

Testimony of Aimee Monroy Smith, Board Member, Connecticut Humanities
Before the General Assembly's Appropriations Committee

Re: Governor's Proposed FY 2016-2017 Biennial Budget

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and other distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, I want to thank you for this opportunity to address the Governor's proposed budget and specifically the proposed cuts to the CT Humanities.

As a Board Member, member of the business community and a parent, I am deeply concerned about the impact the proposed budget cuts will have on historical and cultural institutions around the state. As you may know, Connecticut Humanities uses most of its state funding to financially support nonprofit organizations and municipalities around the state through a competitive grant program led by practitioners in related fields. The decision-making process around what to fund is strategic and focused on how best to foster an understanding of the Humanities in all parts of state.

The end result is a cadre of dynamic programming, ranging from the Poetry Out Loud program, a statewide competition for high school students; to a celebration of artist Deane Keller's work at the New Haven Museum; to a family reading program at the Rockville Public Library in Vernon. These programs and many others are designed to share some dimension of the state's cultural and historical impact. As a parent, I have witnessed the excited delight of my children as they relayed their field trip experiences learning about revolutionary medicine at Putnam Memorial State Park or how commerce originally began in our area through our local historical society. These experiences for them are tangible and inspire them to think beyond their daily lives.

In January one of my colleagues on the Connecticut Humanities board of directors wrote an opinion piece, which I have included as part of my testimony. It truly captures one of the most important reasons I see for continuing to financially support Humanities in our state – its role in promoting civil discourse. The exhibitions, lectures, and community forums that capture and portray some aspect of the humanities can frequently inspire, grow and encourage civil debate. Throughout the years, these programs have played a role in our state and in other states to illustrate how communities have collaborated and devised constructive solutions for various issues. Given the state's current challenges, it seems that we want to encourage rather than impede innovation thinking.

At present, the governor's proposed two-year budget would eliminate all of the state support for the Connecticut Humanities which amounts to essentially two-thirds of the organization's budget. I strongly urge the committee to reinstate the funding for the Connecticut Humanities and in the process emphasize the legislature's support for the cultural institutions and libraries in their local communities. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Op-Ed: The humanities can help us rekindle notions of the common good

By: BERNARD L. KAVALER | January 20, 2015

Whatever happened to the common good?

Once the bedrock of a vibrant, democratic society, it has been overtaken by partisan bickering, a virulent and relentless news cycle, economic uncertainty and demographic upheaval. It now seems relegated to being a quaint notion of generations past.



(<http://ctmirror.org/about-us/#submitoped>) It is time to go back to the future, and reassert the prominence and inspiration offered by the common good. We need to recognize once again that there is significant societal benefit in aspiring to national purpose beyond political convenience or advantage. We should strive to reframe the public debate in a way that stresses what we have in common, rather than descending to dwell exclusively in what pulls us apart.

Fortunately, some stand ready to grasp the baton of common good. Those who remember when disagreeing without being disagreeable was possible, and when agreeing to disagree was not disingenuous, understand the value of civic discourse that invokes both respect and restraint.

The common good has surely receded, but it has not disappeared. It starts with civility. Admitting as much, the Maine legislature recently conducted a “civility training workshop,” attended by more than 30 legislators representing both political parties. It was a beginning.

The National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD), based at the University of Arizona, explains that “the strident tenor of contemporary American discourse is threatening our cherished democracy.” Urging that Americans “demand civil discourse and a government that works in the best interests of the country as a whole,” Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, NICD’s Executive Director, said recently that “negative ads are too polarizing to foster civil discourse and do not respect voters.”

William “Bro” Adams, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), has pointed out that “new and powerful technologies exercise unprecedented influence over our private and public lives, in both empowering and constraining ways. Our democratic institutions are being tested by deep changes in the means by which people engage the political process.”

The NEH response is a soon-to-be-launched initiative specifically designed to support efforts to grapple with critical issues in a manner that reasserts the notion of the common good. While not underestimating the challenges, Adams is convinced that the humanities can contribute to achieving constructive, collaborative solutions.

Where to begin? If we are to summon the common good, we must seek it. Constructive dialogue is possible in all settings, large and small, simple and complex. There is a way for the common good to be rekindled, if we have the will.

Nearly half of millennials – significantly more than any other generation – now accept the notion that incivility is part of the American political process. But in a recent poll by Weber Shandwick, nearly one in four millennials believe civility will improve over the next few years, two to four times the percentage of other generations. While 56 percent of millennials say the Internet and social media are making civility worse, they remain optimistic.

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On March 4, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in *King v. Burwell*, a case challenging the validity of tax subsidies helping millions of Americans buy health insurance. If the court rules against the Obama administration, those subsidies could be cut off for everyone in the three dozen states using healthcare.gov, the federal exchange website.

Given the dizzying changes and challenges that demand our response, common ground and the common good are too often viewed -- to our collective detriment -- as unwelcome capitulation, unbridled naiveté, or utterly unattainable.

“The arts and humanities play a particularly vital role in articulating, nurturing, and conserving the common good,” explains Michigan State University’s website. “The arts and humanities shine a light on those elements of the common good that are endangered. They tell us when what was once held in common is beginning to lose favor and why. And (they) can articulate new components of the common good.”

As columnist Jim Wallis described in TIME last year: “The notion of the common good has both religious and secular roots going back to Catholic social teaching, the Protestant social gospel, Judaism, Islam, and in the American Constitution itself, which says that government should promote ‘the general welfare.’”

The humanities can help us find our way back.

Bernard L. Kavalier is managing principal of Express Strategies, a public affairs and public policy consulting firm in Hartford. He recently joined the board of directors of Connecticut Humanities, a nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Comments

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Legislators grappling with fast-changing health care landscape

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The health care landscape is changing, and legislators are trying to figure out how to respond to an industry that is at once a top employer in many communities and a big driver of health care costs that are straining state, local and business budgets. Hospital officials say some of the proposals so far would take the state backwards.