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Go8 condemns Government's secret rejection of Australian Research Council-approved grants

"The Group of Eight (Go8), which represents Australia's leading research-intensive universities, condemns in the strongest possible terms this Government's interference in academic freedom, and the globally accepted and revered research peer review process."

Go8 Chief Executive Vicki Thomson said the actions by former Education Minister Senator Simon Birmingham in secretly rejecting 11 research projects worth some \$4.2 million in Australian Research Council grants was "reprehensible".

"This is a Government that demands freedom of speech on campus but at the same time walks all over academic freedom; a Government that, without transparency or explanation secretly vetoes some \$4 million in research projects that have undergone a rigorous peer review process and have been judged worthy for recommendation to the Minister by the ARC.

"The decision-making process needs to be transparent and explained. If the advice of the ARC was not accepted by the then Education minister - then whose advice was he taking, and what were the reasons behind the rejection of these projects that were not apparent to the ARC expert panels?

"At the very least, there should be a requirement for the Minister to be upfront and include in their grant announcement why they have rejected ARC recommended grants."

Ms Thomson said while a Minister did have the power to do what Senator Birmingham did, this had not happened since 2004/2005 when then Coalition Education Minister Brendan Nelson caused an International academic outcry for a similar action. "When political views, political dislikes, begin to infringe on research projects that have already been accepted by this nation's highly respected Australian Research Council it has to be said that we are on a slippery undemocratic slope," she said.

"This is clearly base politics. It is unworthy of any Government. Government should be above being so tricky for its own political agenda," said Ms Thomson. "Grants programs have rigorous peer review processes. These grants are not handed out like candy. They are hard fought for and hard won and to suggest that the ARC is making the wrong decisions on which grants it chooses as worthy of funding, as this Ministerial action does, is uncalled for.

Ms Thomson said the Go8 looked forward to the new Minister of Education, Dan Tehan, restoring integrity to Ministerial process and ensuring the grants are now provided as set out by the ARC.

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