Iannone, Carol: Letters Opposing Nomination of (1991): Correspondence 25

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The Honorable Claiborne Pell
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

I write on behalf of the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association regarding the President’s nomination of Carol Iannone for service on the NEH National Council on the Humanities. I am also writing to Senator Kennedy and the other members of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

I note first that the MLA is a century-old learned society whose 29,000 members are primarily college and university scholars and teachers in English and the other modern languages. The MLA Executive Council, which is elected by the membership, is made up of distinguished scholars who have achieved national recognition for their contributions to the field. The association annually publishes the MLA International Bibliography, which is the major reference work in the field of modern language studies; PMLA, a highly regarded scholarly journal; and books, including the New Variorum editions of Shakespeare’s plays and the Approaches to Teaching World Literature series. In addition, the MLA Handbook is widely used by undergraduate students throughout the United States.

The MLA Executive Council asks the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources to decline to recommend confirmation for Carol Iannone. Recognizing the seriousness of this request, we will explain our reasons in some detail.

In 1988 William Bowen, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, testified before the Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies of the House Appropriations Committee regarding the increased importance of the NEH in providing support for the humanities. Mr. Bowen pointed out that although NEH funding for the humanities had increased over the years, funding from the private sector had declined. As a result of this trend, the NEH has become the major source of support for fellowships; for institutes for teachers and scholars; for the preservation of archival and published materials; for the development of research tools, humanities
curricula, museum exhibits, historical-society collections, and scholarly editions; and for other relevant activities. We think it fair to say that the health of the NEH is directly related to the quality of the nation's cultural life. The governance of the NEH is therefore a matter of considerable consequence.

Because the governance of the NEH is so important, the humanities community and the nation are fortunate that the NEH has been such a well-administered agency; Lynne V. Cheney is justly praised in this regard. The National Council on the Humanities also deserves recognition for the role it has played in the agency's development.

The members of the National Council on the Humanities are charged with advising "the Chairperson with respect to policies, programs, and procedures for carrying out the Chairperson's functions" and with reviewing "applications for financial support and [making] recommendations thereon to the Chairperson." Those who are appointed to advise on such serious matters are described as:

individuals who (1) are selected from among private citizens of the United States who are recognized for their broad knowledge of, expertise in, or commitment to the humanities, and (2) have established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity . . . .

We have reviewed the facts recorded on Carol Iannone's curriculum vitae and considered the writings listed there. We do not believe she has a record that qualifies her to advise the head of the NEH "with respect to policies, programs, and procedures for carrying out the Chairperson's functions" or to recommend on applications for financial support.

Carol Iannone's curriculum vitae and publications indicate that her nomination to this important position is premature. In the ten years since she earned the PhD, she has done some teaching at the college level and written journalistic book reviews in Commentary that are not contributions to scholarship, a book chapter that relates personal experiences and is also not a contribution to scholarship, and three essays that are modest pieces of scholarship. Carol Iannone might in time develop a record that would qualify her for a position on the NEH National Council, but the record is currently too weak to justify such an appointment.

We believe that the members of comparable councils for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Science Foundation are people whose distinguished achievements demonstrate they have the knowledge, wisdom, and experience appropriate to their responsibilities. We do not believe that a person of such junior standing and slim scholarly production as Carol Iannone's record indicates would even be considered
for comparable councils in the arts and in science. Because Carol Iannone's record is weak, the MLA Executive Council asks the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources to decline to recommend confirmation.

Some members of the Senate committee may wonder how important a single nomination out of twenty-six council members can be. Does it matter that one person among twenty-six lacks experience and a record of any distinction? We think every nomination is important because of changes in the make-up of the NEH National Council that have taken place since the 1970s.

We enclose a report on these changes that the National Humanities Alliance (NHA) recently completed, and we call your attention to two conclusions in that report. First, since the 1970s the representation of college and university administrators has declined: college and university administrators in 1975 made up 30.8% of the council; in 1990 the representation of this group stood at 15.4%. Second, the representation of college and university faculty members in the humanities has also declined. In 1975 they represented 26.9% of the body; by 1990 they made up only 15.4% of the council. Furthermore, the NHA report notes:

the academics scheduled to rotate off [the NEH council] in 1992 represent 56% of all academics on the 1990 council. In addition they account for three-quarters of the college and university administrators on the 1990 council and just over half of the college and university faculty currently serving.

This declining representation from the academy and the particular circumstances in the rotation expected next year force us to scrutinize each appointment that purports to represent scholars and traditional scholarship. We are obliged to consider the depth of experience each nominee is likely to bring to the task at hand. How can the NEH council carry out its responsibilities with regard to higher education and scholarship when the representation of college and university administrators and faculty members in the humanities has become increasingly smaller and the merit of the nominees also declines? As we noted, the vitality of the nation's cultural life is directly related to the health of the NEH; for this reason the qualifications of each appointee who is to advise the head of the NEH should be impeccable.

Some will argue that objections to the appointment of Carol Iannone to the NEH National Council are "ideological." Let me assure you that this is not so. The MLA is concerned only about the effective oversight of the NEH. We welcome the appointment of distinguished scholars across the political spectrum. In our view, Gertrude Himmelfarb, a scholar of distinguished achievement whose "ideology" is probably similar to that of Carol Iannone, contributed in important ways to the NEH council because Professor Himmelfarb has a profound understanding of the academic enterprise and the wisdom and experience needed to carry out a council
member's responsibilities. When Robert Hollander, who will retire from the council in January, is eligible for reconsideration, we would welcome his reappointment for the same reason.

On behalf of the Executive Council, I thank you for your consideration of the MLA's views on this nomination. If you have questions or wish further information, I hope you will not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Sincerely yours,

Phyllis Franklin
Executive Director