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Chair
Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media
House of Lords
London
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Dear Chair

**House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media report on
'The politics of polling'**

Government response

The Government is grateful to the Committee for its timely inquiry into digital media and polling, for its valuable contribution to the debate on the future of polling, and for highlighting areas of concern on digital media to Parliament and the public.

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 relate to the British Polling Council. As the British Polling Council is an independent self regulatory body it is not appropriate for Government to comment on these recommendations.

We will address the remaining recommendations: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13.

Recommendation 7

In order to ensure transparency around voting intention polling in the run-up to elections, we also recommend that the Electoral Commission should take on an enhanced role in monitoring voting intention polling conducted and published during the regulated periods which precede UK elections. In particular, there should be a requirement for the details of all published voting intention polls to be declared to the Electoral Commission, regardless of who the poll was commissioned by, what its purpose was, or how much it cost. The details of all the sources of funding for such polls should then be published by the Electoral Commission, although we recognise that, in order to protect commercial confidentiality, the actual sums of money involved need not be made public. We acknowledge that this will require an extension of the Electoral Commission's existing remit and recommend that action is taken to achieve this. (Paragraph 236)

Government response

The Government believes that regulation is a matter for the polling companies. Polling standards should remain self-regulated by the industry to prevent additional bureaucracy. Polling firms already have a strong incentive to update and improve their techniques, especially if flaws are uncovered.



There is no evidence that that an official regulator is necessary to ensure best practice or indeed that it would go further to improve quality and accuracy than the organisations themselves. Regulation can impose costs on business, chip away at their competitiveness, and give them less space to innovate and grow. This is why the Government's approach is to consider regulation as a last resort rather than the first option.

Recommendation 8

The evidence received by the Committee on the use of social media to influence political debate adversely was deeply concerning. We appreciate the complexities of considering a regulatory solution to these issues. We are, however, acutely aware of the urgency of the situation, as many witnesses highlighted that Governments, regulators and the platforms themselves are on the 'back foot' on many of these issues and have been too slow to address the spread of misinformation and the manipulation of political information on social media platforms. We believe that these issues warrant serious and concerted investigation, and recommend that the Government urgently conducts further research into this issue. (Paragraph 318)

Government response

The Government takes the issue of manipulation online very seriously, particularly where this may influence political debate. Our democracy is built on trust in electoral processes and confidence in public institutions. The Government is already undertaking additional urgent research, including workshops with academics, media and representatives from the tech sector, to better understand the problem of disinformation, including the scale, scope and impact of disinformation campaigns in the UK. Going forward, we will continue to work with industry, civil society and international partners to conduct further research and build a robust evidence base to tackle this problem. This will inform our policy response, which will focus on education, technology, communications and ensuring the right regulation.

Recommendation 9

One way to combat the spread of misinformation online and to limit its potential impact on democratic debate is to ensure that people have the critical literacy skills to match digital skills to enable them to assess and analyse the information they read online. The Department for Education must ensure that such skills are taught to people of all ages, including children and young people at schools and colleges, as well as adults in further education. (Paragraph 319)

Government response

The government agrees that it is important that everyone can assess and analyse the information they read and see online. We agree that building citizens' critical thinking skills and digital resilience - enabling them to tell fact from fabrication - is crucial to long-term success in tackling this issue. This is a vital pillar of our response.

There are already a range of opportunities across the curriculum to be taught about trusted sources, how to use internet search functions and how to read text critically. In the citizenship curriculum, pupils are taught critical media literacy so that they can distinguish fact from opinion as well as explore freedom of speech and the role and responsibility of the media in informing and shaping public opinion. Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) can also cover these areas when teaching on topics like media, advertising, and safe and judicious use of social media.

In the English curriculum, there is strong focus on critical analysis of texts. The programmes of study state that pupils should check that what they read is clear and makes sense to them; discuss their understanding, ask questions to improve their understanding; and distinguish between statements of fact and opinion.

In maths, the curriculum aims to ensure that all pupils become fluent in the fundamentals, able to reason mathematically and solve problems by applying their mathematics. This mathematical fluency should support young people to understand and question the data they read online.

A range of other core curriculum subjects including history, computing, and science equip pupils to ask perceptive questions, be discerning in evaluating digital content and evaluating data in terms of accuracy.

The Departmental advice for schools and childcare providers on implementing the Prevent duty (June 2015) makes clear that part of building resilience to extremism includes equipping pupils to explore issues critically, to weigh evidence, to debate and to make reasoned judgements. We are supporting schools to meet their obligations to protect pupils from radicalisation and to promote fundamental British values by making available, through the Educate Against Hate website, a number of resources that encourage pupils to talk about contemporary political and social issues and think about the reliability of news sources critically.

The National Literacy Trust has also made related resources freely available to schools at <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/fake-news-and-critical-literacy/> .

We want to help all citizens - not just those in full or part-time education - build their digital literacy, to spot dangers, think critically about the content that they are consuming, and to understand that actions have consequences online just as they do offline. That is why as well as working through the school curriculum we are also scoping options for reaching an adult audience through better comms campaigns and other institutions such as libraries.

