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Blocking Berman

It has now been half a year since President Ford renominated Ronald Berman as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. During this time the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, which must confirm the appointment, has taken no action. The committee has been silent because its chairman, Harrison A. Williams of New Jersey, seems to have abdicated his authority and judgment to fellow committee member Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, the villain of the piece. For close to a year Pell has waged an erratic and hyperbolic vendetta against Berman, making ill-conceived demands that NEH become a local patronage dispenser, rather than the keeper and patron of standards in humanistic scholarship and mass education that it has been.

In view of Pell’s behavior it is astonishing that Williams and the ranking Republican on the committee, Jacob Javits of New York, are playing along with Pell. Indeed, the two of them had pledged to any number of men and women in the universities and public television that they would not countenance Pell’s efforts, which would first demoralize and then cripple the Endowment. Berman, a Nixon appointee and a Republican conservative, has been scrupulously fair in the conduct of his office. Liberals, radicals and reactionaries all have found him to be a model of intellectual tolerance, tempered only by his insistence on excellence. As a result, he has widespread support in Congress and elsewhere. Pell appears to have none. And yet it looks as if the unsupported will prevail—because Williams and Javits have allowed senatorial courtesy to supplant senatorial responsibility.

It is widely assumed that, given a chance, the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare would vote overwhelmingly for Berman, and that the whole Senate would follow suit. But Pell’s tactic is the familiar congressional one of stringing out the matter, and preventing a vote. Pell’s most recent fiction, in which Williams and Javits are now implicated, is that Berman’s hearing will take place after a vote on the legislation reauthorizing the agency. But since Pell heads the reauthorizing subcommittee, he can postpone everything indefinitely. All he needs to do is to put off Berman’s hearing until after October 1, when all nominations lapse with the adjournment of Congress.

And that’s exactly what he seems to be planning. The committee should give Berman the hearing he deserves. Is it too much to expect that Williams and Javits be responsive to justice in this matter and not to the aberrations of the Senate club?