Berman, Ronald: News Articles (1976): News Article 25

Jacob Neusner

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_11

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_11/12

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Berman, Ronald: News Articles (1976) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu.
Leadership and vision needed

Jacob Neusner

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.

Jacob Neusner is University Professor, Professor of Religious Studies, and The Ungerleider Distinguished Scholar of Judaic Studies at Brown University.