

To the members of the committee,

I am writing this submission in wholehearted support of the proposed amendment to remove ministerial discretion from the awarding of ARC research grants.

I am a professional scientist who has worked in university-based medical research for the last 30 years, both in Australia and in the UK. I currently work at the University of Tasmania, although obviously I speak only for myself in this submission, and not my employer.

I have never had tenure, and all my salary over the last 30 years has come from research grants (so-called "soft" money), usually funded for only 2-3 years, and each and every one of those grants was bitterly contested and fought for. I have been involved in writing many more research grant submissions, both to ARC and NHMRC, and a vanishingly small proportion of those were successful. As research scientists in receipt of public funding, we accept that the pool of funding will always be much smaller than the pool of applicants. We know that every grant application will cost us weeks of effort: Designing experiments, data collection, thought, writing, rewriting, polishing, critiquing and so on. We pour our hearts and souls into crafting these complex applications, which we know have limited prospects of actually being funded.

This can be a somewhat soul-crushing endeavour, but the knowledge that we are striving for excellence within a field that we are highly trained and competent for, and the occasional success ("the grant got up!!!") makes us continue.

The other thing that keeps us motivated to write these applications is the certain knowledge that we are being assessed and judged by our peers – experts within our area – and that personal bias or animus is kept to a minimum through checks and balances in the committee system. If we triumph, it validates our standing as researchers as well as the quality of the grant. If we fail, well....

There are no terrible grant applications any more in my field – they simply don't get past the gatekeepers. By the time an application makes it to the committee it will have been judged to be "worth funding" at least. It then comes down to how does it compare to the other fundable grants this round?

If the grant makes it to the committee but is rejected, we are confident that the grant itself was good, but the funded grants this round were **better**.

I speak from the perspective of a medical researcher, but I have little doubt that the same committee system pertains to grant applications in the arts and humanities fields. I cannot

imagine that a poor quality or frivolous application ever gets recommended for funding by ARC, as the number of excellent research projects which are deemed "fundable" must always be vastly in excess of the available funding.

To introduce the element of veto by *any single person* into this system is incredibly corrosive, in my view. If I knew that the chairperson of the committee had an absolute veto over my grant, for example, and that this year's chairperson was a scientific rival, or simply someone who disliked me – why would I even bother submitting the grant? It would be profoundly dispiriting to have a scientific peer veto my grant without any counterbalancing views taken into account.

Even worse would be to have a chairperson who is not an expert in my area veto my grant! I know very little about Elizabethan history, or the slave trade, or the changes in dress design in the 18th century. I am an expert in a very narrow field, and it would be completely inappropriate for me to act as a referee or judge on an ARC Humanities research grant panel, let alone act as a chairperson with the right of veto. Similarly, I would be outraged to have a historian dismiss my research proposal because they didn't see the point of it.

And worse still would be to have my grant vetoed by the minister because they "didn't like it". As academics, we use "impartial peer review" as our guiding principle for assessing the quality of grants and publications. We expect nothing less from the government system into which we entrust our grant applications – each one a massive team effort, representing many, many hours of work, underpinned by years of knowledge and expertise. To have all that tossed aside because *one person* doesn't like it? It demoralises us, and it is profoundly depressing to have witnessed this occur over the last few years.

I believe this power of veto corrodes the fabric of Australian research, and I very much hope this bill is passed.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Bill Bennett

