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Thinking Small on the Iannone Vote

Jonathan Yardley

What Iannone didn't lose was the battle for her job as chairman of the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities; thus denying her the dubious privilege of being heard within that sanctum sanctorum; but her opponents may pay a price for their little victory, both in NEH politics and in such standing as they enjoy within the body politic.

The first consideration is the least important and most amusing. In singling out Iannone for disapproval on the highly spurious grounds of what those eminent academicians Edward Kennedy and Claiborne Pell call "qualifications," her opponents merely wasted their artillery on a relatively puny target. Surely the senators are aware that next year Lynne Cheney, the chairman of NEH, will have the opportunity to fill nine of the 56 seats on the advisory council; surely they know that this time around members of the public and fellow senators will be alert to the issue of "qualifications"; surely they know that it therefore will be almost impossible for them to pull off another job such as the one they did on Iannone, and that as a result Cheney will end up with just about exactly the kind of council she wants.

This, assuming it comes to pass, will be justice both poetic and political. Although John Aloysius Farrell in the Boston Globe and Nat Hentoff in The Washington Post have advanced the interesting notion that the Democratic vote against Iannone had less to do with the NEH than with Kennedy's perceived need to remind Massachusetts voters of his continuing "military" in Washington, it remains that the campaign against Iannone was at heart a battle between the spent, irrelevant old left and the oafish, elephantine new right. The grounds upon which it was fought were, all protestations on both sides to the contrary notwithstanding, entirely political; this time around the left fought dirtier than the right, so pardon me if I smirk at the thought that the price of keeping the lone right-winger Carol Iannone off the advisory council this year may prove to be letting nine God-knows-how-loony righties onto it next year.

But that, in the long run, is neither here nor there. The affairs of the NEH, large though they may loom in the offices of the Modern Language Association and the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies and other repositories of the loftiest wisdom, loom scarcely at all anywhere else. The old saw obtains: Academic politics are so vicious because the stakes are so small. The awarding of humanities grants for $5,000 or even $500,000 may be a matter of immense moment to those given or denied them, but their numbers are minute and so too is their influence. Whether the NEH council is all-righty or all-lefty, the all-switcheroo is a question of almost ludicrously small consequence, as those either trumpeting or bemoaning Iannone's defeat would do well—not that any of them will—to admit.

But in another sense the guarrel over Iannone is no laughing matter, and no trivial one either. Licking her wounds in public last week, in a commentary on the Modem Language Association and is now president of the Guggenheim Foundation. Connaroe was vehement in his opposition to Iannone, citing as just cause an article she published in Commentary under the title "Literature by Quota," wherein she argued that questions of race and politics have become—most unfortunately, in her view—central to the giving of literary awards. That point should be perfectly obvious to anyone who has followed the recent history of the country's major (and minor) prizes, but no matter: For having the effrontery to make such a case, in Connaroe's stated view, Iannone gave evidence of racism.

Subsequently Connaroe modified the accusation, though he hardly repudiated it, but the damage had been done; others, among them the MLA and PEN, the writers' organization, associated themselves with Connaroe's charge, thus, in Iannone's accurate description, "avaluing [themselves] of the smear without having to make it." That "smear" is the word is beyond question. In her Commentary article Iannone cast no racial slurs; she merely raised questions, ones that ought to be raised, about the criteria under which literary awards are now made and whether those criteria are legitimate. But Connaroe, and others in his train, chose to make a truly reprehensible leap of illogic, enabling them to conclude that raising questions of racial quotas in literary awards is in and of itself an act of "racism."

It's preposterous, but it's of a piece with the way discourse in this country is conducted, by right and left alike. What Iannone calls "honest face-to-face confrontation in the marketplace of ideas" is dismissed as hopelessly old-fashioned by ideologues and operators at every point on the political and cultural compass. Whether it's Connaroe & Company crying "racism" or George Bush using Willie Horton's name as a code for everything from softness on crime to racial violence, the effect is the same: to reduce political and cultural discourse to dirty little sound bites that bear no discernible relationship to the complex and elusive truth.

The hope, and no doubt in today's climate it is a slender one, is that episodes such as the Iannone hearings will bring this state of affairs to greater public attention than it has thus far received. Perhaps—no, probably—the mentality of the television age has so inured us to oversimplification and casual vilification that nothing can jolt us into an awareness of what has happened to us, but surely the recent spectacle of Carol Iannone being run out of Washington on a rail should provide such edification.

It's true: The "real issue" isn't Iannone herself but the large and troubling questions raised by the sham "debate" over her nomination. Whether she is on the NEH council or off is of absolutely no moment to anyone save herself and a handful of others. Whether we are capable of talking intelligently to each other about difficult and ambiguous questions is another matter altogether, and nothing in the brief flap she caused can give us any reason for optimism.