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Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): Correspondence 11

William C. Rice

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The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy, Chair  
U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC  20510  
April 4, 1991

Sir:

I write in response to a story I read in a recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, in which I learned that the Modern Language Association (MLA) is opposing President Bush's nomination of Carol Iannone to a position with the National Endowment for the Humanities.

As a member of the Modern Language Association, I would like you and your colleagues to know that I dissent from this action.

The arguments against Ms. Iannone's nomination are specious, and it is highhanded of the MLA to presume to speak for its membership on this matter.

One charge made against Ms. Iannone is that she has not published a great deal of what the MLA leaders define as "scholarship," but has instead published in Commentary and similar journals for the educated public. This is an unwise charge for the MLA to make. Commentary (as well as intellectual journals on the political Left, such as The Nation, and more centrist intellectual journals like The Atlantic) do indeed publish the work of scholars who address the American public and thereby do far more to keep the humanities alive in American culture than scholarly journals within the circle of the MLA. As is not the case with MLA-type journals, these public humanities journals are very hard to get published in, one must be an extremely able writer, one must actually win an audience. As a highly successful public scholar in the humanities, Ms. Iannone is in fact especially qualified to serve a public agency like the NEH.

A second charge the MLA has made against Ms. Iannone is that she does not know the world of the universities and therefore cannot speak for the interests of that world. This charge is dubious first because it is not primarily the task of the National Endowment for the Humanities to support only the universities as conveyors of the humanistic tradition. More importantly, this charge is quite simply false—and revealing of the elitism of the MLA. Ms. Iannone is well-acquainted with the academic world. I happen to know that Ms. Iannone was a part-time instructor in the
New York metropolitan area for several years. The exploitation of part-time instructors is the dirty secret of the nation's English departments. It is a viciously exploitative arrangement in which instructors are almost uniformly given no voice in the departmental affairs, no job security, and no health benefits, and are paid abysmally low wages (in the neighborhood of $10,000 per annum for the equivalent of full-time work). Surveys have shown that part-time instructors now do most of the teaching in writing and basic humanities courses. They are in fact responsible for the core of collegiate humanities education. That Ms. Iannone has experience in this sadly neglected world of the academic humanities, and could speak for a dedicated humanities constituency which currently has barely any voice, especially qualifies her for a position with the NEH.

I hope you will not take the MLA's official position as that of literature, writing, and language professors, or as an accurate reflection of academic culture. Over the years the MLA has alienated large numbers of members and potential members. The reasons are varied, but one of them is demonstrated in this case, in which the elitism of the organization can only be described as breathtaking. It really is hard to imagine a more callous and unconscionable move than for the MLA to belittle Ms. Iannone because she has been a part-time instructor, when the MLA itself has done next to nothing to correct the nationwide scandal of adjunct faculty exploitation—in which, it should be added, it is women like Ms. Iannone who are the main victims.

As a citizen, as a teacher, writer, and scholar, and as a sharply dissenting member of the MLA, I strongly urge that you act favorably on the nomination of Carol Iannone.

Sincerely,

William C. Rice
Doctoral candidate
Department of English
University of Michigan

cc: The Honorable George Bush
The Honorable Nancy Kassebaum
The Honorable David Wellstone
Lynne Cheyney, Chair, NEH
Carol Iannone, New York University
President's Office, MLA