I*nASA*: International Australian Studies Association

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We write on behalf of the International Australian Studies Association (InASA), a multidisciplinary organisation of scholars committed to fostering a better understanding of Australia's complex history, culture and society, and sharing this with the world. Our members work across many areas, but are primarily clustered in humanities and social science disciplines.

We write in support of Senator Mehreen Faruqi's *Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018*, and do so particularly in light of the refusal of six Australian Research Council Discovery Program (DP) awards by the Acting Minister Stuart Robert, announced on 24 December 2021, on top of then-Education Minister Simon Birmingham not approving eleven successful DP grants in late 2017.

InASA Treasurer Jon Piccini explained in 2018 (see Appendix 1), when Minister Birmingham's decision not to approve the eleven grants became public:

> "The Australian Research Council (ARC) administers the National Competitive Grants Program that, alongside the National Health and Medical Research Council, provides the lion's share of external research funding to Australian academics.…These grants are incredibly competitive. In 2017, the ARC approved only 18% of discovery grant applications, and 17% of Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards. Only 20% of Future Fellowships were awarded in the 2018 round. Such high standards are maintained by a rigorous system of peer review. Each application is assigned two general assessors – members of a group of experts for the field of research in which the project falls. After initial review, each is sent to as many as six reviewers, who provide anonymous comments and ratings. By intervening at the end of the process – what should be a ministerial 'tick' for the work of the ARC's experts – the minister undermines this exacting process. What's more, by rejecting only humanities projects, Birmingham has placed this discipline at a decided funding disadvantage."[1]

The same stands today. The Acting Minister's decision not to approve six awards, based only on the most cursory of understandings, is a proverbial slap in the face to the hard-working academics on the ARC College of Experts and numerous assessors who have already assessed these applications in full and decided on their meritorious status.

Ministers Roberts and Birmingham justified their decisions not to approve the grants on the grounds that the projects were not in the national interest. Yet, in the 2018 application round, four grants declined a year earlier were successful and in the 2019 application round at least five

[1] Jon Piccini and Dirk Moses, "Simon Birmingham's intervention in research funding is not unprecedented, but dangerous," *The Conversation*, 26 October 2018, https://theconversation.com/simon-birminghams-intervention-in-research-funding-is-not-unprecedented-but-dangerous-105737, accessed 21 February 2022.

were successful. Furthermore, that all unapproved grants in both 2017 and 2021 were in the humanities and social sciences – including projects to aid LGBTIQ young people and to better understand young people's responses to climate change – suggests that a culture war mentality is driving the ministers' decision-making, rather than any substantive problems with the projects.

The level of public debate about humanities research in general and the specific grants not approved by the Acting Minister is extremely limited and disappointing. Regular media campaigns ridicule excellent Australian research based only on the titles and public descriptions. InASA's current president, Professor Noah Riseman, was the target of a campaign in 2018 when a *Daily Telegraph* article criticised the funding of his project on Australian transgender history (see Appendix 2). Yet, one output from that project was shortlisted for a 2021 Victorian Premier's Community History Award, clearly demonstrating its value and public contribution. The ill-informed derision in Senate Estimates Committee towards the latest grants refused funding similarly dismissed research into Shakespeare, the canonical English dramatist whose work is central to university curricula in programmes such as the Ramsay Centre-funded Western Civilisation degrees – which this Federal Government has strongly supported.

If it is the government's intention to internationalise Australian research and make us a centre for global research and development, then the denial of these grants, many of which had international collaborators, seems entirely counterproductive. Furthermore, that two out of the six grants focused on Australian-China relations is of particular concern for InASA, given we have worked hard to foster and encourage Chinese interest in Australian studies. Indeed, our organisation regularly offers a conference exchange with members of the Chinese Association for Australian Studies and has contributed to the work of the Foundation for Australian Studies in China. Australian Studies as a discipline is popular in China, with there currently being forty-one Australian studies centres in Chinese universities (including in Taiwan).

We have a better option already available. 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).* While we welcome Shadow Education Minister Tanya Plibersek's promise not to exercise her veto rights if Labor wins the next election, we believe that the guarantee against ministerial bias in Senator Faruqi's bill removes this power as a potential danger to Australia's research culture.

The use of the Ministerial power to decline grants approved by the ARC is personally devastating for the academics who invest substantial amounts of time in the application process and have funding withheld at the final stage for reasons that are ill-defined and unrelated to the quality of their research and its standing within the scholarly field. It is a diminishment of expert advice and commitment to a rigorous peer review process and the antithesis of the principle of academic freedom, which this government has so vociferously endorsed. Furthermore, the ministerial interventions in both 2017 and 2021 undermine confidence at home and abroad in our research system, leaving academics wondering if it is even worthwhile to seek funding in Australia. This is a profoundly disappointing outcome, and one we as members of InASA hope the Senate can ensure does not happen again by supporting Senator Faruqi's bill.

