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Democratizing culture

When Ronald S. Berman announced, not long after he became chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, that he would spend more than $2 million of public money on a television series about the lives and loves of the Adams family, he was denounced in many elite places for vulgarizing the nation's chief funding mechanism for scholarly and "serious" humanities work.

Not quite four years later, as his long-pending nomination inches toward action in a Senate committee, the founder of "The Adams Chronicles" is being denounced for not bowing to "popular" interests and not giving local political groups enough of a voice in choosing grant recipients.

Dwight Eisenhower — a man whose politics were similar to Mr. Berman's — used to claim that if a public servant was denounced from both extremes he was almost certainly doing his job. That rule of thumb applies aptly to Mr. Berman's performance.

Administration of the National Endowment for the Humanities and its more powerful and visible companion agency, the National Endowment for the Arts (chaired by Nancy Hanks) necessarily is a delicate balancing act. The potential beneficiaries of the grants — museums, universities, artists and scholars — are the most effective lobbyists for the programs. Almost as important in lobbying for annual funding from Congress are state and local governments. Yet these lobbying groups have to be placated with grants or good excuses. And the two Endowments never have enough money to find more than a fraction of worthwhile proposals. Their budgets have grown by leaps and bounds, but so has the number of good proposals.

Given the pressure for grants — plus his belief that each proposal is best judged in comparison to all other submissions — Berman has fought against the mandatory allocation of a percentage of his budget to state funding agencies. The Arts Endowment has always had state affiliates. He thus incurred the wrath of the Endowments' chief congressional supporter, Sen. Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island.

We understand the reasons for Sen. Pell's insistence that arts funding should be participatory. The Senate and Berman in fact worked out a compromise that will allow local groups, chosen and in some cases heavily influenced by the National Endowment, to share in grant-giving. Some opponents of reappointing Berman (in part because he is a conservative Republican) claim he cannot wholeheartedly run the new collaborative effort.

We disagree. His skillful service and base-building for the humanities deserve appointment to another term.

Dear Senator —

Also, see other side of Saltmarsh's Book.