



April 28, 2004

Dear Corporation for Public Broadcasting board member:

Probably no grassroots organization in the country has more of a commitment to the future of public broadcasting than Common Cause. Common Cause founder John Gardner assisted in the birth of public broadcasting when he headed the Carnegie Corporation 40 years ago. And Common Cause has 300,000 members and supporters whose primary source of information comes from public broadcasting.

For this reason we are writing to you to share our deep concerns about the governance of public broadcasting. We believe that the appointment process for members of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting must be changed, and that CPB's mission must be clarified and restored to its historic roots.

CPB was intended by the founders of public broadcasting to be an entity to promote and fund public broadcasting and to serve as an intermediary between Congress and public stations. CPB was designed to insulate public broadcasting programming from political interference by the government.

The visionaries who conceived public television and radio in the 1960s knew that CPB's role would be a difficult one to fulfill. For that reason, they proposed that appointees to the CPB board be "twelve distinguished and public spirited citizens," six of whom would be appointed by the President, and the other six chosen by the board members that had been previously appointed. The Public Television Act, based on the Carnegie report, required that all 15 CPB members be nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate.

Unfortunately, CPB's board has failed to fulfill its mission almost since its inception. In its 1979 report, *A Public Trust*, The Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Television found, observed that "in recent years appointments to the CPB board have become highly politicized, a trend which we believe has damaged the system."

The CPB board, the Carnegie report noted, failed to "fight for the system's independence," and rather worked to "mollify the Administration in order to maintain the funding that was now life and death to the system."

Derek Bok
Chairman

Chellie Pingree
President and CEO

Archibald Cox
Chairman Emeritus

John Gardner
Founding Chairman

Over the past few years, CPB board members seem to be increasingly caught up in the search for any hint of “bias” in public broadcasting’s reporting, a state of affairs that can only chill our best source of fact-based hard-hitting investigative journalism.

Recent abrupt staff changes at CPB, coupled with the appointment of two ombudsmen to ensure “balance,” add to our unease about the vision of current board members. Is the CPB board committed to protecting public broadcasting from government interference, or are they looking to protect their partisan interests from criticism, no matter how well documented?

Adding to our unease are media reports concerning a newly instituted policy of insisting that federal funds for PBS would be given only if the network would commit to strict “objectivity and balance” in each of its programs.

We urge you to reconsider and drop this new policy, which would make the founders of public broadcasting turn over in their graves. We also urge you to explain specifically what the two CPB ombudsmen are empowered to do, and whether they will listen to the concerns of the public broadcasting audience, or only to the complaints of CPB board members.

We also invite you to work with us on some long-needed structural reforms of CPB. We urge you to support our recommendation to Congress to change the process for naming members to the CPB board. At the very least, the board should not be a home for big political donors of either party, but rather be composed of individuals without partisan leanings and a dedication to a vision of public broadcasting that was supposed to “enable us not only to see and hear more vividly but to understand more deeply.”

Based on some of the recommendations in *A Public Trust*, we propose that the President continue to make appointments to the CPB board, but from a list of nominees drawn up by a panel chaired by the Librarian of Congress. The Librarian would find six distinguished Americans - perhaps the head of a leading university; the poet laureate; an award-winning journalist, the recipient of a National Book Award, a noted filmmaker -- to serve with him to draw up a slate of candidates for the President's consideration. Those candidates for the CPB board should reflect geographic, gender and racial diversity, and possess the appropriate talent and expertise for a medium that offers news, entertainment, and public affairs programming.

This structural reform would help ensure that public broadcasting will benefit from the involvement of leading American civic and cultural leaders, helping to strengthen its public interest mission. As the nation fully enters the digital TV era it is even more important to ensure that public broadcasting has the involvement of leaders who can help ensure that it fulfills its digital age potential.

We also urge you to recommend to Congress that it clarify CPB’s mission. The board of CPB should protect public broadcasting from governmental interference. It cannot be a “heat shield” between government and public broadcasting’s editorial independence if it is also charged with making sure public broadcasting is “balanced.” We strongly believe that Congress, when it reauthorizes CPB, should make clear that its primary function is to protect public broadcasting from government

interference. If “balance” is to be any part of CPB’s mission, it should be ensuring balance across the entire program schedule, and not pertaining to any one program.

While these larger reforms are in play, we must make sure that the CPB board we have reflects to the best of its ability the diversity of the American viewing public. We have made clear that we prefer a process that favors the selection of a nonpartisan board. But it is only fair that until these reforms are made that the Administration quickly fill the one vacancy on the nine-member board, which would go to a Democrat, since no more than five appointees can belong to the same political party. (One board member is an Independent.) The Democratic seat on the CPB board has been vacant for more than a year. We hope you share our concern that this vacancy be filled as soon as possible, and communicate that sense of urgency to the President.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chellie Pingree".

Chellie Pingree

President, Common Cause