Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): Correspondence 01

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April 12, 1991

Senator Claiborne Pell
Committee on Labor and Human Resources
U. S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6300

Dear Senator Pell:

Recently President Bush placed the name of Dr. Carol Iannone in nomination for a seat on the National Council of the N.E.H. There are a variety of compelling reasons for believing that Dr. Iannone would make a unique contribution to the work of this body, bringing to it a superbly trained judgment on issues pertaining to the place of the humanities within our larger culture, and the role of public policy in fostering humanities education. As a result, I would urge the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources to act favorably when this nomination comes before it.

Unfortunately, several organizations within the academic establishment--the Modern Languages Association and the American Council of Learned Societies--have seen fit to oppose Dr. Iannone’s nomination, arguing that she lacks the scholarly credentials appropriate for Council membership. This would be a specious contention under any circumstances, since Dr. Iannone has compiled a very long record of publication as a literary critic for such widely read and prestigious journals as Commentary and the New Criterion. Unlike most academic publications, little noted nor long remembered by any except those reference librarians who dutifully catalogue them, the journals in which Dr. Iannone’s criticism appears must hold the attention of a demanding readership, and consequently set the most exacting standards on style, trenchancy and originality of comment. Moreover, they are precisely the publications that argue the great questions now being debated about the quality of our culture, and which take most seriously the preservation of intellectual and aesthetic excellence. For these reasons their pages are probably the ideal place for preparing the mind to analyze policy questions of the type that regularly come before the N.E.H. Council.

Dr. Iannone would be replacing Dr. Leon Kass, one of the "public" rather than "academic," members of the board. Consequently, the criticism of her "lack of academic credentials" even if more on the mark, would still be quite gratuitous. However, it should also be noted that Dr. Iannone has actually had an experience of academic life far closer to the day-to-day realities of the classroom than that of most current or likely members of the Council. Unlike other scholars of comparable standing, she has chosen to invest very significant amounts of her time in the teaching of undergraduates,

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the most important and neglected responsibility of our colleges and universities. Since it is at precisely this academic level that the great majority of Americans receive their only sustained exposure to the humanities, her long and intimate knowledge of actual teaching conditions will be an invaluable asset to the Council.

One might well consider why several large academic organizations have seen fit to oppose this nomination. Perhaps it reflects a perspective that views the humanities as the preserve of a rather small coterie of scholars who, though engaging in mysteries of interpretation too arcane for the public to understand, nonetheless possess a perpetual claim on its support. In contrast, Dr. Iannone sees the humanities as civilization's bequest to all seeking intellectual nourishment, and regards acknowledged standards of truth and beauty, now so regularly scoffed at and decried, as fundamental to the perpetuation of a democratic society. Viewed in this light, the opposition that Dr. Iannone faces may only underscore the degree to which her views need to be heard in the councils of the N.E.H.

Sincerely,

Stephen H. Balch
President and
Executive Director

SHB/bg