Our Ref: MFC/2208

Damian Collins MP
Chair, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee
House of Commons
London, SW1A 0AA

6th June 2019

Dear Damian,

Thank you for your letter of 17 May 2019 to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, regarding electoral law, I am replying as the Minister responsible.

Earlier this month you will have received the Government’s response to the Committee’s report on Disinformation and ‘fake news’. That response covers a lot of the work the Government are doing across departments relating to the issues and recommendations raised in your Report. Since then, as you say, the Cabinet Office have published the response to our consultation on ‘Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information’. I also announced the Government will consult on a range of measures to better safeguard UK elections and democratic processes by cracking down on intimidation, malign influence and disinformation.

As part of this package of measures we have committed to implementing a digital imprint regime as well as strengthening the current provisions which protect UK politics from foreign influence by holding a consultation on electoral integrity. We want to better safeguard against future risks, strengthening our resilience and ensuring the regulatory framework is as watertight as possible.

The Cabinet Office will continue to work closely with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, as well as stakeholders, to confirm how such regulations will be put into practice and which third party organisations it would extend to. We will bring forward the technical proposal for this regime later on this year.

The Government will take views of interested groups like the Parliamentary Parties Panel and the Electoral Commission to better understand the problems which the Government could seek to address in the consultation, and to see what scope there is for broad cross-party agreement. The consultation may consider recommendations for increasing transparency on digital political advertising, including by third parties; closing loopholes on foreign spending in elections; preventing shell companies from sidestepping the current rules on political finance and on action to tackle foreign lobbying.

The Government recognises the seriousness and urgency of the situation, but it is important we consult properly, consider the views and thinking of others, and ultimately ensure we get this right and the regulatory framework is as robust as possible. A law drawn up in haste could be ineffective in the aims we both share.
I hope these, in addition to the other measures being taken in and with other Departments, show that the Government takes seriously the issue of protecting our democracy, its functions and all those involved in it.

I would of course be happy to meet with you to discuss further as requested in your letter.

Best Wishes

Kevin

Kevin Foster MP