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Defending our democracy in the digital age Posted: 22 January 2020 Written by:
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Defending our democracy in the digital age This week saw publication of a new and valuable contribution to the debate about electoral reform, with the release of the report 'Defending our democracy in the digital age' by the UK Parliament's All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Electoral Campaigning Transparency. A cross party group of MPs formed in the last parliamentary session, the member MPs took evidence from over 70 organisations – including the Commission – before publishing this welcome addition to the debate. Digital campaigning is a net-positive innovation for engagement in the democratic process; it can make it easier for voters to engage in the political debate, and for campaigners to reach voters and tell them about their policies and political views. However, we need to ensure that we know that the regulatory system keeps up with the changes to ensure public confidence can be sustained; we know from our research that people tend to find digital campaign material less trust worthy than non-digital, that they are concerned about the use of data, the spread of false or misleading information and about the funding behind these campaigns. These are issues that the Commission looks at in detail – most comprehensively in our report on the subject – but it's very positive to see Westminster parliamentarians focusing attention on the subject. We are particularly pleased that this report supports a number of the recommendations the Commission has made previously, to improve the system. A key example of this is our call for online campaign material to be required to clearly identify who is paying for it. We first recommended this in 2003 and the need for it has continued to grow; we welcome the UK Government's commitment to take forward this policy and look forward to seeing progress on the implementation. The APPG has also supported our call for an increase in the fines we can impose on those who commit election offences. While we have not sought unlimited fining power as recommended by the APPG, we are concerned that the current maximum fine of £20,000 for breaking electoral laws may be seen by some as a worthwhile cost of doing business, and urge the Government to raise this limit. We welcome the APPG's support for the Commission developing a prosecutions capacity; we have the powers to do so in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and will be following the practice of other regulatory colleagues who work in this way. And we also welcome the report highlighting the opportunity to increase transparency and regulation of candidate financial reporting by shifting oversight to the Electoral Commission, joining the parallel process for party and campaigner political finance. This will allow for greater alignment between the party and candidate regulatory frameworks, a simpler system for all and the ability to apply more proportionate civil sanctions to lower order offences. In other areas the report has fresh contributions to add to the debate and we look forward to discussing those with parliamentarians and others. This new parliamentary session creates an opportunity for the Government to bring attention back to a range of public policy areas that are important to people and where change is needed; we think it is important for electoral law reform to be a part of this programme. We can look to Scotland for inspiration, as their referendum framework legislation takes forward many of the changes we are recommending. Ultimately the regulatory framework exists to enable the public to feel confident in our democratic process; this cannot be taken for granted, we see signs that it is being tested, and now is the time to act before it is further undermined. Craig Westwood, Director of Communications, Policy and Research

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