Curran, Edward: Confirmation Hearing (1985): Correspondence 23

John William Ward

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Dear Senator Kennedy,

I write you as ranking minority member of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources. You will see I am sending a copy of my letter to the other minority members of your committee. I am also writing the same letter to Senator Hatch with copies to the majority members. By the time you receive my letter, I will already have testified on June 20 before Senator Stafford's Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities as part of the re-authorization of NEH and NEA. I have considerable interest in the arts, but my professional competence extends only to the humanities.

Both Endowments should be, and I am confident will be, continued and funded at an adequate level. The real question concerns their vitality. I am not confident that emendation or addition to the language of the legislative mandate will assure that, although I understand why some may feel it necessary.

Your committee is charged with oversight of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I urge you to exercise your authority strongly. For example, I think the last slate of nominations by the Executive Office for membership on the National Council on the Humanities represents indifference to, and borders on contempt for, humanistic learning. I do not single out individuals. As a group, the nominees represent a considerable decline from the quality of previous members.

Your committee must confirm the appointment of Mr. Edward Curran as Chairman of NEH. My concern is not directed at Mr. Curran personally for the simple reason I do not know him and did not know of him until his appointment was announced. For caution's sake, let me say I am not so foolish as to think someone must have a Ph.D., have taught in a university, or published a book to be intelligent and to care about the humanities. I have already corresponded with Mr. Curran and am sending a copy of this letter to him. I believe it as much in his interest as in the interests of the world of humanistic learning and scholarship that he have the opportunity to consider the concerns of one major constituency the NEH serves, namely, the scholarly community. Given that opportunity, if he is confirmed, I am confident we will discover we share the same goals, if not always the same means to reach them.

What concerns the scholarly community in the humanities is Mr. Curran's relative lack of experience, at least as measured by the positions he has held, in the world in which he will now play so leading a role. From my experience with NEH, its great strength is the quality
of its professional staff and the careful review by peers of all proposals which come to it. The staff of NEH will be looking carefully for signs of direction from the Chairman. Does he understand and value the institutional procedures which NEH has developed over twenty years? Does he appreciate the worth of humanistic learning and scholarship in a democratic society?

In other words, the constituency which NEH serves and the staff within NEH will both be attending closely to the questions put to Mr. Curran by your committee and to the answers he gives. That will be the first moment one may discover whether NEH will vitally continue the important role it has played in the life of the mind in the United States. That is why I urge you and your important committee to exercise your prerogatives strongly, so we may discover what degree of confidence we may have about the future of NEH.

Finally, you and each member of your committee should by now have received a copy of A Report to the Congress of the United States on the State of the Humanities. If your staff has need for further copies, please have a member call our office. If there is anything which the American Council of Learned Societies may do to help you in your important work, please do ask.

Thank you for letting me think I might write you directly.

Cordially,

John William Ward

JWW:bmh
cc: Mr. Edward A. Curran
   The Honorable Claiborne Pell
   The Honorable Howard M. Metzenbaum
   The Honorable Spark M. Matsunaga
   The Honorable Christopher J. Dodd
   The Honorable Paul Simon
   The Honorable John F. Kerry

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy
U. S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510