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1 July 1991

The Honorable Daniel P. Moynihan
U.S. Senate
464 SRB
Washington, DC 20510-3201

Dear Senator Moynihan:

I write regarding the nomination of Carol Tannone for service on the NEH National Council on the Humanities, which we understand will be voted on next month. I enclose for your information a copy of the letter the MLA Executive Council directed me to send to the Committee on Labor and Human Resources and an MLA council statement on a related topic. I call your attention to three issues.

First, the issue of qualifications. In the MLA's letter to Senator Kennedy, the assessment of Dr. Tannone's record was generous. Beyond the apprentices work of her dissertation, Carol Tannone has not designed, written, and published even one substantial scholarly or critical study of literature that allows other scholars and critics to judge the merit of her work. Her book reviews are respectable examples of their kind, but they fail to meet the legislative requirement that council members shall "have established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity ...." In this regard a comparison of Carol Tannone's record with that of Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., of Harvard University, another nominee for the NEH council, is instructive.

Exaggerated claims about Carol Tannone's qualifications have been made on television, in Senate offices, and in newspapers like the New York Post; the State Journal Register of Springfield, Illinois; and even the Wall Street Journal. Editorials preceded by no inquiry among those questioning the nomination have been the rule in these newspapers, and they describe the brief book reviews Dr. Tannone writes for Commentary magazine, which are opinion pieces and constitute the bulk of her publications, as equivalent to scholarly and critical articles and books that require months and years of research and thought.

It would be unthinkable that a person with a PhD in science who had never designed a major experiment, never conducted or supervised a substantial research project, and never published the results of this research so that other scientists could judge its merit would be eligible for a comparable position on the board of the National Science Foundation.
As you know, many members of the NEH Council come from outside the academy and represent the general public. They bring important and varied experiences to their work on the council. Dr. Tannone’s supporters argue that her community reviews establish her as representing the public sector and that therefore she should not be held to the standards used for scholars. Because Dr. Tannone has a higher degree in the humanities and is a faculty member at a university, appointing her to represent the public sector will blur an otherwise reasonable clear distinction, particularly since she has no record of leadership in public humanities activities in New York City or New York State. Her accomplishments do not match those of Mary J. C. Creelmore, for example, the NEH council member Dr. Tannone would replace. Mrs. Creelmore has an impressive record of voluntary cultural leadership both on the national level and in her home state of North Carolina.

The second issue we are raising is linked to the first. The MLA Executive Council is concerned that Dr. Tannone’s appointment will establish a precedent that lowers the legislative standard of distinguished service. This is particularly troubling because nine council members are due to complete their terms in 1992. As Stanley N. Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies, notes in his letter to the Senate Committee (copy enclosed):

...If Dr. Tannone is confirmed, it will set a disturbing precedent and may lead to a diminution of the Council’s prestige and influence, especially within the national academic community. This, we believe, would be bad not only for the Council, but for the National Endowment for the Humanities itself.

Third, Dr. Tannone’s supporters charge that the MLA questions her nomination for political reasons. The record does not support this charge. The MLA has not opposed other nominees to the NEH council, although in recent years many, if not all, of them share Dr. Tannone’s opinions. For example, Peter Shaw, a new appointee, is, like Dr. Tannone, a vice president of the National Association of Scholars, and both are contributing editors to Academic Questions, a journal published by the National Association of Scholars. That their opinions are similar is widely known. Only their scholarly credentials differ. Because Dr. Shaw’s record as a scholar meets the legislative requirements, the MLA did not question his appointment. Because Dr. Tannone’s record as a scholar fails to meet this requirement, the MLA has questioned the nomination.

Thank you for your attention. I will be happy to provide any additional information you might wish to have. With good wishes.

Sincerely yours,

Phyllis Franklin
Executive Director