Recommendation 10

We were concerned to hear the issues raised by the Electoral Commission and support its calls for more transparency in online campaign material. The Electoral Commission has called for the Government to introduce secondary legislation to ensure that online campaign material must, like its printed equivalents, include an imprint stating who has published it. This will be crucial in helping to ensure that public confidence is maintained in the electoral system and we endorse this recommendation. However, we recognise that this will do little to address the challenges posed by international actors who try to operate below the radar. (Paragraph 320)

Government response

The Electoral Commission provide guidance to campaigners to encourage them to produce imprints on electronic material. However, it is not a legal requirement. There are particular challenges in extending imprint rules to electronic material. For example, how to ensure that the rules cover material produced by campaigners to influence the outcome of the poll, and not individuals expressing their personal views.

The Government will provide further clarity on extending those rules to online material in due course by consulting on making regulations under the power in section 143(6) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The Government will continue to discuss this issue with the Electoral Commission.

Recommendation 11

We welcome the Government's announcement of the Digital Charter, which will agree new standards for online behaviour. As identified in this report, digital technologies pose some very serious challenges and risks for democracy, which require urgent attention and decisive action. The Government should, without further delay, outline the specific actions it will take to address

the Charter's priorities, including around the legal liability of online platforms and on limiting the spread and impact of disinformation, and publish the likely timescales for its programme of work. (Paragraph 322)

Government response

The Digital Charter is a rolling programme of work to agree norms and rules for the online world and put them into practice. We have set out our principles and initial priorities for the Charter, which includes both platform liability and disinformation.

Specifically looking at the legal liability of online platforms, we want to ensure that online companies have the right level of responsibility for the illegal material appearing on their sites. Online liability cuts across many different areas and we need to handle this carefully to make sure change does not damage the digital economy. In the coming months, we will be carefully considering the options across Government and working closely with stakeholders who have an interest in this area, including the tech industry and international partners.

Tackling disinformation is a key pillar of the Digital Charter and work is underway to develop the Government's response to this issue. The Government is currently focussing on five key areas: further research to understand the problem; education and guidance to ensure citizens have the skills to tell fact from fiction; working with the tech sector and social media platforms to voluntarily develop policies; considering whether the right regulation is in place; and improving or Strategic Communications across government. Work to develop policies will continue and further information will be published in due course.

Recommendation 12

The Government should also ensure that the Digital Charter's work programme includes:

- Assessing the scale and impact of algorithmic filtering of news on social media sites on political engagement.
- Exploring issues relating to the transparency of funding for online political advertising, to address concerns raised by the Electoral Commission.
- Examining the progress made to improve digital literacy and assessing whether additional action is required.
- Tackling the spread by bots of political misinformation.
- Drawing together existing studies on the impact of digital and social media on politics.
- Collecting information about the actions taken to address these issues in other countries and governments.

This work will clearly need to be conducted in close collaboration with, or even commissioned from, independent organisations including research bodies, businesses, civil society and other stakeholders. The challenges associated with digital media are fast-moving and the work outlined above should be pursued urgently. (Paragraph 323)

Government response

We are clear that the Digital Charter will not be developed by government alone. We will look to the tech sector, businesses and civil society to own these challenges with us, using our convening power to bring them together with other interested parties to find solutions.

We want to make the UK the safest place to be online. We are already assessing each of the suggested areas of concern raised above through the Government's work on online manipulation and disinformation. Government will continue to work with industry and civil society to tackle these issues. We are engaging with international partners and the DCMS Secretary of State discussed disinformation at the UK-France Summit earlier this year. We welcome the fact that

there is broad international interest in tackling disinformation and are engaging with international partners.

Recommendation 13

We also recommend that the Government should initiate talks within the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Commonwealth, the Group of Eight (G8) and other international bodies, to discuss international approaches to tackling the problems posed to the democratic process by the rise of digital and social media. (Paragraph 324)

Government response

The Government agrees with the Committee's recommendation and supports a strong international response to tackle attempts to maliciously interfere with the UK or allies' sovereign democratic processes. To that end, the Government is already working with allies and partners, bilaterally and in international fora, to promote a collective response. For example, Canada as current holders of the G7 Presidency, have made Defending Democracy a key theme for discussion. To that end, the G7 ministerial issued a statement on '[Defending Democracy – Addressing foreign threats](#).' The UK Government strongly supports the Canadian approach and has been working closely with the Government in Ottawa to develop these proposals which will be taken forward by the G7 Summit in Charlevoix on 8-9 June.

All work on these issues takes place in accordance with the UK's international commitments, including that rights must be protected online as they are offline. The UK worked with its Commonwealth partners to reaffirm this commitment in the Commonwealth Cyber Declaration. Recognising that some countries have at times blocked the use of social media during elections, the Declaration also included a commitment to limit the circumstances in which communication networks may be intentionally disrupted, consistent with international and domestic law. The importance of strengthening democratic institutions also emerged as an important theme during CHOGM 2018 and this has been reviewed in Council of Europe discussions.



The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP