Wanted: a leader for Dominic Cummings' brainchild

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Dominic Cummings at the Commons Science and Technology Committee March 17, 2021.

Despite its operatic acronym, ARIA is nothing to do with divas. Rather, the initials stand for Advanced Research and Invention Agency, a new office set up by the UK Government to lead on technology development and scientific breakthroughs. The aim for this new organisaton is to think through problems in new ways and not be bound by more traditional management approaches or governmental processes.

The Bill to create ARIA is currently working its way through Parliament. It was the brainchild of Dominic Cummings, who viewed this as a way to get innovation kickstarted. The organisation is also due to appoint its first chief executive officer.

This appointment will be a critical one. It will set the tone for how ARIA will turn into reality, the Cummings idea of innovation without fetters, of a new model for science and technology investment undertaken with less regard to risk, and of a more US venture capital approach to building companies. If the wrong person is appointed, then this vision will not come to fruition.

However, the wrong candidate would also be someone who does not believe in an open approach. Only two weeks ago, we published OpenUK's Phase One State of Open, demonstrating the UK as a global centre of open source software excellence and the value of open source software of up to £43 billion per annum to our GDP – a value I feel is hugely conservative. I suspect the later phases of our report will conclude that the existing value of transparency is a multiple of this. I also suspect that openness and transparency will be a dominant proportion of the value of the UK's digital economy, which Tech Nation valued last week at £248 billion.

The true value of Open Technology, even just open source software, to the UK economy, is not just monetary. It is transparency and trust around how these solutions are

put together. Its value consists in encouraging faster take-up and expansion of new approaches, as well as developing communities and contributions from across the world.

The ability to take risks and fail may be counter-cultural to the British psyche, but it is one that we must now find. The new leader for ARIA must have experience in this approach around playing the odds – rather than small gains on multiple fronts, the model here is about finding and backing organisations that create massive gains and can dominate a market. I find myself agreeing with Cummings again on the importance of this, to the extent that there must be tolerance for failure across individual projects, for ARIA as a whole to succeed.

When talking to founders over the last few weeks, I have been trying to get a sense of why the UK has not fulfilled its potential in the tech sector and why our best companies, from DeepMind to JetStack, are usually gobbled up by US giants. It seems to come down to our aspirations and our culture around success. We don't walk like a candidate ready to take on the world; instead, we have sat cautiously in the corner, either afraid to risk failure or afraid to lose what we have already accrued. For the UK to have the tech sector it deserves, we must think big, take a gamble and reap the rewards.

Indeed, the UK must not only enshrine transparency and openness in ARIA, but it must also take this chance.

Becoming more risk tolerant is not about being rash, but ultimately includes an understanding that success requires a potential to fail alongside an ability to assess risk. Failing along the path to success is, however, a very different thing from failing. Success will require leadership that understands and assesses risk. By doing this across multiple projects and using big successes to cover for other smaller – but still significant – losses, we can achieve a bigger overall impact.

To gamble like a pro and fulfil ARIA's "high risk, high reward" aims, requires skill and expertise. That means a special kind of leadership. The UK public sector's IT transition a decade ago was seminal. At the time, Liam Maxwell was at its helm as Chief Technology Officer of the Government Digital Service, able to understand the potential for technology as well as the political aspects. A leader of Maxwell's calibre is required for ARIA today, able to understand and manage where the next big things in technology are coming from as well as the demands of investment, return and risk.

Successful technology investments often take 10 to 20 years to pay off, but public sector investment planning has historically been set around three-year periods — essentially, planning for the next election. The proposed 10-year grace period granted to ARIA may allow a step change in planning that finally facilitates success.

There are three areas that any appointment to ARIA will

require:

- Integrity of approach – after all, this organisation will be working with public money. While the approach to risk will be different to other departments and organisations, this role will only succeed through transparency on why decisions have been made, and how those investments pay off over time.
- Ownership – this will require acknowledgement of both success and failure. Building the next technology power (equivalent to previous successes like ARM in Cambridge) will help justify the overall spend, and those projects that don't hit the mark.
- Understanding – this will require insight into innovation boundaries and what will be the next frontiers for technology. It will also require understanding of how to build industrial and technology companies that are successful for the long haul, not just the short term return on investment cycles that typically have to be followed.

So who will fit the bill here, who can see through the get-rich-quick schemers and the flim-flam merchants, and who can tell the right scientific projects that should be bankrolled? More importantly, who has the political capital to get support, and the thick skin to cope with the inevitable slings and arrows that will come their way?

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