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1985

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Jonathan Culler

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CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
THE SOCIETY FOR THE HUMANITIES  
ANDREW D. WHITE HOUSE  
27 EAST AVENUE, ITHACA, NEW YORK 14853-1101

607-256-4725 Fellows  
607-256-4086 Director

RECEIVED

September 25, 1985

SEP 27 1985

Senator Claiborne Pell  
U.S. Senate  
Washington D. C. 21510

Dear Senator Pell,

May I, as an admirer of all you have done for education over the years, address you on a matter of concern to many of us who work in the field of the humanities: the nomination of Edward Curran as Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Unlike William Bennett, who had been head of the National Humanities Center before his appointment to NEH, Mr. Curran does not appear to have been closely involved with research in the Humanities. Those of us who value the role NEH has played in recent years in making possible the most innovative individual and collective research projects in the humanistic disciplines (languages and literature, history, philosophy, history of art), are especially concerned about this appointment. We urge you to question Mr. Curran thoroughly, in the hearing now scheduled for October 2nd, about his conception of the role of the NEH.

Mr. Curran's background in secondary education might, for example, lead him to stress programs in that area, neglecting NEH's vital current role, as the organization that stands to the humanities as the National Science Foundation stands to the sciences: an agency dedicated to making the United States a leader in research and scholarship; an agency which, to insure that it funds the best work (and not that which seems momentarily or politically attractive), bases its decisions about which projects to support on the judgments of experts in each field. Mr. Bennett was outspoken about what seemed to him right and wrong in the humanities, but he seems to have respected and preserved the vital principle of peer review. Does Mr. Curran understand the importance of this principle? Is he willing to respect it? Can he protect the intellectual integrity of NEH? I hope you will question Mr. Curran seriously about this issue.

Part of the concern many of us feel about Mr. Curran comes from the fact that before his confirmation as head of the National Institute for Education, he praised the Institute as precisely the appropriate sort of Federal involvement in education but then soon recommended the abolition of NIE. Will he also recommend or work for the abolition of NEH? We also wonder whether Mr. Curran is qualified for or capable of the role Mr. Bennett so vigorously assumed: spokesman for the humanities, dedicated to advancing thought in this area and to representing

the work of scholars in the humanities to the government and the public. Mr. Curran's prior experience does not show us whether he could take on this important task or how he would perform.

Let me say in closing, first, that the Humanities institute which I direct does not depend on the NEH for funding: my interest here is a general rather than a particular one. Second, I would expect to disagree on some issues with any Reagan nominee for this job, but there are many conservative Republicans in foundations or universities throughout the country, whose distinguished records of achievement and leadership in the humanities and comprehensive understanding of the issues involved in humanistic research would recommend them for such a position. I hope that your hearing may draw attention to the importance of finding a well-qualified person to encourage and to guide work in the humanities through the National Endowment. I am not convinced that Mr. Curran is the right man for the job and I urge you to question him most seriously about his convictions, experience, and intentions.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J.C.', with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left and then curves back under the name.

Jonathan Culler  
Director  
Professor of English and  
Comparative Literature