APPENDIX 1

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

In 2017 and 2018, as education minister, Simon Birmingham vetoed 11 ARC grants in the humanities. LUKAS COCH/AAP Image

Simon Birmingham's intervention in research funding is not unprecedented, but dangerous

October 26, 2018 4.22pm AEDT

Jon Piccini

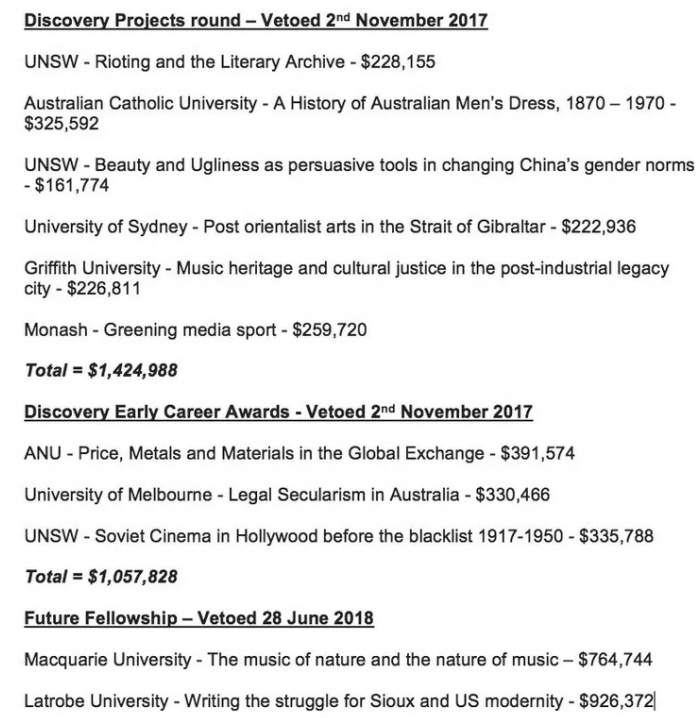
UQ Research Fellow, School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, The University of Queensland

Dirk Moses

Professor of Modern History, University of Sydney

Senator Simon Birmingham's personal intervention during his time as education minister in 2017 and 2018 to deny funding to 11 Australian Research Council (ARC) grants, all in the humanities and worth a combined total of A$4.2 million, has sparked outrage.

Revealed in Senate estimates on Thursday, the vetoed projects included $926,372 for a La Trobe University project titled "Writing the struggle for Sioux and US modernity", $764,744 for a Macquarie University project on "the music of nature and the nature of music", and $391,574 for an ANU project called "Price, metals and materials in the global exchange".



Discovery Projects round – Vetoed 2nd November 2017

UNSW - Rioting and the Literary Archive - $228,155

Australian Catholic University - A History of Australian Men's Dress, 1870 – 1970 - $325,592

UNSW - Beauty and Ugliness as persuasive tools in changing China's gender norms - $161,774

University of Sydney - Post orientalist arts in the Strait of Gibraltar - $222,936

Griffith University - Music heritage and cultural justice in the post-industrial legacy city - $226,811

Monash - Greening media sport - $259,720

Total = $1,424,988

Discovery Early Career Awards - Vetoed 2nd November 2017

ANU - Price, Metals and Materials in the Global Exchange - $391,574

University of Melbourne - Legal Secularism in Australia - $330,466

UNSW - Soviet Cinema in Hollywood before the blacklist 1917-1950 - $335,788

Total = $1,057,828

Future Fellowship – Vetoed 28 June 2018

Macquarie University - The music of nature and the nature of music – $764,744

Latrobe University - Writing the struggle for Sioux and US modernity - $926,372

Projects vetoed by Simon Birmingham. Ben Eltham/Twitter

On Friday, Birmingham defended his intervention, suggesting most Australian taxpayers would prefer their funding be directed to other research.

In a statement, Ian Jacobs, the vice chancellor and president at UNSW, from which three grants were vetoed, said "the unjustified and unexplained decision to solely deny funding for research that contributes to scholarship in arts and humanities is deeply troubling".

The decisions are, in the words of Australian Academy of the Humanities president Joy Damousi, "political interference" that "undermines confidence and trust" in Australia's world-leading peer review system. It has incalculable effect on the lives of academics, but such action is not unprecedented, and only further evidences the vital need for strong, independent humanities research.

How does the process normally work?

The Australian Research Council (ARC) administers the National Competitive Grants Program that, alongside the National Health and Medical Research Council, provides the lion's share of external research funding to Australian academics.

These are apportioned through difference schemes. Of those, Birmingham rejected six Discovery Projects; three Early Career Researcher Awards; and two Future Fellowships.

These grants are incredibly competitive. In 2017, the ARC approved only 18% of discovery grant applications, and 17% of Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards. Only 20% of Future Fellowships were awarded in the 2018 round.

Such high standards are maintained by a rigorous system of peer review. Each application is assigned two general assessors – members of a group of experts for the field of research in which the project falls. After initial review, each is sent to as many as six reviewers, who provide anonymous comments and ratings.

