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*The Hon. Dr David Kemp MP
Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra. ACT. 2600.*

4th December 1998

Dear Sir

The proposed changes to the Australian Research Council reported in "The Australian" on 11/11/98, and elsewhere, have caused considerable concern among members of the Society of Australian Systematic Biologists (SASB). We believe that the plan as outlined in the media would be extremely destructive of quality research for a range of reasons.

Australia has a high profile in the field of systematics and, with the development of modern molecular genetics tools, competition for funding among Australian systematists has led to an excellence in the field equal to that anywhere in the world. We expect that the government's reported intention to replace the current arrangements with block funding to institutions would reduce competition among researchers and reduce the quality and diversity of research, for the following reasons:-

- **Threat to quality control**

Excellence in research at the highest international standards is achieved by a two-stage peer review process. First, national granting bodies such as the ARC and NH&MRC are able to establish a large pool of highly qualified national and international researchers to referee grant applications. Second, manuscripts reporting the results of funded research are assessed by the larger scientific community before they are published. If government policy removes the first of these controls, or reduces it from a national/international level to a local level, then the process of quality control of research would be effectively cut in half. Individual institutions cannot afford to develop, run and maintain a nation-wide and international register of referees.

- **Loss of national leadership**

Without an ARC central panel, there will be nobody able to set directions for areas of national research priority, in fact there will be a total lack of leadership. This will be in stark contrast to comparable countries and in stark contrast to the Global Taxonomy Initiative (GTI). Australia is a leading participant in GTI, indicating our recognition that global as well as national priorities are important.

- **Collaboration is needed to attack major research problems**

The current ARC funding model favours collaboration between researchers in different institutions but a block grants system would make this difficult if not impossible. It is common for university departments to employ as few as one individual in a given field of research and these researchers must join national, cross-institutional teams to generate sufficient critical mass to attack important scientific problems.

- **Equity**

A block grants model will severely disadvantage any outstanding researcher who is isolated in a small institution, relative to their peer at a large university. Groups of specialist researchers at large universities have the critical mass needed to attract large block grants and so to tackle the big problems mentioned above. The majority of Australian systematists are isolated in this way and so will be disadvantaged. Young researchers will be similarly

disadvantaged.

- **Museums and herbaria**

Of particular concern to SASB is that museums and herbaria will probably be excluded from the process altogether. Many of the best systematists are employed in these institutions and currently have access to ARC grants. It is a serious concern to this Society that such outstanding Australian systematists will lose access to a major source of competitive funding.

- **Threat to biodiversity research**

The Australian government has received and acknowledged many representations on the need to research and describe our mega-diverse biota. Unanimous recommendations on the need to promote systematics research have come from international and national bodies. Most recently, the Darwin Workshop of 3-5 Feb 1998, which built on the Convention on Biological Diversity, strongly recommended supporting research in museums and herbaria. The proposed changes to ARC fly in the face of these initiatives.

- **Supporting innovative research**

One of the strengths of the present ARC model is that it supports the development of newer, more efficient approaches to systematics, such as the use of molecular methods. You may have heard the recent media announcement from Kew Gardens in the UK on how this approach is revolutionising the classification of plants. ARC funding is almost the only source of funds for innovative research in smaller institutions, museums and herbaria.

- **Diversion of research funds to administration**

Decentralising ARC will generate inefficiency in administration through duplication of effort in many institutions. Given the financial crisis that most of Australia's universities are experiencing, it is highly likely that ARC money would be siphoned off from block grants for general university operating costs.

We are aware that the current ARC model has problems but we believe that the system can most effectively be improved by addressing specific needs rather than by its thorough dismantling and dubious reconstruction. One of the most important steps is to recognise the fundamental contribution that research makes to the economic development of the nation, and thus to raise ARC funding to levels comparable with other developed countries. In the United States the National Science Foundation will have a budget of US\$3.8 billion in the fiscal year 1999 -- that is a 10 % increase over 1998. In the UK the competitive research funds have just had the largest increase for many years (from 4 to 10 %).

We would be happy to participate in any discussions on how to improve the present ARC model.

Yours faithfully

Dr Michael D. Crisp

President

Society of Australian Systematic Biologists

cc.

Hon. John Howard, Prime Minister

Prof. Vicki Sara, Chair of ARC

Prof John Niland, President of Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee