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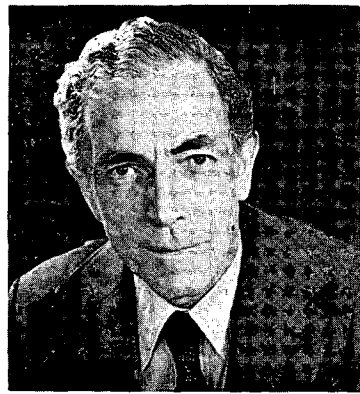
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CLAIBORNE PELL



U.S. SENATOR RHODE ISLAND

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE
AUGUST 4, 1989

STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL (D-RI) ON NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS CONTROVERSY

As one Senator who was deeply involved in the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts and as Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts & Humanities, I am distressed that the current debate over Endowment grant-making is being waged largely in ignorance of what our government endorsed as law almost 25 years ago. The establishment of the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities was not done in a vacuum. Exhaustive Congressional hearings were held as early as 1963 to hear from a broad range of witnesses whose ideas were carefully distilled into the landmark legislation that was ultimately signed into law by President Johnson in 1965.

Concern over government interference in artistic decision-making was raised frequently throughout the hearing process by both government officials and public citizens. It was widely understood that any federal control would stifle the arts and defeat the purpose of the entire endeavor which was to encourage the reawakening and growth of America's cultural vitality. The unanimous conclusion was that such interference be strictly avoided.

President Johnson echoed these concerns in the following statement conveyed to the Congress in 1965: "We fully recognize that no government can call artistic excellence into existence. It must flow from the quality of the society and the good fortune of the nation. Nor should any government seek to restrict the freedom of the artists to pursue his calling in his own way. Freedom is an essential condition for the artist, and in proportion as freedom is diminished so is the prospect of artistic achievement."

We incorporated these cautions directly into the legislation in an unequivocal paragraph stating that: "In the administration of this Act no department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States shall exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the policy determination, personnel, or curriculum, or the administration or operation of any school or other non-federal agency, institution, organization, or association."

Dr. Barnaby Keeney, who had been Chairman of the Commission on the Humanities, said in his report to Congress on the need for a federal humanities program: "A government which gives no support at all to humane values is careless of its own destiny, but that government which gives too much support - and seeks to acquire influence - may be more dangerous still.....It is the conviction of this Commission that the independence of the proposed Foundation's Board will be the best safeguard against interference."

My colleagues and I wrote further in the Senate Report accompanying the legislation that "It is the intent of the committee that in the administration of this act there be given the fullest attention to freedom of artistic and humanistic expression...conformity for its own sake is not to be encouraged, and that no undue preference should be given to any particular style or school of thought or expression. Nor is innovation for its own sake to be favored. The standard should be artistic and humanistic excellence."

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Over the years both Endowments have been remarkably faithful to this mandate. Financial support, while limited, has been stretched to reach as many American citizens as possible and has enriched their lives in immeasurable ways. The system of peer panel review has proven itself to be durable and effective. It may be an imperfect system but no one can deny what a beneficial effect it has had on our cultural lives. The one concern I have in this regard is an impression held by many that Endowment grants are not as broad-based as they should be. A safeguard here is to ensure that peer panelists are rotated frequently and are representative of all sectors in any given discipline.

The current controversy is especially troubling because of the extremes involved. The extreme nature of Mr. Serrano's and Mr. Mapplethorpe's work, has led to an equally extreme "solution" proposed by Senator Helms. I found their artwork deeply offensive so it comes as no surprise to me that large numbers of people are similarly offended. The result is a situation that has the very real potential to seriously undermine an agency that is so vital to the continued cultural development of our country.

Before the Congress hastily adopts the Helms "solution", should we not step back and consider what such a move will mean? Should we not seek a careful review of Endowment procedures in an effort to gain greater accountability for federal grants? I urge a reasoned approach that shows an understanding of the original legislative intent for a federal arts support program.

In this regard, I have made a formal request to the Acting Chairman of the Arts Endowment that the National Council on the Arts undertake a full-scale review of grant procedures and report to me on their findings. Their conclusions will be incorporated into the Endowment's reauthorization process within which any necessary changes to the statute can be formalized.

This process will also afford us the opportunity to explore the questions: Should there be limits on what the Endowment supports with the taxpayer's money? Can we continue to justify spending funds on art that a majority of people may not ever appreciate and some of which is truly offensive? These are valid questions and are ones which the Congress, as steward of the public's money, has the legitimate responsibility to discuss. Balancing the desirability for a climate of artistic freedom with responsiveness to the taxpayer is a challenge that we should accept.

It is my hope that the Arts Council will reaffirm the Endowment's Congressional mandate to support artistic excellence and make any needed changes in procedures so as to assure Congress and the public that funds are being spent responsibly. If this is done with conviction and discipline, I would be reluctant to take further steps to alter a unique system that requires flexibility in order to function effectively.

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