A Nobel Prize for Sustainability, Perhaps?

THE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE creation of the Nobel Prizes provides an excellent opportunity for some reflection. Alfred Nobel's goals, as specified in his will and testament (*1*), were obvious: He wished to reward those who make major scientific or social contributions to the well-being of humanity as a whole, and the five prizes he stipulated in his will reflect a certain balance between science (physics, chemistry, and physiology or medicine) and society (literature and peace). A sixth Nobel Prize, officially known as the Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, was established in 1968 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Bank of Sweden.

There has been debate, even among eminent economists, whether a prize in economics really fits in with Nobel's own views (*2*, *3*). It is fascinating to speculate what prizes Nobel would have created had he been writing his will today. For the domain of "science," his philosophy still leads to physics, chemistry, and physiology or medicine, although possibly with an emphasis on new aspects (biotechnology) or, the addition of new disciplines such as computer science. For the domain of "society," it is our view that modern topics such as environmental management and social development—or to widen the definition, sustainability—could well supplement literature and peace as subjects befitting Nobel's views.

What could be the nature of a Nobel Prize for Sustainability? One option would be to add another prize in addition to that for economics. Or the prize for economics could be transformed into a Nobel Prize for Sustainability, because the three mainstays of the concept of sustainability are the environment, economics, and social development. A variation of this idea would be to award alternating prizes for economics, the environment, and social development.

The first option, adding a new prize, seems least likely to be realized. When the Nobel Foundation Board created the prize for economics, it decided to accept no further prizes (*3*). Thus, transforming the prize for economics is a more realistic option, all the more so because economists already questioned in the early 1980s whether enough outstanding economists could be found for an annual prize (*3*).

The dream of Nobel, inventor of dynamite, was "to be of service to mankind" (*1*). (Painting by Emil Osterman, undated.)

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Who could be eligible for a sustainability prize? Two categories of people come to mind. The prize could be awarded to persons who have made major scientific contributions to the field of sustainability research (including environmental science, economics, and social development). This would not seem to be the most obvious choice, however, because together with the potential paucity of eligible economists, environmental science lacks the necessary international status as a discipline. Furthermore, environmental researchers are already eligible for the physics and chemistry prizes.

An alternative, which we favor, would be to award the prize, in the manner of the Nobel Peace Prize, to persons, institutions, or projects that have made great contributions to the promotion of sustainability in society; for instance, in terms of environmental protection. These could include candidates such as Brundtland, Greenpeace, or the Club of Rome.

Although other types of prizes are already being awarded to people who have distinguished themselves in various aspects of sustainability such as environmental protection, these prizes are not nearly so prestigious as a Nobel Prize. Creation of a Nobel Prize for Sustainability would provide a high political and media profile for the discipline annually, and thus a powerful impetus for humankind.

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References and Notes

1. Norwegian Nobel Committee, *Alfred Nobel, Biography* [online] (2001). Available at http://www.nobel.no/eng_com_will1.html
2. R. A. Wirtz, *Region* **3** (no. 13), 7 (1999). Available at http://woodrow.mpls.frb.fed.us/pubs/region/99-09/nobel.html
3. B. Lemmel, *The Nobel Foundation: A Century of Growth and Change* [online], V. Kayfetz, transl., The Nobel Foundation, Stockholm, Sweden, June 2000 [updated 17 April 2001]. Available at http://www.nobel.se/nobel/nobel-foundation/history/lemmel/index.html. Nobel Laureate Douglass North (1993) admitted that the supply of serious candidates might have become exhausted after the first 15 years when he said, "There is some question whether [the Academy] ought to be giving [the Prize] out every year....I don't think there are any big, outstanding individuals left" (*2*).

Candidate Number 1: Instant Runoff Voting

STEVEN J. BRAMS AND DUDLEY R. Herschbach are right about the defects in the plurality voting system used in most U.S. elections (Editorial, "The science of elections," 25 May, p. 1449). But, on both theoretical and practical grounds, they are wrong to tout approval voting (AV) over instant runoff voting (IRV).

Used for decades in Australia and Ireland and considered in 13 U.S. state legislatures this year, IRV allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. A voter's best strategy is to sincerely rank the candidates. If no candidate gets a majority of first preferences, candidates at the bottom