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National Endowment for the Humanities: Council Reappointments (1984): Correspondence 07

Mary Beth Norton

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CORNELL UNIVERSITY

ITHACA, N. Y. 14853

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
MCGRAW HALL

607-256-4367

May 2, 1984

Ms. Kathy Burns
House Committee on Government
Operations
B 350 Rayburn Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Kathy,

Thanks (I think) for sending the information on the nominees. They certainly do present a uniform picture, don't they?

I have a few observations:

1) They show, once again, that Reagan has not a clue as to what the Humanities are. The only one that seems to be a real, practicing humanities scholar (and he has a PhD in science) is Leon Kass. Helen Taylor would be suitable for the Arts Council; what she's doing here isn't clear to me (a leftover from that group of nominees?). Jo Cresimore and Kathleen Kilpatrick seem to me to have no visible credentials for the job other than Republican Party/conservative activism. William Allen and James Schall are like the people Reagan already appointed the last time around (Berns, Carey, and Sandoz)--extremely right-wing political scientists, representing a fringe of a fringe within that profession. (That is, political science these days is highly quantitative; not many people in the area concentrate on thought & ideas rather than numbers. So they are of that subgroup, and then another subgroup--the conservatives.) Laxalt is at least a director of a university press, which is interesting--that background could be OK. You did not enclose any information on Rodrigues, but of course I know about his book, though I haven't read it. (He and Louise should have an intriguing time of it as the two Hispanics on the Council!) From a humanities standpoint he might be the best of the lot--at least he, like Kass, seems to be in the ballpark as far as the proper qualifications for the Council are concerned.

2) As for the right-to-life/Catholic etc. connection, that is evident. But it is irrelevant to most of the work of the Council. Those sorts of issues just don't come up on a regular basis. The key question is: how much homework will these people do? How much expertise/knowledge of the humanities will they bring to the Council? Bill has already stacked the General Programs Committee to represent the views he wants, and that's had a dramatic impact. But what will Jo Cresimore or Helen Taylor have to say, e.g., about fellowships for scholars or research projects on arcane topics or even Education Programs? I suspect that this new Reagan-dominated Council will not be a group of individualists (as the Carter Council was), but rather a Council whose tone is set by just a few knowledgeable members, those with strong opinions who do their homework (I would cast Berns and Himmelfarb in those roles). The others won't know enough to have independent opinions, even if they wanted to. Most of these people (Probably not Allen, who I see as a potential activist, based on his vita) will come and vote, but not speak.

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Ms. Burns
May 2, 1984
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Did you note that on page 4 of his vita Allen reveals a joint work with the late unlamented Jeff Wallin? Clearly that's where he came into all this. Also, Liberty Press, for which he writes, is very right-wing ideologically. (So what else is new?)

Well, I don't envy Louise, Roland, and the others for having to cope with these people for the next two years. At least Reagan has named more women, one minority member, and some "Public" members--they are not all conservative academics, as the last group was.

I'll see you at the May meeting, unless a miracle happens and they are confirmed by the Senate before that. If I don't have a vote, I'm not coming! I assume some of them will come, too, since that's Bill's plan (to invite nominees to attend without vote). I wonder if any others of my group will come--maybe Neusner.

Yours,



Mary Beth Norton
Professor

PS. My comments above are, of course, not for publication! (though you can share them with trustworthy types)