



**Australian Historical Association Submission to the Senate Education and Employment
Legislation Committee Enquiry into the Australian Research Council Amendment
(Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018**

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) is the peak national body of historians and students which includes academic, professional, and other historians working in all fields of history. AHA members are past and current holders of Australian Research Council grants in all categories, including Laureate Fellowships. Members also act as assessors and members of the College of Experts.

The AHA supports the proposed amendment to remove the Minister's veto over Australian Research Council grants. It objects in the strongest terms to political interference in the award of Australian Research Council (ARC) grants. The three known examples of such rejection of applications approved by the ARC's rigorous processes of peer review have undermined confidence in Australia's research system, damaged academic careers, and called into question this country's commitment to open inquiry in the eyes of the international academic community.

The vetoed grants have overwhelmingly been from the humanities and social sciences. The six Discovery Projects targeted by the Acting Education Minister in December 2021 were all in this category, originally recommended for funding by the ARC's College of Experts. The rejected projects focused on climate activism, modern China, and English literature. That the actions of the minister were politically motivated and had nothing to do with the merit of the projects or of the researchers is obvious to all.

This is the third time we know of that a Liberal-National Party Coalition Education Minister has acted to override what is a most highly competitive and rigorous academic grant scheme. Previously, in 2005 and again in 2017, this tactic was used, and always with projects in the humanities.

This interference harms Australia's international research reputation. The recent head of the European Research Council, Professor Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, reported that he had never heard of ministerial interference of this kind and noted that it "affects very negatively its international image, especially for countries who are working hard at attracting scientists

from other countries such as Australia”.¹ Closer to home, it damages the careers of humanities scholars who are teaching the young professionals and citizens of tomorrow.

The very existence of a right of veto, even when it is not exercised, undermines academic freedom and the integrity of the peer review process. It has the potential to produce self-censorship. It may redirect academics from important areas of research for fear of offending the government of the day. This is not in the national interest. It is inconsistent with the ethos of a free and democratic society.

ARC grant rounds are highly competitive. The guidelines and processes are extremely rigorous. To take the Discovery Projects (DP) as an example, more than four out of five applications in each round are generally not funded. The recent round saw only 19% of DP grants funded. Generally, even with the successful grants, budgets are often slashed.

Each year, academics invest vast amounts of time in preparing ARC applications that sometimes extend to over 100 pages. Universities devote massive resources to ensuring the submission of high-quality, fundable applications. Expert reviewers collectively donate thousands of hours of their time and expertise voluntarily to the assessment process. Those who serve on the College of Experts, generally for a three-year term, receive minimal compensation for the significant time spent attending to their important work. Some expert researchers have already indicated that they will refuse to participate in future assessments while the veto remains. Members of the College of Experts have resigned in protest at the actions of the Acting Education Minister.

Ministerial intervention overrides this robust, independent system of expert judgment on a minimal reading of project titles, word searches, and National Interest Test statements. Australia has a world-class university sector of researchers who hold international academic reputations grounded in deep expertise. Those who ensure its daily operation should be entrusted to assist the Australian Research Council to conduct a fair and objective assessment process in the national interest, compliant with the rules, and without the interference of ministers and their political staffers.

Professor Melanie Oppenheimer FASSA
AHA President
22 February 2022

¹ Quoted in Julie Hare, “Robert’s research veto attracts international condemnation,” *Financial Review*, 10 January 2022.