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Prof J C Lattanzio, President, ASA
School of Physics and Astronomy
10 College Walk,
Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, 3800
Phone: +61 (0)409 959 326
E-mail: john.lattanzio@monash.edu

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Re: Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

The Astronomical Society of Australia (ASA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission concerning this Bill to amend the operation of the Australian Research Council (ARC).

The ARC assessment process is thorough, independent and multi-layered. There is the College of Experts, over 200 Australian experts in various disciplines, who compose the Discipline Panels that evaluate each proposal. The proposals are also separately evaluated by international experts, who make evaluations and recommendations based on the quality of the research as well as its feasibility and national benefit. Finally the Discipline Panels rank the proposals, based on their own opinions as well as that of the international experts.

The competition is strong, and only the top 20% or so receive funding. In the final step, after the ranking is determined based on multiple peer-reviews, the Panel decides on the amount of funding, bearing in mind the value for the tax-payer money involved. It is important to note that funding is considered only after the quality of the proposal has determined its ranking, and whether it receives any funding at all.

The overriding determinant is peer-review of the quality of the proposal, including national benefit. The funds assigned are determined after a grant is ruled worthy.

No single person, be it a Minister or any other individual, can possibly be as informed on any proposal as those involved in the ranking of proposals. No single person, be it a Minister or any other individual, is objectively sufficiently qualified to veto a decision made by this process. Quality and national benefit have been at the forefront of the evaluation process at each stage.

This raises an important question: what are the reasons for intervening in such an independent process? Given the lack of transparent explanations, the research community views this as unwarranted political intervention, and strongly asserts that it is inappropriate to overrule the existing peer review processes used to rank ARC research proposals.

The nation requires and indeed deserves an independent process to ensure that the best research is carried out, independent of current politics or ideology. We note that the health equivalent of the ARC, the NHMRC, acts under different legislation which does not seem to permit the Minister to veto proposals; in any event, it has never happened. The proposed amendment would place the ARC in a similar position.

Hence it is entirely appropriate that the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* be modified to remove Ministerial discretion in funding research proposals recommended by the ARC.

The Astronomical Society of Australia supports the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

Professor John Lattanzio
ASA President