

# ARIA: THE UK'S DUBIOUS 'DEEPTECH' AGENCY



## SUMMARY

The full report can be found at:

<https://www.etcgroup.org/content/aria-uks-dubious-deep-tech-agency>

In 2025 global policymakers and civil society were surprised to learn that a new 'high risk-high reward' agency funded by the UK Government was starting to bankroll outdoor solar geoengineering experiments, even though this flies directly in the face of agreed international moratoria and norms (geoengineering involves the intentional manipulation of the climate). We decided to take a closer look.

### High risk 'deep tech' bonanza is being funded by the UK taxpayer

The UK's Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA), which was created by a dedicated act of parliament in 2022 and became functional in January 2023, is already letting rip on a giveaway bonanza of a billion pounds of ring-fenced UK taxpayer money to spend over five years. Its portfolio includes 'deeptech' proposals in geoengineering, genetic engineering / synthetic biology, brain tech, automation and Artificial Intelligence – high risk tech research areas that just a few years ago were relegated to the sci-fi margins.

### Harking back to Victorian visions, bulldozing guardrails and ushering in Silicon Valley

ARIA differs from other 'moonshot' initiatives due to its wildly ambitious appetite, style and level of public funding. While ARIA's communications do not explicitly say 'we miss the British Empire and we want it back', the agency is modelled on the pursuit of a Victorian-style version of 'progress', working to reignite a supposedly lost age of British scientific and industrial greatness by remaking the UK as a global 'science superpower'. The ARIA

approach is to empower individual 'geniuses' and lone scientific actors to 'attack' problems, seemingly regardless of any collateral damage or societal complexity, in the hope that they will unilaterally deliver brilliant (and potentially commercial) panaceas.

### Democratic oversight trashed: ARIA flouts precautionary principle, conflict of interest rules and freedom of information

As well as breezily breaking critical precautionary norms, ARIA has been deliberately exempted from a key element of public scrutiny, the UK's Freedom of Information Act. Industrial interests that would ordinarily be seen as conflicts of interest are actively encouraged, and ARIA has been given broad powers to accept or borrow different types of money and gifts, acquire land and set up companies. In addition, ARIA funding decisions do not require any peer review, and it is legally protected from being dissolved by the UK Government for ten years. This all raises huge accountability concerns in an institution handling £1 billion of taxpayers' money on 'high-risk' tech.

### Behind the Union Jack-waving: US Big Tech and conservative libertarian priorities

ARIA prides itself on disrupting a buttoned-up British science establishment by adopting Silicon Valley's free market fundamentalism and free-wheeling 'move fast and break things' ethos. It was conceived of by an



oddball and highly controversial pro-Brexit nationalist, Dominic Cummings, working under then-British PM Boris Johnson, who was intent on hitching Britain's star to what he saw as the industrial dynamism of the billionaire-driven American tech sector.

Key members of recent and current executive staff, board and advisors are from the USA or have close links with Silicon Valley, including ARIA's newly appointed Executive Director Kathleen Fisher, previously with DARPA; Chair of the Board UK entrepreneur Matt Clifford (who leverages relationships with Silicon Valley and the UK Government); Advisors Patrick Collison of Stripe, Arun Majumdar of ARPA-E, Katie Rae of Engine Ventures, Özlem Tureci of BioNTech, and Ilan Gur (who recently stepped down from being ARIA's first Executive Director); and 'Activation Partners' such as Google DeepMind and Renaissance Philanthropy.

It is also closely tied to the ideological interests of a network of mostly US-based tech billionaires, libertarians and transhumanists building a new conservative-rooted 'progress movement', including Peter Thiel and Tyler Cowen.

### **ARIA's climate geoengineering research is normalising the development of dangerous technologies**

ARIA plans to spend £56.8 million (around US\$75 million) on a multi-year solar geoengineering programme that includes five outdoor experiments. The announcement of this plan sent shock and surprise around the world when it was announced in early 2025, in part because the pledge appears to put the UK Government in contravention of the international moratorium on solar geoengineering research agreed through the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 2010 and still upheld today. Leading climate scientists noted that this is by far the biggest commitment of any government towards 'solar radiation management' (SRM) research to date and warned that

"the ARIA programme constitutes a new escalation in the push to normalize this dangerous set of technologies."<sup>1</sup>

### **ETC's verdict: ARIA is serving up Britain's public funds and resources to an America First tech broliarchy**

Outwardly ARIA's leadership likes to project a brash, self-confident enterprise conceived in patriotic and 'Anglofuturist' terms: bold, future-looking, 'motion-biased' and experimental. The deeper truth, however, seems rather more desperate and transactional. ARIA's realpolitik role may be less about promoting science and technology and more in line with the geopolitical project its ideological founder, Dominic Cummings, always hoped for: realigning the British economy with the interests of American capitalism. By offering an attractive taxpayer-sponsored playpen to US tech investors the hope appears to be to ingratiate 'UK PLC' with the Silicon Valley elites currently targeting the global economy – and maybe achieving some 'skin in the game' of tech investment along the way.

This role aligns with the current UK Government's tech strategy which has included buttering up the Trump administration's tech pals via gilded state dinners and AI-coded 'tech prosperity deals'. With its determination to cast aside both transparency and the precautionary principle and to erase other pesky ethical lines of good science governance, ARIA may be just another means of serving up Britain's post-Brexit public resources to an America First tech broliarchy, in a desperate scramble to maintain a place at the table.

Yet the 'deeptech' 'solutions' that ARIA is set up to fast-forward have the potential, especially if developed as part of a reckless drive for capital, to undermine human rights and the integrity of ecosystems, and may even (as in the case of geoengineering research) potentially accelerate the breach of planetary boundaries. This is 180 degrees away from the 'progress' that people and the planet urgently need.

<sup>1</sup> Pierrehumbert, R., Hulme, M., Newell, P., & Stirling, A. (2025) ARIA's 'Exploring Climate Cooling' folly. <https://www.solargeoeng.org/arias-exploring-climate-cooling-folly/> (Accessed 24 March 2026).