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How Non-Ideological Has the Opposition Been to Nominee to National Humanities Council?

By Peter Shaw

Both the American Council of Learned Societies and the Modern Language Association have opposed the nomination of Carol Iannone to the National Endowment for the Humanities' National Council. According to a report in The Chronicle (April 10), they profess to be concerned that she "does not have a distinguished record as a scholar or administrator."

In letters to Edward M. Kennedy, chairman of the Senate committee that must approve nominations to the council, and to Lynne V. Cheney, chairman of the N.E.H., the executive director of the M.L.A., Phyllis Franklin, gave assurances that despite her political disagreements with Iannone, her organization's opposition was not "ideological." Let us see.

Franklin objected that Iannone, who writes literary criticism for a broad audience of undergraduates, though her political disagreements with Iannone, is a qualified, respected, and well-published writer on contemporary cultural matters, is well positioned to advise the Endowment.

The two professional organizations claim also to oppose the nomination because the representation of college and university faculty members and administrators on the council has precipitously fallen—from 37 per cent to 30 per cent, according to Franklin—and Iannone, presumably, will not bring a full-fledged academic point of view to its deliberations. But the council is made up of 16 members with Ph.D.'s, all of whom, like Iannone, have taught or been administrators in the humanities, and eight public.

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"The appropriation of material that consumed substantial amounts of our time, energy, and resources is tantamount to theft."

various books that Kinko's then sold to students as anthologies.

**Is Opposition to NEH Council Nominee Truly Non-Ideological?**

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members, who are not expected to have Ph.D.'s.

Phyllis Franklin's figures could have been arrived at only by narrowing the definition of the humanities so much that, as Chairman Cheney pointed out in a memorandum, members with backgrounds not strictly in the humanities, such as Henry H. Higuera, a political philosopher, are not counted. Yet the broad interests of these members surely qualify them to be counted, like Iannone, as academic humanists. Higuera, for example, wrote his dissertation on *Don Quixote* and teaches Plato and Thucydides. One could understand, though not necessarily agree with, opposition to the nomination of Iannone on the ground that the public, which makes up only one-third of the council, is underrepresented. But to link the appointment of another academic to the mistaken notion of a decline in the number of academic members once again points to a search for pretexts.

**The Political Motivation** behind the opposition to Iannone's nomination peeps out everywhere. Take, for example, the inappropriate comparison in Franklin's letter to Cheney: "I will not quarrel with your view that she is "well-published," " she writes, "but I hope the Senate committee understands that as a writer on contemporary cultural matters, liberal-to-radical M.L.A. leadership. She has written critically—often devastatingly—about "Feminist Mysticism," "The Barbarism of Feminist Scholarship," and the follies of the cultural left—including the M.L.A. It is entirely understandable that the M.L.A. board is not happy with her nomination.

Similarly, there are those of us who would rather not have cultural leftists running the M.L.A. Nevertheless, we are not challenging anyone's credentials, even though a better technical case could be made against some of them than they have succeeded in mounting against Carol Iannone.

As testimony to her lack of ideological motivation, Phyllis Franklin volunteers that the M.L.A., far from objecting to those conservative scholars who have "a profound understanding of the academic enterprise and the wisdom and experience needed to carry out a council member's responsibilities," approves of Robert Hollander. He will retire from the council in January, but when he "is eligible for reconsideration, we would welcome his reappointment." More effectively to demonstrate its tolerance for conservative views, the M.L.A. should do two things. First, nominate Mr. Hollander to its executive council. There he could serve as its lone traditional scholar in English studies. Second, withdraw the self-contradictory, ill-considered opposition to Carol Iannone. She is highly qualified by every measure save the M.L.A.'s current standard of ideological purity.

Peter Shaw is professor of humanities at St. Peter's College and author of *The War Against the Intellect: Episodes in the Decline of Discourse* (University of Iowa Press, 1989).