



# The Nobel Prize: Where science and reason triumphs over prejudice and irrationality

By Malin Dunfors

Few would have missed the world headlines that Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenager fighting for children's right to education, received this year's Nobel Peace Prize, together with Kailash Satyarthi, the Indian activist working to end child slavery in his native country.



October 10 was to be no ordinary day for Satyarthi. When a journalist led him to talk about the Nobel Prize, he didn't have a clue. In an interview with BBC GlobalNews, Satyarthi describes how he started scrambling frantically to find out who the Nobel Prize winner was. It wasn't until his colleagues stormed his office that it dawned upon him who the real recipient was.

Yousafzai, who got word early in the afternoon that she had been awarded the peace prize, went to school as usual and didn't meet the press until in the afternoon, when school had finished. "That was an incredibly symbolic act," says Annika Pontikis, Public Relations Manager for the Nobel Foundation.

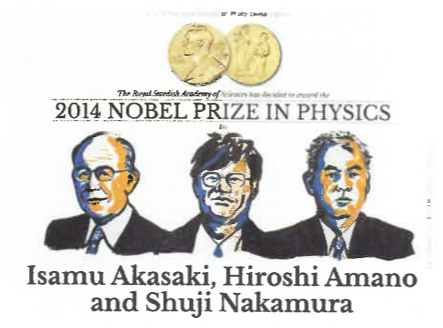
*"Jida"*  
This year's winners also includes a married couple – May-Britt and Edvard Moser. The Norwegians share the Nobel Prize in Medicine with the American John O'Keefe, "for their discoveries of cells that constitute a positioning system in the brain."

Pontikis explains that even though married couples, e.g. Pierre and Marie Curie; and Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, have previously been awarded the Nobel Prize, it isn't too common.

But looking at this year's winners, there's a strong connection to Alfred Nobel's fundamental vision: that his prize should be awarded "to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind" (as written in Nobel's last will).

*The celebration of discovery*  
One example is the Nobel Prize in Physics, which was awarded jointly to Isamu Akasaki, Hiroshi Amano and Shoji Nakamura for their invention of the LED light. "It's a technique that makes lighting cheap, which means that it can be used in large parts of the world where today you can't afford electricity," says Pontikis.

Gustav Källstrand, Senior Curator at the Nobel Museum, also points to the Nobel Prize's universal and inspirational significance. "The fact is that, for many people, the Nobel Prize represents something far greater than just the individual scientific discovery, it represents the belief that science and reason is better than prejudice and irrationality," Källstrand says.



He continues by quoting the Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry 2006, Roger D. Kornberg, who in his banquet speech summarized the importance of the prize with these words:

"There is perhaps a deeper significance. In a world beset by irrational influences, with often devastating consequences, the Nobel Prizes call attention to the triumph of reason. They salute our search for understanding. They celebrate the discovery of the most basic facts of nature."

*The Swedish connection*  
Although the Nobel prize never came about to reap any international glory, one cannot downplay the crucial role it has played for Sweden since its inception in 1901.

"You could put it like this, the Nobel Prize has been vital for Sweden but Sweden has also been vital for the Nobel Prize," says Källstrand.

Imagine for a second, he explains, that Alfred Nobel had chosen France, where he lived, to present the Nobel Prize with the French Academy of Sciences selecting the recipients. It is plausible that it would have been a lot more difficult for the prize to gain recognition, not least in the beginning of the twentieth century with the prevalence of nationalism throughout much of Europe.

For instance, German scientists and the German public would have had a much harder time accepting a French prize while Sweden, on the

other hand, was neither a superpower or part of the larger political play. In that sense, Sweden and its neutrality has and continues to play an essential part in the prize's existence and current prominence, Källstrand concludes.

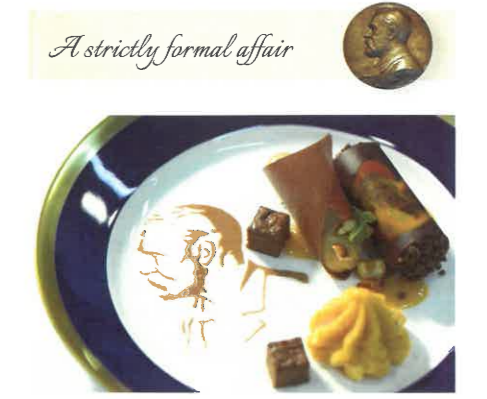
*The essence of independence*  
The very idea that the Nobel Prize awarding institutions handle the selection of the Nobel Prize Laureates independently, and in secrecy, without any input from external parties, such as the Swedish Parliament, surprises many people, especially from abroad, says Annika Pontikis.

"But it's a process that really ensures the quality of the choices that are, and have been made. And this is how it has worked for a 100 years," she says. "It's something that's distinctly unique for the Nobel Prize."

*The Award Ceremony*  
As stated in Nobel's will, the Nobel Prizes in Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Physics and Literature are awarded in Stockholm (at the city's Concert Hall) while the Nobel Peace Prize is presented in Oslo (at the City Hall).

The Nobel Laureates are presented with the Nobel Medal, the Nobel Diploma and a document stipulating the Nobel prize amount from King Carl XIV Gustaf of Sweden. In Norway, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureates

receive their prize from the Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, in the presence of King Harald V of Norway.



2013 Nobel Banquet Menu: Dessert. Copyright © Nobel Media AB. Photo: Helena-Paulin Strömberg

The ceremony is followed by the Nobel Banquet, which might be one of the most sought-after tickets in Sweden. The annual banquet takes place on December 10, the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death. In 1901, Stockholm's Grand Hotel hosted the first Nobel Prize Award Ceremony with 113 male guests in attendance.

Since 1943, the banquet has been held in the Blue Hall of Stockholm's City Hall. The hall can seat 1,300 guests, including the Swedish Royal Family, representatives from the Swedish government, the academic, cultural and industrial sectors and 250 students.

A bird's eye picture of the 2013 Nobel Prize Award Ceremony at the Stockholm Concert Hall. Copyright © Nobel Media AB 2013. Photo: Alexander Mahmoud

