

1991

Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): Correspondence 06

Phyllis Franklin

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The Honorable Christopher J. Dodd
United States Senate
444 SROB
Washington, DC 20510-0702

Dear Senator Dodd:

I write to thank you for taking the time to talk to me. I wish to comment on two points you raised.

The first concerns your desire to increase recognition of college and university teaching--a desire I share. Adding teaching to the categories (which now include scholarship and creativity) appropriate for council members is, I think, an excellent idea. Perhaps the most effective way to do this would be to change the legislation itself: when the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act next comes up for reauthorization, Section 8 (b) could be amended to specify teaching.

If one wished to use an appointment to the NEH council to enhance the status of teaching in higher education, it would seem essential that the first person to hold such an appointment should be well established as an outstanding teacher and well versed in those aspects of higher education that affect teaching.

In these regards Carol Iannone's record is weak. Her experience has been wholly as an adjunct teacher, and adjunct teachers rarely--if ever--participate in the departmental and institutional decisions affecting curriculum, faculty hiring and promotion, and the development of general education and other courses. These critical responsibilities fall to the regular full-time faculty.

The second point you raised concerns whether the MLA's opposition to Carol Iannone's nomination was motivated by "political correctness." Attention has focused on Dr. Iannone's controversial book review "Literature by Quota" and the "political correctness" of opposing her because of the opinions she expressed in it. The fact is the MLA council voted to question the Iannone nomination on 21 February 1991. (Shortly thereafter--on 4 March--I wrote to you and the other members of the Senate Committee.) The review in question was not listed on Dr. Iannone's curriculum vitae, was not discussed by the council, and was not even available to council members in February. (It appeared in the March 1991 issue of Commentary, which we did not see until early April.) It had no influence on the MLA council's decision.

The MLA is well regarded among the learned societies for the excellence of its scholarly and professional publications and for the usefulness of its

many special projects in support of teaching. Only twice has the MLA come to the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources to call attention to nominees whose records have fallen short of the responsibilities they would be expected to carry out. You recall the first instance--the nomination of Edward Curran for the chairmanship of the NEH, when you earned wide respect in the humanities community for the key role you played at the hearing.

From the outset, the MLA council has been concerned about the precedent Carol Iannone's thin record as a scholar would establish for future council appointments, especially because nine NEH council members will complete their terms in 1992. Among those scheduled to leave is Robert Hollander, a most distinguished representative of our field.

I assure you the MLA would not have come to you if we were not convinced Carol Iannone's confirmation would represent a significant change in the qualifications of NEH council members in our field. The decision to express a professional judgment about the weakness of her record was not undertaken lightly either by the MLA or by other societies. We all have much to lose because we depend on the NEH for funding vital activities.

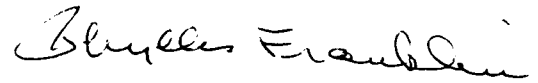
Indeed, those of us questioning this nomination have been at a considerable disadvantage. We do not have powerful people from the Executive Branch of the Federal government to speak for us, nor do we have easy access to the press. All we can do is ask you and the other members of the Senate Committee to consider the sincerity and validity of our concerns and the price we have already paid--and are likely to continue to pay--for expressing them.

Consider also the effect of the publicity Dr. Iannone's supporters have generated. The Senate Committee's vote will send a clear message to the White House and the humanities community about the credentials acceptable for membership on the NEH council.

I know you must weigh multiple considerations before taking your position on the nomination, but I also know that your vote will be decisive.

I very much enjoyed the opportunity to meet you, and I wish you well in the important work that you do. With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,


Phyllis Franklin
Executive Director