

3 September 2019

## **Election law needs to change before any election to safeguard democracy**

Dear parliamentarian,

The government has agreed that election law must be updated and that the integrity of our elections is at risk. But that work has not yet been done.

I am writing to draw your attention to the recommendations of the DCMS Select Committee, the Electoral Commission, the Committee for Standards in Public Life, and others, that UK election law needs to be updated *before* any election.

The DCMS Select Committee has called for emergency legislation to safeguard our democracy. We respectfully agree.

As a charity committed to protecting public debate, and as experts in tackling misinformation and disinformation, Full Fact is ready to work with government and parliamentarians to help develop stopgap legislation and safeguards for a snap election if necessary.

This needs to cover -

- Transparency of online campaigning
- Transparency of online advertising
- A protocol for warning the public when major interference is detected

We are not alone in making this request.

The **Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee's** Chair Damian Collins said in [July](#):

"We know that our electoral laws are not fit for purpose. Political campaigns are fought online, not through the letter box and our laws need to be brought up to date with the digital age. We've repeatedly highlighted threats to our electoral system and it's essential that public confidence is restored."

The **Electoral Commission** has been calling for imprints on digital election and referendum campaign material since [2003](#).

The **Committee on Standards in Public Life** backed these requests in its 2019 report, [Intimidation in Public Life](#).

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There is a **widespread consensus** on the importance of these steps. The government acknowledged in the [response](#) to the Protecting the Debate consultation, “**the majority of respondents supported** the idea of digital imprints and encouraged taking steps to combat election disinformation and undue influence online”.

The **government** recognises the risks created by allowing elections to continue to operate as they have, [saying](#) that extending the imprint rules to digital communications was “**essential for promoting fact-based political debate and tackling disinformation online**”.

Other free countries have been preparing carefully to protect their elections from foreign and other interference and disinformation campaigns. The UK needs to catch up if an election is imminent. For example, the steps **Canada** has taken include -

- Publishing the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol explaining to citizens how a panel of named public servants will be responsible for warning the public of election interference attempts.
- Publishing the Canada Declaration on Electoral Integrity Online covering the responsibilities of internet platforms.
- Developing public education material and dedicating \$7m towards a Digital Citizen Initiative to support digital, news and civic literacy programming, supported by a \$19.4m Digital Citizen Research Program.

You can read more on Canada’s work on [Protecting Democracy](#).

In contrast, while the UK government has been a world leader in seeking to develop a proportionate response to the risks and harms from disinformation, unfortunately it has not yet taken the urgent action needed to safeguard elections.

In May 2019, the DCMS Select Committee Chair warned in a [letter](#) to the Cabinet Office:

“Were an election or referendum to take place later this year, campaigns will be fought using electoral law that I think we can all agree is no longer fit for purpose...Public confidence in the integrity of our democracy is of imperative importance.”

Those risks are real. We ask all MPs and Peers to help ensure that whenever the next election is fought it is appropriately protected in line with the Select Committee’s and others’ recommendations.

I would be happy to discuss this at any time, and I can be reached on this email or 020 3397 5140.

Yours sincerely

Will Moy  
Chief Executive  
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