MEDIA RELEASE
ASCP Response to Disclosure of Ministerial Intervention in ARC Grant Allocation Process
31 October, 2018

Members of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy (ASCP) were concerned to learn last Thursday night that the former Minister for Education, Senator Simon Birmingham, used his ministerial discretion to veto eleven successful ARC grants in the Humanities, without providing reasons or making public this intervention.

Given that the ARC grant process is strongly guided by ‘national research priorities’ laid down by government, the assessment process is already weighted in favour of project proposals with a strongly applied nature that address these NRPs. Therefore, to have high-quality Humanities projects that have established their importance through stringent expert review struck down after they have been found to meet such requirements is an especially unjustified act by the former Minister that flies in the face of natural justice.

ARC Grant applicants must have confidence that unsuccessful applications fail on the basis of merit, as assessed by experts in their field, and not political intervention or other extraneous considerations. The former Minister has undermined this confidence, and has damaged the reputation of a system on which Humanities scholars rely for research support.

He has also disrespected the applicants who invested considerable time and energy writing their applications, their collegial mentors and advisors who gave time to provide feedback, the peer assessors who volunteer to review applications, and the public servants who administer this process in good faith.

The former Minister treated all of these people, and thus the process as a whole, with disdain. The only reason he has so far provided for doing so was a vague claim, delivered by means of Twitter, about what “most Australian taxpayers” think (see @birmo: 3:25 p.m. 25 October 2018). His sneering reference to one particular project in that statement added further insult to substantial injury.

We are also troubled to have learned that the affected scholars and universities seem not to have been advised of this interference at the time, something that only adds another concerning layer to the egregious lack of transparency and due process pertaining to this whole intervention.

The overall effect is to erode confidence in our highly competitive funding environment, and thus to undermine Humanities research in Australia. The indication that one of the early-career academics affected has taken up a position overseas is indicative of the perils of such ad hoc interventions.

The ASCP is deeply concerned about this interference by the former Minister, and recommends that the following steps are taken to remedy this situation:

1. Funding should be restored to the projects that were vetoed by the former Minister;
2. Robust steps should be taken to remove the capacity of the Minister to arbitrarily override the expert judgements of assessors involved in the decisions of public research funding bodies such as the ARC, thereby ensuring that political expediency plays no part in undermining the integrity of future Grant rounds.

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