Hilton (The Indigenous Institute) discussed bridging economic divides. Pedro Antunes, Chief Economist and Primary Spokesperson for The Conference Board of Canada, referred to a point made by the Honourable Janet Austin in the prior evening’s session that discussed how we often have a conflict between truth and fact, where a fact is indisputable, and the truth is how we interpret and feel about how the situation affects us. As an example, Antunes asked the audience if inequality has increased in Canada in recent years. Unanimously, the audience said yes. Although this was true to many people in that room, the facts show that inequality—measured by the Gini coefficient—has remained steady from 2000 to 2017 and has since decreased. Antunes noted that it’s important to not focus solely on facts, as the truth that people are feeling is equally important. His suggested solutions to ease those concerns were to expand upon government programs that reduce inequality, such as free access to education, dental coverage, and daycare.
Regenerating Our Depleted Ecosystems to Address Climate Change

Brittany Hull (Earth’s Own), Natalie Slawinski (Gustavson School of Business), David Ranson (BC Parks) and Mary Coyle (Senate of Canada) joined in a panel discussion on addressing climate change via environmental restoration and protecting our ecosystems. Ranson, Executive Director of BC Parks Provincial Services, pointed out a common misconception, “often people will think, ‘if we educate, people will behave how we want’, but that doesn’t work”. He presented a challenge faced by BC Parks; how do you get people to invest in making positive change? One success story that BC Parks is using is a citizen science program using the iNaturalist app. Campers and park day-trippers take photos of plants and animals on their visits to BC Parks and then upload them to a specialized database for identification and geolocation. A volunteer community of scientists and naturalists verify the species. This has resulted in BC Parks becoming aware of new species in parks, as well as confirming the existence of species and understanding their range. Rather than simply educating the public and expecting behaviour to change, BC Parks used the power of community to obtain the data they need to protect ecosystems.

Getting to Net Zero

One of the panel discussions between Senator Rosa Galvez, Jonathan Fowlie (Vancity), Nathan Gillett (Environment and Climate Change Canada) and Brad Liski (Tru Earth), discussed the importance of getting to net zero emissions and some of the obstacles to achieving this goal. Gillett started the discussion with some hard facts. To achieve a stable climate, we need zero emissions—not stabilized emissions. Further, if we want to keep the warming of the earth’s temperatures well below two degrees Celsius, we need to aim for net zero by mid-century. Liski, CEO and founder of TruEarth, noted that the biggest obstacle faced in his sector is changing consumer habits. Despite his business working to reduce emissions and waste, his competitors continue producing more waste because it is cheaper. Liski maintains consumers should continue to pressure companies to change. Fowlie from VanCity pointed out how important it is that proposals on climate action truly meet people where they are at. For example, he pointed out that the Inflation Reduction Act, recently announced in the USA, is one of the most ambitious climate plans ever put forth and was largely successful because it addressed pressing issues like energy costs and inflation.