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Endowment nominee in trouble

Senators have doubts on her qualifications.

By Stephen Salisbury

A controversial Bush administration nominee to the largest advisory panel of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has run into trouble in the Senate.

Yesterday, Sen. Claiborne Pell (D., R.I.), an influential member of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, which is considering the nomination, announced his opposition to Carol Iannone. Pell is the first senator to go on record against her. At the same time, a number of other Democratic committee members acknowledged serious concerns about Iannone, 43, a professor in the Gallatin Division of New York University, whose published writings consist largely of polemical reviews for conservative journals.

Iannone’s appointment to the 26-member National Council on the Humanities has attracted strong opposition from a host of scholarly organizations that maintain that her professional record lacks distinction.

She also has been criticized for the anti-feminist content of several essays and for an essay in the March issue of Commentary that denigrated the work of a number of award-winning black novelists. This essay led to charges of racism, vigorously denied by Iannone’s supporters. Iannone has not been available for comment since the controversy began this spring.

Despite the debate, the trouble brewing in the Senate apparently caught NEH officials by surprise last week as the Labor Committee prepared to vote on three council nominees, including Iannone. Senate sources said that on the eve of a scheduled June 5 vote, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D., Mass.), committee chairman, informed Lynne Cheney, head of the endowment, that the Iannone nomination did not have the votes to go forward.

According to Senate sources, the 10 Democratic members of the committee had privately expressed reservations about the nominee.

“Some members expressed concern about the racist nature of her writing and some expressed concern about her anti-feminism and some expressed concern that she is not a serious scholar,” said one source familiar with the situation.

After informing Cheney of the problems, Kennedy granted her request that all three council nominees be removed from the committee’s agenda and that meetings be arranged between committee members and Iannone.

The other two council nominees, who have not elicited opposition, are Harvey C. Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard, and Michael J. Malbin, a professor of political science at the State University of New York-Albany and a former speechwriter for Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, Lynne Cheney’s husband.

An endowment spokeswoman said yesterday that the meetings between

Endowment nominee has some doubters

Iannone and Labor Committee members were designed to allay “unanswered questions and concerns” senators expressed about her.

“How professional organizations have felt that Iannone might not have the qualifications,” said the spokeswoman, Claire del Real. “She does have the qualifications. She’s a public intellectual.”

Pell announced his formal opposition following his meeting with Iannone yesterday afternoon.

Her record of service in the humanities is not a distinguished one, and her qualifications fall short of what the NEH enabling legislation requires of such nominees, said Pell, one of the architects of the endowment in 1965. The enabling legislation calls for members of the council to have “established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity.”

A spokesman for Pell’s office declined to characterize the status of the nomination, but other Senate aides said Iannone faced tough going.

“She’s definitely in trouble,” said a spokesman for Sen. Tom Harkin (D., Iowa). “Sen. Harkin has very great concerns about the nomination. He’s leaning against it.”

A spokesman for Sen. Paul Wellstone (D., Minn.) said the senator had many questions about Iannone. A spokesman for Sen. Paul Simon (D., Ill.) said Simon wanted “to go over some issues” with the nominee.

A aide to Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R., Utah), ranking Republican on the Labor Committee, said the outcome of the nomination was uncertain.

“I’m not sure it’s in trouble,” said the aide, who acknowledged being somewhat surprised that the nomination did not go forward last week. “We were under the assumption that everything was fine,” the aide said.

Officials at the endowment were cautious in predicting the outcome.

“We’ll have to take it one step at a time,” said del Real.