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RE: The Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

I am a research-active historian who has been the recipient of Australian Research Council (ARC) funding and an assessor of ARC proposals. I am writing to lend my support in the strongest possible terms for amending the Australian Research Council Act (2001) to remove the Ministerial veto over projects that have been approved for funding. Academic freedom is a core principle of Australian research. If the ARC is seen to be politicised, with a perception that only projects that fit the ideology of the government of the day are likely to be funded, it will do enormous damage to Australia's global reputation as a research leader and diminish the international standing of the tertiary education sector (Australia's fourth largest export).

In 2017 the Minister for Education, Simon Birmingham vetoed eleven successful ARC proposals. In 2021 the Acting Minister for Education, Stuart Robert vetoed a further six. Both instances represent a breach of faith by the government towards the academic community. The second instance, however, is extremely troubling as it appears to establish political interference in Australian research as a norm. The Ministerial veto was also secretly used by Brendan Nelson when he was Education Minister in 2005. As far as we know, these vetos have exclusively targeted successful proposals in the Arts and Humanities.

The Minister for Education has an important role to play in overseeing the grants process, however, they do not have the necessary expertise to judge individual proposals and must rely on the advice of the ARC College of Experts. Hundreds of hours are spent writing ARC grants and it takes many more to assess them. Typically, the whole peer-review process takes a year. It is entirely inappropriate for a Minister without relevant expertise to claim that an approved grant does not meet the 'pub test' or is not in the national interest. **Overruling the College of Experts after a proposal has survived the rigorous and time-consuming peer-review process undermines the integrity of Australian research.**

Internationally, comparable democracies which value academic freedom are guided by the Haldane Principle. This dictates that while governments should oversee funding bodies, individual projects should be judged by a process of expert peer-review. As a matter of urgency, Australia should ensure the independence of its research by removing the Ministerial veto from the Australian Research Council Act (2001).

The use of the Ministerial veto is personally devastating for the academics who lose their funding, an unjustifiable insult to the experts who approved the projects, and the antithesis of the principle of academic freedom. In a vibrant democracy, there is no place for political interference in research.

Kind Regards,

Benjamin T. Jones