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A particularly petty drama in advice and consent will finally get an airing today when the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee at long last holds hearings on the renomination of Dr. Ronald S. Berman as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Dr. Berman has been widely praised for his first four-year term. The endowment's $74 million budget has supported outstanding scholarship and popular cultural events without a trace of political favoritism. Unfortunately for Dr. Berman and the world of scholarship, however, Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island has different ideas for the endowment.

Senator Pell apparently feels that not enough of this money is going to the man in the street, to lumberjacks and "mom and pop store operators" as he puts it. He wants to set up politically appointed state councils to replace the present voluntary federally chosen groups and redirect the money. It would be hard to imagine a more guaranteed waste of tax money. Once you have taken away standards of merit in subsidizing research, the only reason someone will get NEH money and someone else won't is bound to be political. The rest of the Senate has seen the catch, so instead of fighting the issue on its merits, Senator Pell has instead tried to block Dr. Berman's reappointment.

Senator Pell has relied on "senatorial courtesy" to defer the upcoming hearings. But there are limits even to this mis-named custom, by which the rest of the Senate stays out of appointments involving a particular member's home state or area of committee jurisdiction. It's time for Senator Pell to make his case in open hearings. If his arguments aren't any better than in the past, then the Senate should act on Dr. Berman's appointment with no further delay.