

Opinion

Under cover of Christmas, Education Minister Stuart Robert overruled the experts



Stuart Robert took out the trash on Christmas Eve.

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December 29,

Politicians and their courtiers have so many bad habits: deception, pork-barrelling, promise-breaking, taking out the trash. All are commonly understood but the last – Friday night, maybe Saturday, and there’s a press release from a department or agency revealing bad news. Might just be a one pager, might just be one sentence. But news outlets have deadlines and late Friday is past bedtime.

Normal weekends are bad enough, but last Friday clashed with COVID Christmas Eve, so there was a good chance shameful announcements would be missed in the avalanche of everything else. And so it was last Friday when hundreds of Australians got some very bad news.

Once again, universities have suffered at the hands of political interference, this time from the acting Minister for Education Stuart Robert who decided to reject six approved research projects. The rejected grants, he said, “do not demonstrate value for taxpayers’ money nor contribute to the national interest”. All were in the humanities: two on climate, two on China, two more on literature.

This is not the first time the minister has tried to take out the trash. Who could forget the time Robert was forced to refund \$721 million to victims of Robodebt? That too was dropped late on a Friday. Here's what happened this time.

Every year, thousands of Australian researchers apply for funding through the Australian Research Council (ARC), about the only organisation in Australia which gives money for all kinds of projects. Applications are Herculean labours and there is so little money only about 20 per cent of grants ever get funded. You have to be smart, skillful and cunning to get through the 200-strong College of Experts. Jobs rely on these grants but, much more importantly, the future of Australia relies on the outcomes of these grants.

This late Friday drop was Robert's first show of force in his acting portfolio since Alan Tudge dropped off the perch – Robert demonstrated that only he would decide what was in the national interest and the manner in which it would be funded. He utilised a ministerial veto despite absolutely no qualification to judge any kind of research or even what constitutes the national interest. The last time this happened, back in 2018, the entire ARC should have resigned in protest. This time, one highly regarded mathematics professor resigned from the ARC's College of Experts. Western Sydney University's Andrew Francis tweeted: "Resignation is the only means I have to indicate my fury over this situation, and to send any kind of signal." And is the university sector responding as one?

Only the excellent yet necessarily anonymous @ARC_Tracker serves as a national forum for the anger and grief felt by many in the community.

There must be some poignancy for Robert in his rejection of two projects researching China. It was only five minutes ago his poor understanding of what our relationship with China should look like got him into hot water. Malcolm Turnbull ditched him from the ministry after Robert made a "private" trip to Beijing to oversee a mining deal involving a major Liberal donor and meet a Chinese vice-minister. That looked like self-interest so he had to go.

Now as Australia's relationship with China is perilously bad, Robert decides Australians don't need research that might make it better. I can't imagine why you would not want to know more about one of the rejected grants: China stories under Xi Jinping: popular narratives. It might help our winemakers at least.

All these six grants were judged worthy by the experts and dismissed by the inexpert with an MBA. One in particular shows just how out of touch this government is with young people. Western Sydney University's Philippa Collin with a multi-university team wanted to explore student climate activism to find out what engages this new political generation. As the young people would say, Totally.

Did Robert go to (rising) water (levels) at the mention of climate activism? As the young people would further say, maybe the minister should harden up. In the absence of a fair process, we need philanthropists to step up to fund Collin's research, perhaps the Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network, Mike Cannon-Brookes, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, Simon Holmes a Court, Graeme Wood, the Paul Ramsay

Foundation, the Trawalla Foundation. And once they have the answer, perhaps only provide the findings to political parties that actually want to know how to engage the young in our future democracy.

As the vice chancellor of the Australian National University Brian Schmidt says, governments have the right to decide funding rules. But once those rules are made, governments then need to step aside and let experts be expert. As Nobel Prize winner Schmidt says, “Stand by the agencies and their expert bodies.”