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Museum Services Act (1984): Speech 03

Claiborne Pell

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SPEECH BY SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL TO THE NEW ENGLAND
CONFERENCE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS
October 28, 1978

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to have this opportunity today to join a group that I consider to be old friends. It is also an honor to be introduced by an old friend and colleague, George Seybolt, who was an early and invaluable ally in the struggle for Museum Services. He spent many years engendering key support for this legislation and continues to be a leading spokesman for museums as Chairman of the Museum Services Board.

I welcome you all to Newport. I hope that in between your sessions you have found time to explore some of the spots in and around this city that are especially nice at this off-season time of year.

I find it most commendable that a gathering of museum professionals such as this one can be held under the title: "Museums on Trial". This approach corresponds with the unpredictable winds blowing out of the West in the form of Proposition 13. It also corresponds with certain moods in vogue right now at the nation's capital. However, as is the case with all conference titles, this one is not entirely applicable to all the issues and concerns which we share.

From one point of view, after all, it is not really museums which are on trial. The concept or manifestation

of a building being set aside to collect, house and exhibit cultural artifacts or scientific specimens is not really being challenged. No responsible community leader or government official would question the desirability of having institutions in our midst that are called "museums". Rather, what is on trial is the way these institutions serve the communities upon which they are increasingly dependent for sustaining support. What is on trial is the way in which museums conduct their business with the public's money. What is on trial, ultimately, is the people who run the museums.

Not long ago, the museums of this country were, indeed, the preserve of a wealthy few. Private patrons, in a few instances, continue to create museum institutions from their own accumulated personal acquisitions, and in some places, individual donors provide the financial wherewithal to maintain namesake showcases.

For the most part, however, a new patronage has emerged on the scene. It is the community itself--both in terms of thousands of individual members and in the collective terms of local, state, and Federal government.

As you know, I have had a considerable interest in developing a Federal role in the support of our nation's museums. Both the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, which were established under my sponsorship in 1965, have become indispensable sources

for cultural grant money. Because of responsible leadership and management at all levels of the Endowment's structures, the success of the grant programs has been both magnificent and munificent. We are moving steadily toward my goal of increasing access to the highest quality there is available in these areas.

The Congress has just approved the 1979 budgets for the Endowments which are approximately 20 percent above the 1978 levels--\$149 million for the Arts Endowment and \$145 million for the Humanities Endowment. This is a very satisfying accomplishment in light of the current moves toward tightening fiscal belts and reducing spending. What happens with these budgets next year remains to be seen--but I intend to do all I can in the Senate to assure that these programs retain their strength and direction.

It is alarming to see local governments put into the position of trying to cope with rapidly growing needs and decreasing resources. In California this has meant making difficult decisions on which services to cut. Even though many of the gloomy predictions about massive cuts have not materialized, the California Arts Council has seen its budget slashed by 60 percent to \$1.4 million--moving California from 22d to 44th among all states in percapita funding for the arts. The Wall Street Journal recently summarized...."it has become painfully clear to those involved in California's

cultural and arts scene that they are being placed at the very bottom of the list--if they are still on the list at all".

If cuts must come as a result of this evolving movement, we have got to work seriously to convince our local governments why the arts must not be singled out to pay more than their share. By cutting the arts, our municipalities will certainly suffer economically but even more importantly, the quality and vitality of our everyday lives will be tragically diminished.

Here in Newport a curious kind of reverse tax situation will be on the November 7 ballot as a referendum issue. The Newport City Council proposes to levy an "Entertainment-Admissions Tax" which would take the form of a 6 percent increase in the price of tickets to all cultural events--including visits to our numerous, and immensely popular, historic house museums.

I want to say today that I am strongly opposed to an admissions tax of this kind, and I intend to vote against it. Some may believe such a tax would be born primarily by out-of-state tourists--well, this may be partly true. But, higher ticket prices may create a climate which may actually keep visitors away altogether from local attractions--most of which are in extremely fragile financial shape as it is. The city must look for ways to provide the needed funds for cultural events rather than impose new taxes on them.

This brings to my mind the tremendous economic impact that the arts in general have in the State of Rhode Island. In recent years we have seen the development of more than 200 arts organizations--for the most part small groups at the community and local level. But, these same 200 organizations employ over 2,000 people a year. They have a cumulative budget total of close to \$20 million annually. So, you can see that the arts--museums, ballet, orchestras, festivals, historic preservation efforts and urban design programs to name just a few--have an important economic impact here.

