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1990

# Reauthorization: Hearings and Reports (1990): Correspondence 09

Thomas H. Roberts

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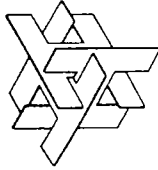
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RHODE ISLAND COMMITTEE *for the* HUMANITIES.



Senator Claiborne Pell  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities  
SR-325 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

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Thomas H. Roberts  
*Executive Director*

April 30, 1990

Dear Senator Pell:

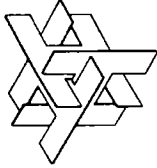
Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee earlier this month and for this further chance to answer some of your questions which time precluded at the hearing. Let me respond to them as you posed them.

1. What should be done to improve the relationship between state government and the Committee? Does the Committee receive any funds through the state budget?

The relationship between the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities and the State of Rhode Island is excellent. That is evident in a number of ways. First, the Committee receives an appropriation from the state legislature for its secondary school program on state history, **The Rhode Island Legacy**. We have maintained this appropriation during the past two years when a number of state agencies have been significantly reduced (the Arts Council is slated for a drop in its state funding by nearly a third) and when others have been eliminated entirely.

The appropriation has come through the state legislature. Efforts to have the Governor include it in his budget have proven fruitless. But, because we could approach the legislature as an independent agency and demonstrate how efficiently we could put a modest appropriation to work, our state funding has continued. Rhode Island is not singular in this; at least 35 state humanities councils have received funding from their state governments, ranging from \$2500 to \$1.1 million.

When we appeared before the Rhode Island House Finance Committee last week to testify about continuing our appropriation, the legislators were very familiar with our program and had nothing but praise for what it has accomplished. I wish I could report that there were sharp



questions or minor criticisms, but I must report that the bipartisan support for RICH and its program was unanimous. These legislators know the program because the Rhode Islanders who benefit from RICH's work -their constituents- tell the legislators about it and why it should continue.

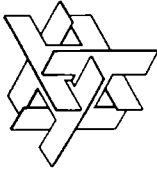
The Committee's relationship with the Governor is good as well, but far more passive. Only two governors have served in Rhode Island since Congressional legislation mandated gubernatorial appointments to RICH. Both Governor Garrahy and Governor DiPrete have made their appointments to the Committee, but except in a couple of instances it has always been because we pressed the Governor's office to act. This is not peculiar to RICH; the Arts Council has frequently had lengthy waits for the Governor to fill expired terms and vacant seats. In our case, both governors have most often appointed members from a list of nominees we ourselves have provided them. (The two exceptions in 13 years have been Lt. Gov. Tom DiLuglio and Carl Stenberg, a DiPrete speechwriter; both requested appointment to RICH.)

Our relationship with the agencies of state government has been fine too. Besides frequent contact with the Arts Council, we have been affiliated on various projects with the state agencies representing education, the environment, libraries, the elderly, health, mental health, corrections, transportation and the courts.

This rather lengthy response is to assure you that our relationship with state government is an excellent one. Our failing thus far has been in igniting a strong interest on the part of the two individuals who have served as governor since 1977. How it could improve, it seems to me, is if there is ever a governor elected who takes an active interest in history, literature and the other humanities disciplines. But to me the awareness and enthusiasm of state legislators and agency heads outweighs the nominal interest of those two individuals.

2. What could Congress do through reauthorization to make NEH a more effective agency?

The easy answer is more money, and I cannot deny the logic of that view. Because the Endowment and the state



councils reinforce the intellectual infrastructure of the nation, the programs they provide are of critical importance in the 90's.

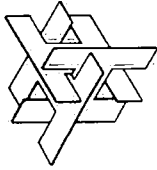
There must also be a delicate balance struck between independence and accountability -- independence because legitimate scholarship demands it; accountability because public funds are supporting these programs. The last reauthorization bill reinforced the Endowment's and the state councils' need for accountability. This bill might be an opportunity to reinforce their need for independence.

3. Is there a "chilling effect" of restrictive language carrying over into the humanities communities?

While the effect has not yet been felt as directly in the humanities communities as by our colleagues in the arts, it is no less real. The emphasis of those who would restrict program content has so far been on the overt content of visual material. The humanities, for the most part, deal in words. But once a wedge has been driven into what is considered officially acceptable, reasons can be found to oppose almost any idea, almost any book. And then, the Endowment and the councils would cease to provide encouragement for ideas, they would provide a monitoring service for the suitability of ideas. That prospect has led to significant apprehension and dismay in the humanities community. It also seems antithetical to the original intent of the two Endowments when you and Senator Javits established them 25 years ago.

Let restrictions be replaced by accountability; the apparatus is already in place. If works supported by the Endowments or the councils offend, there are existing remedies to redress that offense. Let the well practiced and efficient systems of the Endowments and councils remain sensitive to the standards of the communities they serve, both in Congress and in the public.

I had not intended to be so lengthy, but your seemingly uncomplicated questions probed at a number of issues close to the heart of the humanities programs. I hope that my answers help you in your effort to examine the work of the Endowment and the state councils and to draft



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reauthorization legislation that simultaneously defines their respective activities and serves the ever-growing demand for cultural programs by the American people.

I look forward to seeing you in Washington on May 3rd. Thank you again for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Thomas H. Roberts  
Executive Director