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Pell tries to politicize NEH

James Doyle

IN A 1975-1976 CONGRESSIONAL YEAR in which tumultuous events in Washington have bemused and overwhelmed the nation, it has been inevitable that newsmen and agencies in that city would overlook or minimize the persistent effort of our own Sen. Claiborne Pell to politicize the National Endowment for the Humanities and its affiliate organizations in just about all the states.

The Senate has defeated—so far—the attempt by the senator to re-structure the program of support of the humanities by putting control over state agencies in the hands of political hacks and by debasing the function of the national and state agencies. But Mr. Pell continues to oppose the re-appointment of Dr. Ronald Berman as national chairman because he opposes the dilution of effort Mr. Pell wants.



A BRIEF PERSONAL NOTE is required. It was with great pleasure that I accepted appointment to the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities when it was organized in the winter of 1971-1972 under the chairmanship of Judge Florence K. Murray of the state's Superior Court. The state committee answers only to the national agency in the fixing of policies and in the granting of funds for programs.

Not once in the years since then has anyone in politics in this state ever approached me to exert pressure for or against a project. To the best of my knowledge, no other member and the committee as a whole ever has had to fend off politicians looking for favors for special interest groups. If politics had been involved in the beginning, I would not have accepted appointment.

But Mr. Pell wants to effect change in what he himself helped to set up as an independent federal agency, answering only to Congress and the White House. The senator wants to have the endowment set up state humanities councils, on the order of arts councils with members appointed by state political officers, presumably governors. Had the senator succeeded, I would have resigned from the state committee.

But equally bad, as the politicizing, it seems to me, is the senator's thrust to dilute the national and state programs. He thinks that if politically oriented councils are created, money will filter beyond the prestigious humanities institutions to the people who pay the freight with taxes; he sees the arts and the humanities as potential avocations for millions of newly leisured Americans.

In a story in the last edition of the *Providence Sunday Journal*, Mr. Pell is quoted like this on the issue: "Pell, meanwhile, speaks longingly of the possibility of a grant of \$1,000 to some 'mom and pop store operators' to pursue a latent interest in the Great Books or \$500 to a

lumberjack with aspirations of historical research."

THE SENATOR'S ARGUMENTS cry out for rebuttal. To begin with, the Rhode Island committee has not poured its allocations of federal cash into "prestigious humanities institutions." If Mr. Pell had had the wit to ask, he could have discovered easily that his home state committee has funded a wide variety of programs, some of them put together by scholars, all guided by scholars, and all aimed at people.

Grants have been made to ethnic groups, such as Cape Verdean neighborhood groups determined to develop ways and means of using the humanities to enrich their lives; studies of such problems as the effect of growth pressures on land uses from Block Island to the Audubon bird sanctuary.

Nationally, the endowment has supported such programs as the writing of histories for each of the 50 states; the underwriting of scholarly works and films; programs to strengthen the impact of teaching in the humanities group projects for research in the humanities—all of them summoning the best minds in the country to enliven the teaching of humanities and participation in them.

For the senator to say longingly that he would like to see a grant of \$1,000 for "mom and pop store operators" to pursue a latent interest in the Great Books leads me to doubt seriously that Mr. Pell knew what the humanities were all about back in 1965 when he helped win passage of enabling legislation for the national arts and humanities foundations.

The Rhode Island committee has been patiently indefatigable in making certain that every project it approves involves the public or opens an opportunity for involvement of the public—to encourage the "mom and pop store operators" and "lumberjacks"—if there are any in Rhode Island—to engage actively in programs involving just about every conceivable aspect of the humanities.

IT APPEARS TO ME that the Pell method for disposing of the federal humanities money would result in the wasteful funding of private hobbies from reading books by these mom and pop store operators to a study of the interrelationship of tree rings and the weather by a lumberjack. Such programs undoubtedly would be wildly popular and politically fruitful.

The humanities program nationally and locally have not been able to compete with the arts program for public attention for the simple reason that such programs, except for the artists involved, require only spectator participation whether in watching a federally-funded ballet or a theater company perform. Eyecatching and newsworthy.

But humanities programs involve hundreds of men and women in the difficult non-spectator sports of using their minds, of engaging in fruitful dialogue on public issues from prison reform to downtown renewal, and of relating themselves and their dreams to the society in which they live. The payoff is in the mind and the heart.

In the *Sunday Journal* story, Barnaby Keeney, former president of Brown University and the first chairman of the national endowment, was quoted for his definition of just what the humanities are: "If you do it, it's an art. If you study or learn or examine it, it's a humanity." In the

1975-1976 brochure on its programs, the endowment itself had this to say:

"The humanities . . . comprise the family of knowledge that deals with what it has been—and is—to be human, to make value judgments, and to select the wiser course of action. This is achieved primarily through the examination of human experience and its implications for the present and the future." That is the goal the national and Rhode Island committees seek to achieve.

FROM ITS BEGINNING, consonant with the goals of the national endowment, the Rhode Island committee and the committees of every state I have read of dedicated themselves to twin goals: prudence in the authorization of the spending of federal cash and dedication to the purpose of making sure that every approved project was organized, planned, and directed, to involve people in every walk of life.

If Senator Pell succeeds in restructuring the endowment so as to politicize state agencies or if he attains his end by ousting Dr. Berman in favor of an executive who will steer national policy along the lines he has laid down, then—with reluctance and regret—I will resign from the Rhode Island Committee, and I think, Mr. Pell, I will not here be a minority of one.

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