By intervening at the end of the process – what should be a ministerial "tick" for the work of the ARC's experts – the minister undermines this exacting process. What's more, by rejecting only humanities projects, Birmingham has placed this discipline at a decided funding disadvantage.

Not unprecendented

Government interference in research is not unprecedented, however. Australian Catholic University historian Hannah Forsyth writes of how, in 1956, Australian historian Russell Ward was denied a lectureship in history at what became the University of New South Wales purportedly on the grounds of his having had communist associations.

Brendan Nelson, minister for education in the Howard government, made a similar intervention to Birmingham's in 2005, rejecting at least three, but as many as 20, applications. All had already passed the strenuous ARC process.

Coming at the tail end of the "history wars" of the Howard era, the decision was greeted with joy by the likes of Andrew Bolt and horror by the academy.

Writing in The Monthly, Gideon Haigh called this “the new censorship”, not only because such interference directly denied research funding to worthy candidates, but because it brought about “self-censorship”.

As one of Haigh’s interviewees put it, “young academics will sheer away from gender, because of the perception that it’s [the ARC process] being monitored”. That Australia has “no other form of research advancement apart from government” made this particularly problematic.

Which humanities?

Birmingham’s singling out of humanities grants, and his explanatory tweet appealing to populist sentiments, exposes a particular vision of the humanities. This vision also became apparent in the criticisms of the ANU when it broke off negotiations with the Ramsay Centre about introducing a degree in “Western civilisation”.

Government figures and conservative journalists accused the ANU and universities generally of inadequately teaching “Western civilisation”, indeed of undermining it with politically correct emphases on class, gender and race.

Many Australians would disagree that this is the case. One of the attributes of “Western civilisation” vaunted by government figures is the secular Enlightenment, which encouraged debate and criticism of established ideas. Yet this government is inhibiting the continuing process of inquiry in all spheres of the humanities. Birmingham’s decision demonstrates that the government is unwilling to leave funding decisions to the free market of ideas institutionalised in peer review.

The Australian Labor Party has a “protocol” of issuing explanatory details when a minister intercedes on these types of matters, something it accuses the present government of ignoring. However, it may be time for such informal processes to be institutionalised in changes to legislation. It may be time to limit – and perhaps forbid – the minister’s rights to intercede for political purposes.

APPENDIX 2

Grants for rants

We pay for research on white privilege and gender

Sydney University of Technology professor **Carl Rhodes** has been given a **$270,000** grant to fund research into gender and culture

Noah Riseman is a lecturer in Australian-American History at the Australian Catholic University. Riseman was given **$256,000** to lead a research project into the history of famous transgender Australians.

Dr Katherine Carroll is an ANU sociologist who studies reproductive issues and has received **$370,000** to research links between lactation and depression

Dr Tania Ferfolja, from the School of Education at Western Sydney University, has been granted **$313,000** to study gender research for schoolchildren

EXCLUSIVE

JACK HOUGHTON

MILLIONS of dollars in government grants are being given to university academics to push their politically correct agendas on issues such as white privilege, as well as developing "gender and sexuality" training for schools.

Among the big winners in the latest round of handouts from the federal government-funded Australian Research Council is a Sydney lecturer who has argued white male privilege is destroying democracy. He has been awarded $270,000 to study culture and gender in the workplace. The Australian Catholic University (ACU) was given $256,966 to research the history of famous transgender Australians, and researchers at Western Sydney University were given $313,000 to develop new gender and sexuality policies for schoolchildren.

A gender theorist at Australian National University was granted $371,815 to study whether donating breast milk can aid depression treatment in mothers who lost a child. The money was pulled from the ARC's Discovery Projects grant scheme, which has dished out $225 million on research projects from this year.

Sydney University of Technology professor Carl Rhodes — who will head up the team researching gender in the workplace — said his work would be used to develop a "new theory on leadership diversity". Professor Rhodes argued in an academic paper in August that anyone who defended white privilege "is setting democracy on the road to tyranny".

"The strength of populist rebuttals would have it that calling out the existence of this privilege is ... 'political correctness gone mad'.

"Central to the upsurge of populist identity politics in Australia is a backlash of denial against white male privilege."

The researchers, who received $250,000 to probe into the history of famous transgender Australians, say their work will also be used to "inform current debates about transgender rights".

ACU history lecturer, ABC contributor and transgender activist Noah Riseman heads up the research.

"By revealing transgender people's histories, the project will explore the ways gender-diverse Australians have expressed their identities amid changing social norms," he said in the project briefing.

Despite Australians forking out millions to fund the research, in some cases, the final products are being put behind paywalls. Mr Riseman took to Twitter to advertise his latest publicly funded work, saying only the "first 50 downloads are free". Everyone else has to pay $58 a day to view the work.

Western Sydney University sociologist Tania Ferfolja — who received hundreds of thousands of dollars to study "gender and sexuality diversity in school" — said her work would be used to train teachers. She said it would also aid "policy and curriculum development, training resources and increased support for parents of G&S diverse children".