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MEDIA RELEASE

Australasian Association of Philosophy response to revelations of Ministerial Interference with Humanities Research

The Australasian Association of Philosophy is gravely concerned by the political interference with Australian Research Council (ARC) recommendations uncovered during Senate Estimates by Senator Kim Carr. 11 Humanities and Social Sciences research proposals, which had been recommended by the Australian Research Council for funding, were rejected by Minister Birmingham in 2017 and 2018.

The proposals – 6 Discovery Projects, 3 Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards and 2 Future Fellowships – were rigorously reviewed by expert peer reviewers, including international experts, and were deemed to be both eligible under the ARC funding rules and of outstanding quality before being recommended for funding. No reasons for the rejection of the recommendations were given. On what basis would the Minister be able to determine that these 11 proposals did not merit funding? It is unthinkable that the Minister would intervene in a similar way with proposals assessed by experts in physics or chemistry. Why would a Minister claim to be better able to assess the merits of humanities and social sciences proposals than the peer reviewers and panel experts in these fields?

This interference with the ARC's independence and its robust processes is a direct threat to Australian higher education, to research, to intellectual freedom and to our community, given that the outcomes from research inform public policy and our understanding of ourselves as a nation and our place in the world. Researchers accept that governments shape the funding priorities of funding bodies, like the ARC and NHMRC. Nonetheless, they rightfully expect that political interests should not impede the robust and independent peer review process. Such interference threatens the core of academic research, independent peer review.

The impact of such interference on the careers of researchers whose proposals have been rejected after recommendation for funding from the ARC significant. DECRA and Future Fellowships support career-establishing and -sustaining projects undertaken by Australia's brightest researchers. At least one of the DECRA applicants whose proposal was rejected has left Australia; a direct loss of research capacity for what was once hailed as a Knowledge Nation.

The Australasian Association of Philosophy is dismayed by the arbitrary and unjust actions of the Minister.

Professor Graham Oppy
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