

## **Speech by Stephen Cottrell, the Bishop of Chelmsford, in the debate on the Report from the Communications Committee 'Growing up with the internet' on 7 November 2017 in the House of Lords**

Well my Lords, It is a great joy to follow Baroness Kidron. And I certainly want to say that I support the amendments that she is pioneering through the House they are extremely important. It is also a great honour and for me a great education to serve on the Committee for Communications, and as other members have said I do want to pay tribute to Lord Best for the admirable and skilful way he led us through this and welcome Lord Gilbert as our new chair

There is so much in this report that is of critical importance to the sort of world that we want to live in, to the wellbeing of our nation, our public life, and of course particularly our children. Lord Best in his opening speech outlined disturbingly well the challenges and the dangers, and although I do want to welcome the initial responses that we've heard from Government, there is still much more that needs to be done to join all this up, and make sure the child – the needs of the child - are put at the centre. So among the many important recommendations that we offer here, I want to draw attention to just two, because they are important in themselves, but because for me, they illustrate the larger central point of our report that Government must take up the challenge to ensure that all those who work in the digital world, work together to support the needs of children in an integrated and overarching response.

So let me tell you a couple of stories. My eldest son when he was about - I don't know – 11 or 12 - came home from school one day, and told us that he was the only boy in his class who didn't have a mobile phone. We said to him, 'don't be so stupid of course you're not only boy in you class who doesn't have a mobile phone.' We then chatted with a few parents at the school gate over the next couple of days and discovered, 'oh, actually he is the only boy in his class who doesn't have a mobile phone'. So what did we do, we went out and bought him a mobile phone. It was the right thing to do; we didn't want him to feel left out or disadvantaged in a changing world. But my eldest son is 27, this is a long time ago, and that mobile phone that we bought him could only really make calls or texts. And now, with the advent of smart phones and tablet...all those things... When I was boy if I wanted to find out all this stuff, I had to get on my bike and cycle to the library. But now – you know – the whole library and so much more besides, like the rest of you I carry in my pocket and refer to from time to time if the debate loses interest. You know just about – just about every child in our country and across the world has access to all the advantages of this technology, and all the terrible snares. And if you don't have one, then you are seriously disadvantaged which is another whole issue in itself. But quite simply the longer this inquiry went on, the clearer it became to me that it is simply no good for Facebook and others to shrug their shoulders and say that they are just a platform upon which others stand. And they can't take responsibility for content and the consequences of that content.

Because if they wished or if we made them, they could be a ticket inspector of that platform, offering proper control and management of content in all the various ways that our report outlines, such as the right to be forgotten, age verification, the removal of upsetting content, time out and so on.

The technology is there. But they will not use it unless pressed.

Let me tell you another story. When I was about 15, I had a Saturday job in a wood yard. The men who worked there often left their sleazy, and by today's standards, I suppose fairly mild magazines lying around. When I was alone in the canteen, and if I thought nobody could see me, I looked at those magazines. I am not particularly proud to tell you that, and I publicly repent of it in the House of Lords, I am bishop after all. It won't look very good on my Facebook page admitting this to you, but the thing is, I was a normal 15-year-old boy, and I expect most normal 15 year old boys would have done the same thing. But now, now it should be of huge moral concern to our nation that those images and so much more and so much worse besides are available today in the pocket of every 15-year-old boy. And there is extremely disturbing evidence from organisations like the National Council for Women telling us how the persistent and pervasive viewing of pornography can

lead to the acceptance of all sorts of violence and unhealthy notions about sex and relationships, and men having extremely warped and degrading attitudes to women, the likes of which can I say this in this chamber this week – the likes of which affect all walks of life. I could go on.

The digital age brings astonishing freedom and opportunity. It gives access to each other and to information, the previous ages could never have envisioned. But in order to inhabit this age well, our report calls for sustained leadership from Government at the very highest levels and an ambitious programme of digital literacy, and most important of all, a commitment to child-centred design, protecting them from danger and harm and at the same time enabling them – not just to be safe online, but to thrive online. Furthermore, I also learned during this enquiry about the potentially damaging impact, not just of some of the content, but of the very fact of viewing the tablet itself. And how overuse, particularly with very small children can affect cognitive development, because the technology is so new, it is hard to know, on all levels, what the longer-term impact might be, but this is an area where more research is urgently needed and further illustrates that although we are indeed growing up in the digital age, we lack maturity in the way we are governing and regulating and responding to this development, it is too fragmented. The digital age can be an age of cultural and intellectual, and even moral prosperity, but enlightened legislation based on sound and child centred research is needed to lift it from the mire and misery that it is also creating. And this will require from Government great determination. But perhaps the first step is to acknowledge that self-regulation does not work; commercial interest always outflanks care of the child. This must change and Government must take a lead. It is often said of Government that its first responsibility is to protect citizens. My Lords, I think we should now ask our Government to protect our children.