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Posted: 28 February 2020 Written by: Sir John Holmes, Chair International

perspectives of the Electoral Commission Earlier this month the Commonwealth Secretariat held an event on electoral finance which brought counterparts from around the world to London. This provided a welcome opportunity for me to have meetings with the heads of Electoral Commissions in Bangladesh, Canada and Kenya, and to share experiences and expertise. Different constitutions, legal frameworks, and political systems mean that we all operate against very different backdrops. Those coming from newer democracies are often surprised by the extent to which our system is grounded in trust, something we tend to take for granted in the UK. But this isn't the case in other parts of the world, and there are varying perspectives on how best to build and maintain public trust. In countries like Kenya and Bangladesh where there are concerns about physical risks to the integrity of the vote, such as ballot stuffing, they are increasingly embracing the use of technology to avert these threats. Yet here, and in many other developed countries, there is little appetite to move towards more digital arrangements, like electronic voting, given the potential to exchange our current safe system for one that carries vulnerabilities of sophisticated interference attempts. That said, we have plenty in common and many of the issues discussed were universal. The wider role and impact of technology is certainly one of these. The effect of the internet and social media has reached all corners of the globe, and everywhere the rise of digital campaigning has changed the way parties and campaigners engage with voters and share their policies and political views. No-one has perfect answers to these issues. We are all grappling with the difficulty of tracking what is happening in the boundless world of digital communication, where accusations of disinformation and foreign interference have become increasingly common. Voters, campaigners and law enforcement agencies have raised concerns about disruption and misuse of digital campaigns at recent elections and referendums in countries such as the United States, France, Germany and Ireland. Legislators in the United States, France and the UK have set out proposals for better regulation, while social media companies have begun to publish their own proposals for reform, and take steps to allow greater transparency, for example by producing consultable libraries of political advertising on their platforms. I was able to explain what we have recommended by way of legislative changes to help meet the digital challenge, while making clear that we know we need to keep thinking creatively about these developments. We do not want to have a chilling effect on digital campaigning, which is good for voters in many ways, but equally we must not be left behind by the speed of technological change. For electoral commissions the world over, ensuring all the electorate can participate in the democratic process is a fundamental aim. Many countries have more modern registration systems than we do, including many developing countries, and we can certainly learn from others in this area. For countries with a large diaspora, such as Bangladesh, there was a particular interest in how those of Bangladeshi origin living in the UK participate in polls here, and whether they can vote in Bangladesh as well, if they have dual citizenship. There are clear challenges for all of us in distributing postal ballots around the world, and getting them back in time, as postal services deteriorate. Others are looking at technological solutions to help with this, such as allowing the download of ballot papers, and their return digitally as well. These reflect recommendations we have made to the government here, particularly in the context of plans to expand the franchise of British citizens overseas by removing the current fifteen year limit on their ability

to vote. Finally, there is the matter of money. Our international peers are always interested to learn about our political finance rules and how we regulate spending and donations. Our system is certainly ahead of most others in this area, and will be even more so when we have introduced our new online tool for submitting party registrations and financial reports. While large amounts of money are donated to campaigns here – political parties in the UK reported receiving a combined total of £30m in donations in the six weeks before the 2019 General Election – many international observers are surprised by the relatively modest spending limits, and actual spending, compared to elections elsewhere. Part of the explanation of this is of course the ban on political advertising on television. I spent quite a bit of time explaining to my overseas counterparts the extent of the efforts to which we go to safeguard fairness by maximising transparency about everything to do with elections, to help make sure everyone is playing by the same rules. Again, I think we are largely ahead of the global pack in this kind of area. Our Electoral Commission is very much UK-focussed, unlike some others such as the Australian EC, which has a remit to help developing country counterparts around the world. Nevertheless we still have a reasonable amount of interaction with others through various international bodies, and individual visits here and there, such as my own trips to Malaysia and Ukraine over the last couple of years. Engagement with international colleagues from across the world helps to remind us that we are all here for the same reason – to maintain trust and public confidence in our democratic institutions. Despite the diverse circumstances we face, there is a lot we can learn from each other. Sir John Holmes, Chair of the Electoral Commission