In defence of research prioritising

By BRIAN MARTIN

SOME of my current research throws into question contemporary priorities for research — including funding — for most of the academic disciplines. It is an intriguing spin-off from the main topic of the research, "Science and technology for non-violent struggle" done in collaboration with Mary Cawte.

Let me explain the connection.

A large proportion of funding for research and development is directly or indirectly for military purposes. For the past 50 years, perhaps one-quarter or more of scientists and engineers worldwide have worked on military-related projects. Although most academics do not receive direct military funding, their work is indirectly affected by military priorities.

Heavy military funding in certain areas, such as nuclear physics, meteorology and communications, has meant those fields have received much more attention than would otherwise be the case. Many topics in "pure research" — not directly useful to the military — are taken up in such fields. The point is not that this work is tainted, but that military funding has influenced the agenda for what are considered to be the most prestigious research fields.

Military funding also affects what are thought to be the key questions within certain fields, such as certain computational challenges in the early days of computers. This affects areas as diverse as the study of climate, gravitational anomalies, genetic engineering and group psychology.

What would happen if military priorities were replaced by a different set of priorities?

Our research is concerned with the systematic use of methods of non-violent action — rallies, boycotts, strikes, sit-ins and so on — as an alternative to military defence.

Particular technological developments would aid non-violent struggle, such as secure and interactive telecommunications networks, self-reliant energy systems and architecture that fosters community solidarity. Developments in such areas would in turn lead to interest in many intellectual and practical puzzles different from the currently fashionable ones.

If current military funding were entirely replaced by funding for non-violent struggle, several changes would be likely. First, relative funding between disciplines would change. The key factors in non-violent struggle are social rather than technological, so there would be much greater emphasis on the social sciences.

Second, priorities within existing fields would be altered. Within economies there would be study of systems and policies designed to build community solidarity.

Third, community involvement in testing technology for non-violent struggle would be essential. Military technology needs only to be tested by developers and soldiers. Non-violent defence depends fundamentally on popular support. Tests and simulations of non-violent defence cannot be restricted to a professional elite.

Anyone familiar with funding of Australian research and development knows it is enormously difficult to alter the proportions of money allocated to different disciplines. If the fraction of Australian Research Council funding to a branch of knowledge changes by a few per cent, it can be cause for alarm by those who are losing out. Yet there seems no justification, aside from tradition, for the established percentages.

Funding patterns have been influenced historically by military funding and priorities. It is simple to extend this point and argue that other dominant interests, such as corporations, have shaped funding patterns. The point is that if different goals are to be sought — such as security through non-violent rather than violent means — then funding priorities, key questions within disciplines and the very way research is carried out may need to change.

Currently, it is difficult to see how these sorts of issues can even be put on the agenda. It is appropriate to note, though, that our research on this topic is funded by the ARC.

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(Note: submitted to The Australian with the title "Questioning research priorities")