Time for change in the Nobel Peace Prize Committee
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It is time for the Norwegian Parliament to change its practice and appoint a Nobel Peace Prize Committee that includes both experts and internationals.

The Nobel Peace Prize is considered one of the world’s strongest symbols; the prize shapes the public agenda and gives voice to peace activists all over the world. Members of the prize-awarding Nobel Committee are appointed by their political parties in the Storting, the Parliament of Norway. This strong link to Norwegian party politics threatens the legitimacy of the prize, and it is high time the Norwegian Storting changes its procedures and includes both experts and internationals in the committee.

Alfred Nobel bestowed a great honor on the Storting. He states in his will that the prize for “champions of peace” shall be awarded by “a committee of five persons to be elected by the Norwegian Storting”, but gives no further instructions on the forming of the committee. Current practice involves having the political parties represented in the Storting divide the seats among them based on relative strength and then appoint one or more of their former MPs to the committee. This is hardly the best way to administer this honorable task.

Adapting to change
The prize has a high standing, largely stemming from its ability to adapt to changes in the world. This does not mean that nothing should be changed, however. Questions are increasingly raised with regard to the committee’s independence, even by its own secretary, Geir Lundestad. How independent can a committee be if it exactly mirrors the balance of political power in Norway? And specifically recruits on the basis of party membership – preferably among retired members of parliament?

Chinese leaders are among those asking these very questions. In a one-party state where the National Congress is the closest parallel to the Norwegian Storting, the idea that the committee could operate independently must be hard to believe. China would likely have protested against Liu Xiaobo’s prize regardless of the committee’s independence, but their arguments could have been significantly weaker than they are today. The fundamental legitimacy of the prize is at stake, both in the 2010 laureate’s home country and in the rest of the world.

Friendly advice
In Norway, a debate has been raging around a conversation between Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Støre and his party colleague, Nobel Committee Chairman Thorbjørn Jagland. The minister disclosed to Jagland that the Foreign Minister of China had threatened sanctions against Norway if the prize were to be awarded to a Chinese dissident. Støre should not have done this. As it turned out, the committee still chose a Chinese dissident irrespective of the government’s preferences. But suspicion lingers over this not being the first time a Norwegian
minister has given friendly advice to a committee of fellow party members and political colleagues.

Conflicts particular to Norway
Geir Lundestad, committee secretary for two decades, made a forceful statement before the announcement of the 2010 prize. He claimed that not awarding the prize to the European Union was a sin of omission surpassed only by Mahatma Gandhi not getting it. Lundestad’s explanation for this oversight was indeed that the committee reflects the Norwegian political landscape, and that awarding a prize to the EU is impossible given the national controversy over EU membership. This is harsh criticism, coming from one who probably knows what goes on behind the closed doors of the committee better than anyone. Regardless of whether one deems the EU a worthy laureate or not, it is hard to argue in favor of allowing Norway’s domestic squabbles to affect the choice of candidate.

Reward
The Storting has every opportunity to rise above party politics in nominating members without violating the spirit – or letter – of the will. Rather than letting individual political parties nominate their own representatives, the presidium of the Storting could do it. This would allow consideration of the composition of the committee as a whole. Having experienced politicians among the members certainly benefits the committee. But the current practice entails the risk that the committee seats are seen as a type of reward distributed on the basis of long and faithful service to the party, rather than on the basis of an interest and expertise in peace and conflict.

Nothing is stopping the Storting from including members on the basis of their professional expertise. Scholars, analysts and political commentators could contribute to expanding the committee’s horizons, as well as to strengthening its assessments and foundations for decision-making. Several former committee members possessed considerable expert knowledge, which has been shown to be an asset. This does not mean that the majority should be experts, however, and expertise should not be confused with neutrality. The Peace Prize is a fundamentally political prize: it is only interesting when it makes a statement.

Purely Norwegian?
There is also the matter of the nationality of the members. The committee’s mandate, defined and revised multiple times throughout the years, does not limit membership to Norwegian nationals alone. Neither politicians nor experts need be Norwegian. What about thinking in terms of people who are recognized across religious, geographic, economic or political divides? Perhaps former Nobel laureates, like Kofi Annan, Shirin Ebadi or Jody Williams? Or maybe other wise men and women like author Amin Maalouf or economist Amartya Sen? Perhaps non-Norwegian politicians such as Australia’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs Gareth Evans or Brazil’s former President Lula could be considered? The problem hardly lies in finding suitable candidates.

Change of nomination procedures has been made before. Up until 1937 it was common practice for current members of government, including both the prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs, to have seats in the committee. The Storting changed this after the controversy concerning the German anti-Nazi and
peace activist Carl von Ossietzky’s prize. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Halvdan Koht, and the former Prime and Foreign Minister Johan Ludvig Mowinckel gave up their seats in the committee prior to the decision to award the prize to Ossietzky. The Royal Family, contrary to tradition, was not present during the award ceremony. As with this year’s prize controversy, the Norwegian government cited the committee’s independence in response to criticism from the prize winner’s home country.

**Free and unbiased**

In 1978 another change took place, abandoning the practice of having current members of parliament take part in the committee. This change was also made to communicate the committee’s independence. Guttorm Hansen, President of the Norwegian Parliament at the time, stated during the parliamentary debate that the committee must be able to “award prizes contrary to Norwegian foreign policy, contrary to views of a potential majority of the Storting, contrary to possible public opinion”. Furthermore, Hansen argued, the committee must be “free and unbiased, without direct or indirect instructions”. These are lofty ideals. But as long as the parties appoint committee members from their own ranks, it is difficult to imagine that they enter the committee without such an “indirect instruction”.

In less than a year, two of the committee seats will become vacant. This year’s prize has not had a negative impact on the prize’s public image and reputation. Now is therefore a good time for another change in practice.

Alfred Nobel trusted the Storting to administer the prize and refrained from giving detailed instructions. It is now up to the Storting to decide to rise above party politics and prove worthy of this trust.