

Wednesday, February 21, 2024
2:00 P.M. - 4:00 P.M.
Lieutenant Governor's Suite
Queen's Park

2023 ONTARIO PRIZES; REMARKS BY JOHN POLANYI

Your Honour Lieutenant Governor Edith Dumont, Minister the Honourable Jill Dunlop, Year 2023 Honourees, Colleagues and Friends.

This is the 36th occasion on which I have the honour of acknowledging the far-sightedness of Premier David Peterson in establishing these prizes. They celebrate young Ontarians of exceptional promise in one of the fields covered by Sweden's Nobel prizes.

Why, you may ask, should we care about Swedish prizes?

A few years ago we had the privilege of asking the King and Queen of Sweden that same question, when they visited the Province to award our prizes in person. Their reply was instructive.

They explained that the people of Sweden had asked the same question insistently of their own countrymen in 1901, the year the Nobel prizes were founded. At first they found the question difficult to answer – perhaps because they had not yet been born.

A century later, the answer had become obvious. The existence of Nobel's prizes had re-shaped their entire country's image. Sweden had become associated with science of the very highest quality.

A similar re-shaping of the view of this Province might result from David Peterson's bold initiative. With the number of Ontario prize winners now totaling 180, we see something of the sort occurring in our own back-yard.

That the first of this year's winners is a chemist, is no surprise. No prize comes earlier in the alphabet. Additionally, the subject matter is gripping. Our chemistry prize-winner, Elisabeth Prince, is an expert in plastics, which are the triumph and the bane of modern chemistry. What shall we do with plastic waste? Will it, one may hope, succumb to age?

The eminent Oxford scholar, known to most of us as Lewis Carroll, felt strongly it must age. You will recognise his voice when I quote him:

"You are old, Father William, the young man said
And your hair has become very white,
And yet you incessantly stand on your head,
Do you think at your age, it is right?"

The mountain of plastics nonetheless grows. Fortunately Elisabeth and her team are developing additives that weaken the bonds that bind plastics together. What chemistry wrought, it seems chemistry can undo.

Our second winner, economist Tianyi Wang, has chosen to confront a mountain that, though threatening, is non-physical. It is known by the name 'McCarthyism'.

Oddly, my father, Michael Polanyi, was one of Senator McCarthy's victims, in the 1950's. Coming from England he was barred from entry to the U.S. on the spurious grounds of being a Communist. This despite the fact that, to anybody who could read, he was a leading opponent of Communism.

How could this be? Ask Tianyi Wang, who warns of the effects of political panic, leading to spurious accusations and eroding the basis of democracy.

Our next two winners comprise a cosmic pair, both astro-physicists. They are Drs. Maya Fishbach and Ryan Cloutier. Maya asks what happens when two black holes, each heavier than our sun, collide. Ryan is on the trail of new habitable planets. Success for either, and we hope both, will have consequences for our view of the first billions of years of the universe.

Maya's favourite tools are ripples in space-time. Ryan's are ultra-violet flares which reveal the compositions of new planets. Together the sweep of their work would suffice for any number of prizes; I apologise that we only have two for our cosmologists.

This year's final prize winner is Dr. Kevin Champagne-Jorgensen, for medical science. His aim is to alleviate the scourge of Multiple Sclerosis, a neurological disorder that affects millions. MS is thought to be due to deterioration of the sheath that should protect nerves. In this Kevin has a tried-and-true ally, the mouse, which may harbour in its gut the microbes that cause MS. This is no fault of the mouse. Quite the contrary; it could offer a path to a cure.

With so many questions, from chemical to cosmic, being investigated by our brightest minds, it should not surprise you that one sometimes hears the young ask, "will there be anything left for me to discover?" The answer is fully apparent to our prize winners. Despite the successes of science, the cornucopia of the unknown remains full to the brim.

The shortage is never in questions to ask, but which to ask first.

You may recall that Isaac Newton attributed his success to "standing on the shoulders of giants". What he failed to mention was his uncanny ability to distinguish the giants, from the rest. That is the skill we celebrate here today. It offers a fitting conclusion to an event devoted to distinguishing the scientifically tall from the rest. Those outstanding individuals amply deserve our applause. Congratulations to all five.