# My Speech during the Second Reading of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill, 23 March 2021

Of course I welcome the idea that we should do everything we can to promote greater science and better technology. Our country has a fine history and tradition of scientific breakthroughs and scientific excellence in our universities and our scientific societies. We also have a fine tradition in technology, with entrepreneurs developing new industrial processes and new products and making great breakthroughs that have benefited humanity widely, and of course we should do everything we can to support that. There may well also be a gap that this body can fill between all the methods we have of backing science and technology, and I wish it every success.

In his introductory remarks, the Minister pointed to the recent great success of universities, companies, medics, scientists and Government in coming together—here and elsewhere, but particularly here—on the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine. Why did that work? Because there was a very clear, defined task. There was great excellence and expertise already in companies and university science, and the Government helped to bring that together, to pump-prime the process and then to provide very large orders, as did other Governments and health services around the world, to make it worthwhile and to defeat the virus.

Now, we hope that do not have too many of those concentrated needs, but that model worked without ARIA, so this body has to define something a bit different from that. I notice that MPs are already discussing the adequacy or inadequacy of its resources, by which they usually mean money. I do not think it is possible to have any idea of what would be a good and realistic budget for it until talented people have been appointed to run it and have set out what it is trying to do. The first thing the Government need to do, therefore, following the success of this legislation—I am sure it will pass quite easily—is to appoint really great people to lead this organisation who just have that feel, that touch and that intelligence to judge risk, to sense opportunity, to see where the niches are and to define the unique breakthroughs and areas where this body can make a serious contribution. As some have said, a scattergun approach is probably not going to work; trying to do too much across too broad a spread would require a lot of good fortune. This body will need some targeting.

ARIA then has to work out how it commercialises whatever it produces. The UK has had a century or more of plenty of breakthroughs and technical innovations, but in quite a lot of cases we did not go on to commercialise and exploit opportunities, and we allowed others around the world to adapt patents or take the underlying principles and develop their own products, making many more jobs and much more commercial success out of these things than we did. The leaders of this body therefore need to ask how they will commercialise the ideas, how big a role that will play, and at what point

they will work with commercial companies that could come in and take advantage.

That leads on to the issue of security. I do not think British taxpayers want to spend more money on blue-sky research and interesting technical ideas only to see them taken away, perhaps resulting in many more products for the Chinese to export back to the United Kingdom. What we want is that integrated approach, where the ideas that the Government have helped to pay for through this body, working with universities and perhaps with companies, can go on to be commercialised and add to the stock of wealth and jobs and make a wider contribution to the human position.

I suggest that the Government link the development of this body to the work that they have started to do, and they need to do much more widely, on national resilience. I am an admirer of what President Biden has set out to do in the United States of America on supply chains. He has a very ambitious programme—a 100-day programme for targeted sectors and a one-year programme for all the sectors of the US economy. It is looking at what America can do better, at where America needs to fill in gaps in her knowledge and understanding of patent, designs and specifications, at where America needs to put in new capacity to avoid shortages or more hostile powers interrupting her production processes by withholding import, and at where the Government machine can use intelligent procurement, appropriate grants and interventions to work with the private sector to have a much better supply chain, creating more jobs and providing national resilience.

I hope that the agency will look at what we can do to ensure that we make our weapons and defence requirements, as the new policy suggests that we will do more often. It should look at how we can grow more food and make sure that we have more of our own fish so that we have fewer food miles and more national resilience in the food chain. It should look at a series of industrial areas where we have in the past been very successful to see where we can improve the technology and add to the UK capacity to produce.

My suggestion to Ministers is that the first task is to get really excellent people; the second is to work with them on defining realistic and achievable objectives; and the third is to ensure that the agency is properly resourced—£800 million might be the right amount, but if the agency comes up with really worthwhile things that look as though they will work, we will want to back it with more money. If it was not getting very far, I think a number of MPs who say that they do not mind failure would become rather more critical. This will need quite a lot of ministerial and parliamentary supervision. I wish the agency every success, and I look forward to hearing to more detail about what it is trying to do.