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Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Correspondence 12

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May 14, 1985

Senator Claiborne Pell
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Pell,

As Director of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, I am writing to you on behalf of the thirty-five historical and archival organizations that compose the NCC concerning the confirmation hearing of the nomination of Edward A. Curran to be Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Because of Mr. Curran's limited experience in higher education and public humanities programs and because of his controversial and brief tenure as the Director of the National Institute of Education, we urge that you conduct a thorough investigation of Mr. Curran's qualifications for the position of Chairman of NEH.

Below are some questions that we submit for your consideration as you prepare for Curran's confirmation hearing.

1. On September 22, 1981 during your confirmation hearing to be the Director of the National Institute of Education, you went on record supporting many aspects of the program. Then during your nine month tenure as Director you took actions that directly opposed the positions you had taken in the confirmation hearing. To be more specific, following are a few of your statements from that confirmation hearing:

"I am also convinced that the Federal government can play an essential role by providing leadership in the examination of important national education issues through the support for research and the dissemination of findings of such research."  (page 13)

In answer to Senator Randolph's question: "What assurances can you give us about maintaining existing contracts and grants and thereby ensuring some needed continuity in the research and development programs your agency funds?" you described the excellent work of several state and university projects and then stated: "Taken together with the labs and centers, projects of quality such as these are an important part of the Nation's research and development capacity and I agree that continuity of support for these efforts is important." (page 22)
Senator Randolph also asked: "Can you give us any assurance of stability in your agency, or do you have some new priorities of your own?" You responded: "The nature of research is such that stability is an important factor in conducting fruitful research. The collaborative involvement of the education community in development of the Institute's research agenda plays a significant role not only in maintaining the continuity of our research agenda but also assures that the research conducted is focused on the most critical education issues they face in their respective roles in education the children of this country. I intend to continue to support the involvement of the education community in developing NIE's research agenda." (page 25)

In response to a question concerning the Administration's interest in eliminating the Department of Education and what this may mean for NIE, you stated: "As you are aware, the President is considering several options on restructuring the Department of Education. Regardless of the structure, few dispute the appropriateness of the Federal leadership role in education research, development, and dissemination. I have called it a paradigm of appropriate Federal involvement in education. I believe that the National Institute of Education will continue to play an important part in fulfilling that role." (page 25)

Within a matter of months after making these statements during the confirmation hearing, you were minimizing the importance of the NIE labs and centers projects, you were ignoring the concerns of the wider education community, and you were finally recommending the abolition of the agency. Your leadership became an extremely destabilizing force for NIE. Despite many words during the hearing regarding the role of the federal government in education research, you wished to destroy the agency designed to do this crucial work. How do you explain these contradictions? What assurances exist regarding your commitment to the National Endowment for the Humanities?

2. As Chairman of NEH, how much would you inject yourself into the review process? Would you interpret your role as Chairman William Bennett did as the final judge on the appropriateness of a grant or would you follow the precedent set by the earlier NEH chairs of endorsing the decisions of the peer review panels?

3. What are your attitudes toward the newer areas of scholarly research such as quantitative history and interdisciplinary research projects?

4. Do you see the role of the NEH as directive or responsive, that is would you see the NEH taking a special initiate to encourage certain kinds of projects or as responding to the concerns of the scholarly community?

5. How do you define the humanities? Section 3 (a) of the Act establishing NEH authorizes support for "those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods," would you give us some examples of the kinds of projects that you think fall into this category?
6. What plans do you have to make the humanities accessible to the American public?

7. Given the fact that a major part of the Endowment's mission is to make the humanities available to all citizens, what do you envision the role of the state humanities councils to be?

8. Under William Bennett's leadership, NEH did not comply with the requirements of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission to submit agency hiring and employment goals and timetables as a part of the annual equal employment opportunity efforts. We view this not as a matter of partisan policy but of legal compliance. Would you continue Bennett's policy or would you recommend complying with EEOC requirements?

9. What do you see as the key needs of the humanities in this country over the next 10 years?

Attached to this letter is a copy of the transcript from Curran's 1981 confirmation hearing. The historical and archival community appreciate the concern which you have expressed toward Curran's nomination as Chairman of NEH. If we can be of any further assistance, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Page Putnam Miller, PhD
Director