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Heading the NEH Pell-mell for Philistia

7/27/76

The contest between Senator Claiborne Pell and the muses comes now to a head, and it repays concentrated thought to what is involved. The upcoming climax is scheduled for July 29. At that point, Senator Pell will use all the traditional prerogatives of a senator, and every inchoate prerogative of a senator, to block the relevant committee from voting to schedule hearings on the renomination of Ronald Berman as Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

My own old-fashioned commitment to the private sector brings me to doubt the necessity of the NEH, which wasn't around to subsidize Mark Twain, the Golden Age of the Metropolitan Opera, or the proliferation of public libraries at the turn of the century. Still, if you are going to have 100-million-dollar programs to invigorate the humanities and the arts, there is one thing about which one has to be scrupulously concerned: No affirmative action for mediocrity. Paradoxically, it was Senator Pell who proposed the National Endowment programs in the first instance. It is he who is now trying to dismember the humanities program.

How? By suggesting that the money be disbursed, instead of by a central institute, by local arbiters elegantiae. It is quite improper to suppose that Providence, Rhode Island is without men and women

greatly talented in their recognition of scholars and writers and artists. It is preposterous to assume that the same high standards that have governed Professor Ronald Berman would govern Senator Pell's satrap in Rhode Island.

Indeed, Senator Pell spoke excitedly (how else might one speak, and come up with such a thought?) about making money available to garage mechanics to create sculpture in their off hours. I think it totally admirable that artisans should in their leisure hours write fiction, paint canvases, fashion sculpture, or make music; and utterly unreasonable to subsidize these endeavors by federal tax money. Local tax money is itself unfruitfully disbursed for the subsidy of hobbies; the notion that federal money should go to such enterprises is a discouraging capitulation to parochial vainglory.

Ronald Berman is a Shakespeare scholar. He wrote perhaps the most perceptive book on the 60's. Politically he is a conservative. His fairmindedness has however earned him the universal support of senators, scholars and poets with views sound and unsound. He has made mistakes, as anyone would spending that much money in a year. But his eclectic interests, his passion for excellence, his humane concern for both high scholarship and broadly appealing entertainment (the NEH

put up the money for The Adams Chronicles) make him the ideal man to preside over a board composed of distinguished citizens. To dismember that operation by establishing 50 state cultural patronage centers is, simply, to throw away whatever merit lies in the plan in the first instance.

The Senate, whose liberal members always speak of the necessity to free themselves of the accretions of a history marked by the obstructive leverage of individual members, nevertheless is apparently undecided on whether to yield to Senator Pell. And this notwithstanding that the editor of the prestigious *Journal-Bulletin of Providence*, Mr. James Doyle, has written a searing indictment of the Pell Plan.

Mr. Doyle, who is a member of the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, looks witheringly at the chummy plans of Senator Pell in the post-Berman age. Doyle quotes Pell as speaking enthusiastically about \$1,000 grants for "mom and pop store operators" to pursue latent interest in the Great Books, or \$500 to a "lumberjack with aspirations of historical research." Said sums to be disbursed by state administrators appointed by the governor.

Bring on that reorganization, says Mr. Doyle, and he will resign from Rhode Island's own committee — "and, I think, Mr. Pell, I will not here be a minority of one."

The crucial vote is that of Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey, the chairman of the Labor and Public Welfare Committee. On July 29 the committee will

set up a date for a public hearing on the Berman appointment. Or it will table that appointment. If it does, the Philistines will have won an important victory.