Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Correspondence 16

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June 7, 1985

The Honorable Orrin Hatch  
Chairman  
Senate Labor & Human Resources Committee  
SD-428 Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Hatch:

Because of our shared interest in the National Endowment for the Humanities, I would strongly urge you to consider holding confirmation hearings for Edward Curran, who has been nominated to succeed William Bennett as NEH Chairman. My recommendation results from a 2-year oversight review of this agency and its operations by the House Government Activities and Transportation Subcommittee, which I chair.

Based on our earlier comments, we would also respectfully request that consideration be given to a more public discussion of the 7 recess appointees to the NEH National Council, whose current limited terms have been proposed for extension through 1990.

As noted in the enabling legislation which established the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities:

The Humanities Endowment, emphasizing quality rather than quantity and research at the highest levels of education, would serve to strengthen teaching, to improve university curricula, and to attract the best teaching talents to humanistic studies...The partnership between the arts and humanities implicit in the Foundation would lead to a better comprehension of man in relation to his environment, in such areas as the proper growth of cities, the best evaluation of behavioral problems and their solutions, [and] the better adaptation of our modern technology to the exchange of information. ("Establishing a National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities," 89th Congress, 1st Session, Senate Report No. 300, June 8, 1965, p. 9.)
Congress, in its wisdom, mandated that NEH be an independent grantmaking agency. Its purpose is to facilitate research, education and public projects central to the humanities. The scope of its work reaches far beyond Washington, as specified in the legislation:

"It is necessary and appropriate for the Federal government to complement, assist and add to programs for the advancement of the humanities and arts by local, state, regional and private agencies and their organizations." (P.L. 89-209)

Given this background, we would like to raise several questions regarding the qualifications of Mr. Curran for this post. Enclosed are some background materials on Mr. Curran, prepared by the Congressional Research Service, including previous Congressional testimony which appears to contradict his later actions.

1. NEH deals primarily with grants for higher education and advanced research. Mr. Curran has never held a faculty or administrative job in higher education.

2. Mr. Curran would be the first individual to head this agency who does not have a Ph.D. According to former NEH Chairman Bennett, a Ph.D. is considered the minimum staff requirement for professional jobs at NEH, beginning at the rank of GS-11. It would be a source of embarrassment to have an agency head who appears less academically qualified than his subordinates.

3. Although Mr. Curran attended public school in his early years, he has spent none of his professional teaching career in the public school classroom. His main interests in education in the past have been centered on tuition tax credits, which apply solely to private schools.

4. His resume does not show any scholarly writings, publications or books, which would be expected for a person in this position.

5. Mr. Curran has already proved a controversial figure. I would call your attention to the many contradictions that appear in his NIE confirmation hearing testimony of September 22, 1981 and his later responses.
a). At that hearing, Curran was asked about the 17 Educational Laboratories and Centers funded by NIE...

Senator Randolph: "Can you give me and this committee some assurances that the laboratories and centers will be continued under your leadership?" (p. 21)

Mr. Curran: "We intend to continue to fund important components of this research system. Of course, we will, as you suggest, monitor each closely to guarantee the quality of its work and to ensure cost effectiveness and the best possible use of our limited resources." (p. 21)

"Taken together with the labs and centers, projects of quality such as these are an important part of the Nation's research and development capacity and I agree that continuity of support for these efforts is important. I believe the Institute should take prudent steps to ensure that all existing contracts and grants can be brought to fruitful completion under our new budget." (p. 22) (emphasis added)

Senator Randolph: "The Labs and Centers now funded by NIE are scheduled for a third-year review in the near future. Can you tell the committee of your plans for this review?"

Mr. Curran: "The process for reviewing the Labs and Centers is only now being determined and I have not yet reviewed the alternatives. I want to assure you that future reviews and awards will comply fully with the intent of Congress."

In spite of such assurances, Curran promptly moved to terminate the 17 labs and centers the following spring.

b). Federal Funding for Education and for NIE...

Senator Randolph: "I can see where you might be tempted to cut out some existing programs simply to free up funds for new programs...What assurances can you give us about maintaining existing contracts and grants and thereby ensuring some needed continuity in the research and development programs your agency funds?" (p. 22 of hearing)
Mr. Curran: 
"...Taken together with the labs and centers, projects of quality, such as these, are an important part of the Nation's research and development capacity and I agree that continuity of support for these efforts is important. I believe the Institute should take prudent steps to ensure that all existing contracts and grants can be brought to fruitful completion under our new budget. I should point out that funds for open competition for existing grants programs and contracted work declined by 67 percent from Fiscal 1980 to 1982." (p. 22)

"...the Federal government can play an essential role by providing leadership in the examination of important national education issues through support for research and the dissemination of findings of such research." (p. 13)

Once confirmed as the head of NIE, Curran began a purge of readers who review grant applications, which resulted in allegations of politicizing the entire peer review process. He hired two staff assistants who had no previous history of background research. One, Larry Uzell, recently ran into trouble again as a short-term nominee for the Department of Education program on educational philosophy.

David Florio, legislative director for the American Educational Research Association, said his group had expressed strong concerns about Curran's upheavals in charting NIE's direction because his new plans included "fairly naive" topics that had already been studied in depth while ignoring recent efforts to study more effective schools, the role of tests and school finance and management.

Instead, some of the topics suggested by Curran including tuition tax credits and the effects on learning of a schoolchild whose mother holds a full-time job.

Describing tuition credits as a form of "consumer sovereignty for parents," Curran said he favored a "free market" system of educational finance. (Article by Mr. Curran in American Education Magazine, April 16, 198~, copy enclosed.)
"Many people think that freedom is the key to excellence, that decentralization and deregulation are essential to education reform. Others disagree. But it is clear that the 'freedom' issues like block grants, federalism, vouchers and tax credits are going to stay at the center of policy debate in the 1980's. NIE could not possibly ignore those issues without forsaking its duty to elevate the level of national debate." (p. 17 of article)

It would be difficult to put all education on a supply/demand basis since the ultimate consumer is the child who has no income nor any bargaining power to demand a quality education, so the federal government has to intercede on its behalf.

6. Mr. Curran seems prone to volatile federal employment situations. He was fired after less than 9 months at NIE when he wrote to the President urging the elimination of the agency, with no prior notice to his boss, Education Secretary Terrel Bell. At the Peace Corps, where he holds the title of Deputy Director, he is described as not having "carried out any substantive work there for several months." (National Federation of State Humanities Councils bulletin, March 8, 1985)

7. Politics should not play the pivotal role in appointments for primarily academic positions. The Chairman of the Endowment should be an individual open to the many crosscurrents in scholarship and the divergent requests for grants, not only those that agree with his personal philosophy. His audience is composed of students and scholars from museums, colleges, universities, libraries and learned societies.

8. It would probably be helpful for the record to clarify exactly what is meant by "Secular Humanism" (Education for Economic Security Act of 1984) so the NEH Chairman, National Council and the public will be able to judge the intent of this law regarding future NEH grants.

A hearing is the proper forum to discuss Mr. Curran's credentials and his concept of what the National Endowment for the Humanities should be. It is a vital part of the American interchange that nominees for our
federal agencies be questioned on these posts with the "advice and consent" of the Senate which represents the general public who fund these agencies, seek its services and challenge its emerging directions.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

CARDISS COLLINS
Chairwoman

CC:KB:eg
cc: Members of Senate Labor and Human Services