Berman, Ronald: News Articles (1976): News Article 33

James Doyle

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

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_11/4

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.
Pell tries to politicize NEH

James Doyle

THE SENATOR'S ARGUMENTS cry out for rebuttal. To begin with, the Rhode Island committee has not poured its allocations of federal cash into "prestigious humanities institutions." If Mr. Pell had the time and the inclination, he could have discovered easily that his home state committee has funded a wide variety of programs, some of them put together by scholars, all guided by scholars, and all aimed at people.

Grants have been made to ethnic groups, such as Cape Verdean neighborhood groups determined to develop ways and means of using the humanities to enrich their lives; studies of such problems as the effect of growth pressures on land from Block Island to the Audubon bird sanctuary.

Nationally, the endowment has supported, such programs as the writing of histories for each of the 50 states; the underwriting of scholarly works and then programs to strengthen the impact of teaching in the humanities group projects for the humanities—all of them summoning the best minds in the country to enliven the teaching of humanities and patriotism in schools.

For the senator to say longingly that he would like to see a grant of $1,000 for "some mom and pop store operators" to pursue a latent interest in the Great Books leads me to doubt seriously that Mr. Pell knew what the humanities were about back in the 60s when he helped win passage of enabling legislation for the national arts and humanities foundations.

The Rhode Island committee has been patiently indefatigable in making certain that every project it approves involves the public or opens an opportunity for involvement of the public—to encourage the "mom and pop store operators" and "hamburger kids if there are any in the state— to engage actively in programs involving just about every conceivable aspect of the humanities.

IT APPEARS TO ME that the Pell method for disposing of the federal humanities money would result in the wasteful funding of private hobbies from reading books by these mom and pop store operators to a study of the interrelationship of tree rings and the weather by a hamburgerjack. Such programs undoubtedly would be wildly popular and politically profitable.

But humanities program nationally and locally have not been able to compete with the arts program for public attention for the simple reason that such programs, except for the artists involved, require only spectator participation whether in watching a federally-funded ballet or a movie company perform Eye Swimming and news-worthy.

But humanities programs involve hundreds of men and women in the difficult non-spectator sports of using their minds, of engaging in fruitful dialogue on public issues from prison reform to downtown renewal, and of relating themselves and their dreams to the society in which they live. Their work is in the mind and the heart.

In the Sunday Journal story, Barnaby Kenney, former president of Brown University and the first chairman of the national endowment, was quoted for his definition of just what the humanities are: "If you do it, it's an art. If you study or learn or examine it, it's a humanity."

DE A 1975-1976 CONGRESSIONAL YEAR in which tummies roost in Washington have buzzed and overwhelmed the nation, it has been inevitable that state agencies in that city would overlook or minimize the persistent effort of our own Sen. Claiborne Pell to politicize the National Endowment for the Humanities and its affiliate organizations in just about all the states.

The Senate has decided to oppose the attempt by the senator to re-structure the program of support of the humanities by cutting control over state agencies in the hands of political hacks and disturbing the function of the national and state agencies. But Mr. Pell maintains that he opposes the re-appointment of Dr. Ronald Murray as national chairman because he opposes the influence he believes Mr. Pell wants.

A BRIEF PERSONALITY: It was with great pleasure that I accepted appointment to the Rhode Island Committee, for the Humanities when it was organized in the winter of 1971-1972 under the chairmanship of Judge Florence K. Murray of the state's Superior Court. The state committee answers only to the national agency in the fixing of policies and in the granting of funds for programs. Not that these years since then has anyone in politics in this state ever approached me to exert pressure for or against any project. To the best of my knowledge, no other member and the committee as a whole ever has had to fend off political lobbying for favors for special interest groups. If politics had been involved in the beginning. I would not have accepted.

But Mr. Pell wants to effect change in what he himself helped to set up as an independent federal agency, answering only to Congress and the White House. The senator wants to have the endowment set up state humanities councils, on the order of arts councils with members-appointed by state political officers, presumably governors. Had the senator succeeded, I would have resigned from the state committee.

But equally bad, as the politicizing, it seems to me, is the senator's thrust to dilute the national and state programs. He thinks that if politically oriented councils are created, counties will filter beyond the prestigious humanities institutions to the people who pay the freight with taxes he sees the state and the humanities as potential avocations for millions of newly leisureed Americans.

JUNE 26, 1976