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Leadership and vision needed

Jacob Neusner

Senator Claiborne Pell is accused (Providence Journal-Bulletin, June 20, 1976) of attempting to “politicize the National Endowment for the Humanities and its affiliate organizations in just about all the states.” This he is supposed to want to do by “putting control over the agencies in the hands of political hacks and by degrading the function of the national and state agencies.”

He further opposes reappointment of Dr. Ronald Berman as national chairman “because he opposes the dilution of effort Mr. Pell wants.” Editorials and articles in newspapers all over the country take the same negative view of Senator Pell’s position — and in much the same language.

Let us separate the two questions. As to Mr. Berman’s reappointment, we must ask, has Berman so exercised the office he has held with distinction and effectiveness as to merit reappointment? Why the exceptional pressures to secure reappointment for him? Given the resonance of his voice and the funds at his disposal, has he made a significant national impact upon the public and execution of humanistic learning in this country? In my view, Berman has done an average job, has exercised his considerable powers with remarkably little distinction. No substantial change in

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the character of humanistic learning, none in public appreciation of humanistic values, and little distinctive and striking thought on the task of the humanities are to be discerned in his stewardship of office. If one were to give him a grade, it would not be an F — he has not failed. It would be merely a strong C + or a weak B — (depending on one’s generosity at the time of grading), which would hardly warrant — in academic parlance — encouraging him to pursue the discipline at an advanced level.

To put matters still more simply, Berman has done a mildly acceptable job. But he has in no way achieved that distinction of leadership which lends importance to the position he has held. He has in no way exercised his remarkable opportunities to provide vision and leadership in the formation of humanistic studies. He has administered; he has spent; he has sought to secure his tenure. That hardly forms substantial ground for reappointment. Public office is opportunity to serve and to lead.

Senator Pell has not argued that Berman has done a poor job, only that he has done a merely acceptable one. “Merely acceptable” is not enough to warrant another term of merely acceptable work. I think he is entirely right. Senator Pell seeks something more: leadership, vision, a mature and engaging conception of the opportunities before the National Endowment for the Humanities. These seem to me to constitute fair criteria, and by them, Berman has not earned another term.

On May 20th, the Senate renewed the life of the Arts and Humanities for four years. The Humanities section gives each state four choices for the organization of state programs: (1) the committee could continue as before (as in Rhode Island); (2) the committee for the several states could be appointed by the governors of the several states; (3) the states could set up new organizations for the humanities; (4) the states could continue existing programs which combine Arts and Humanities. What is the conception behind this legislation, for which Senator Pell bears primary responsibility?

Senator Pell wants to place in the hands of the local leadership the organization of local programs. He does not want the choices to be made in Washington, but in Providence and the other capitals. He maintains that selection of committee leadership in Washington leads to self-perpetuation of an imposed, and not a local, leadership. By contrast, he maintains that the local people should make the basic choices on the organization of programs and their administration.

True, “political hacks” can get jobs this way. But that is the risk of local control. The reward is self-evident to people who believe, as I do, that initiative and imagination flourish best at home, and that intelligence, hard work, and interesting experimentation of diverse kinds begin in the cities and towns and states. Ideas percolate upward. Leadership is to be nurtured in both academic and popular humanistic ventures through taking the risks of mass engagement, popular sharing of decision-making, and local responsibility.

The same arguments against Senator Pell’s position may be marshaled in behalf of the dismantling of municipal and state government and their replacement by federal agencies. What Senator Pell stands for is a partnership between federal and state agencies, what he stands against is government by ukase of federal administrators. True, one man’s local leadership is another man’s “sorry collection of political hacks.” But the notion that people at home “politicize” what people in Washington keep pure and unsullied by politics is nonsense. A hack is a hack, whether in Providence or in Washington. But in Providence it is easier to see who, among people we count as neighbors, is talented and who is not.

Accordingly, the issue drawn between Senator Pell and his rather substantial body of opposition may be described in more than one way: Senator Pell wants the states to make the fundamental decisions on the organization and administration — therefore the policy and program — of the humanities agency. His critics describe local control as “putting things in the hands of political hacks.” Senator Pell maintains that the criterion for occupying public office is leadership of a highly distinctive and imaginative sort. This position is described as opposition to Dr. Berman because Berman “opposes the dilution of effort Senator Pell wants.”

Senator Pell has the egalitarian notion that the humanities enrich the life of the country, and that people who do not hold professorial rank and doctoral degrees have something important to contribute. Fifteen years in university life persuade me that wisdom and humanistic learning are not our monopoly and that democracy, even in the humanities, for our country and its diverse and rich cultural life, while risky is, right.

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