Such economic benefits are over and above the basic traditional role the arts have served--of increasing our sense of appreciation, our awareness of beauty and our curiosity to explore new horizons.

In recent months, new dimensions have surfaced in the area of Federal support of museums. The first round of grant awards have recently been announced by the new Institute of Museum Services. This first year saw \$3.7 million distributed to 256 museums and every type of eligible institution received a fair share of the available funds. 859 museums from all 50 states applied for assistance this past year. As a group, the requests totaled over \$18 million--a tremendous response to a program still in its infancy! Next year, 3 times this

number of applications are anticipated while the Institute's budget will be only modestly increased to \$7.7 million.

The awarding of these first grants is a thrilling moment for me--one which I have eagerly anticipated for many years--in fact since 1971 when I first introduced the legislation in the Senate--to create a "Museum Services Act".

I have met with many of you at different times over the years as this controversial legislation was developed. In June 1976, I spoke before the Annual Meeting of the A.A.M. just days after this act was signed into law. It is especially nice to be back in your midst as the Institute of Museum Services, under the most capable leadership of George Seybolt and Lee Kimche, takes off as a working, living, growing reality.

Six years was a long time to wait for this legislation. In the beginning I was virtually alone in the Senate in advocating this kind of support for our nation's museums. In 1973, when I had the privilege of chairing those landmark hearings on museum's needs, the administration took an entirely negative view. It was not the right time nor was it the right legislation, they said. I can scarcely remember a more negative statement of administration policy before or since.

But, fortunately, times do change. And, what was once just a concept of giving museums the ability and the opportunity of expanding their services to even greater numbers of people is now a reality.

It is useful here to recall the beginnings of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities in the early 60's. That too, began as a "concept". It continues to grow and develop--but 13 years ago, when the legislation was enacted, the Endowments shared an annual appropriation of only \$5 million. Support in Congress was very hard to come by in those days. This is the same figure that has grown to \$300 million for the coming fiscal year...and Museum Services are now fully included in those figures.

In 1980, it will be my responsibility, as Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, to reauthorize once again the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965. And, once again it is time for you to get out and talk to politicians at the national and state levels about how they feel about expanding support for our nation's museums. A strong case can find strong affirmations. Remember that results, once thought impossible to achieve, can come to pass.

Just because some funding is now going to Museum Services does not mean your job is over. Congressmen still need to be enlightened and good relations must be maintained with the Executive Branch.

Museums' needs will continue to outpace available support. Nothing will change this fact. As I have said so often....write to your Senators and Congressmen. My mind has been made up for many years, but others still need coaxing.

I believe the role of the Federal government as a significant patron for our museums is now firmly established. I must warn you, however, of some qualifications and implications of this support.

The first and perhaps most important is that the amount of Federal tax dollars is not now nor is ever likely to be an unlimited source. I believe the Federal government has a rightful role in the preserving and sustaining of our nation's cultural heritage. But Washington can and must continue to be only one of many sources of support.

Just as you would not or should not want a single private donor to be your sole source of support neither should you want the Federal government to be your only patron. In any event, it is not possible for sufficient funds to be appropriated to take care of all your needs. You must be diligent both in the management and in the disposal of your income. You must also make new strides in the development of ever new funding sources.

Federal funds can provide a cushion; they can

provide a challenge and a stimulus; they can serve as a catalyst, but they will never do the whole job for you.

There are consequences, too, in accepting the public tax dollar which you should keep in mind. Public dollars mean public accountability; they should also mean public accessibility. They should mean that the programs they support have broad impact, be significant to as many people as possible and be measurably effective. It may take museums a while to adjust to these demands. Some may not want to and some may not be able to deal with the general public audience.

However, it is part of my philosophy about the Federal government's role in our national educational life, that museums are major educational institutions. To be a major institution in the business of transmitting our cultural heritage, however, requires a willingness and an ability to reach a broad audience effectively. To some, this may sound like a requirement to dilute and debase the traditional role of a museum; I see it as an opportunity for the museum not only to survive, but to prevail as a useful and dynamic community institution.

I recognize the newness and the difficulty of these challenges. The degree of support already demonstrated by the Federal programs that I have had a hand in creating should assure you of my understanding and my commitment.

In the end, however, it will be you, the museum administrators, and the curators, the patrons and the trustees who will have to lead--both nationally and locally, both within and without your organization--to make your institutions valuable and vital to the constituents you serve. They are your jury.

It has been my pleasure to serve as your advocate.