



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

Reference: Electronic petitioning

WEDNESDAY, 12 AUGUST 2009

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS**

Wednesday, 12 August 2009

Members: Mrs Irwin (*Chair*), Mr Broadbent (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Adams, Mr Chester, Ms George, Mr Hawke, Mr Simpkins, Mr Craig Thomson and Ms Vamvakinou

Members in attendance: Mr Adams, Mr Broadbent, Mr Chester, Ms George, Mr Hawke and Mrs Irwin

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The introduction of an electronic petitioning system for the House of Representatives, with particular reference to:

- a) the different models of electronic petitioning that could be introduced, and their effectiveness in facilitating electronic petitioning of the House of Representatives;
- b) changes required to the practices and procedures of the House in implementation of an e-petitions system;
- c) the role of Members in e-petitioning;
- d) privacy and security concerns;
- e) the financial and resource implications of an e-petitions system; and
- f) the experience of other relevant jurisdictions, both in Australia and overseas.

WITNESSES

ELDER, Mr David, Serjeant-at-Arms, Department of the House of Representatives 1

**MAKINNON, Ms Ann, Director, Information Systems and Publishing, Department of the House
of Representatives 1**

Committee met at 11.26 am**ELDER, Mr David, Serjeant-at-Arms, Department of the House of Representatives****MAKINNON, Ms Ann, Director, Information Systems and Publishing, Department of the House of Representatives**

CHAIR (Mrs Irwin)—I declare open this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Petitions inquiry into electronic petitioning. I remind all present that these proceedings are proceedings of the parliament. Today the committee is receiving evidence from Mr David Elder and Ms Ann Makinnon of the Department of the House of Representatives. I welcome you to the hearing today. We have a submission, which you will have read, from the Clerk of the House of Representatives, who previously appeared before the committee. Before we go to questions, do you wish to make an opening statement?

Mr Elder—No, thank you, Madam Chair. We have certainly read the material that the committee has received, so I think we have some idea of what you would like to cover. We are happy to respond to questions if that is okay.

CHAIR—I will start before handing over to other committee members. Before I turn to IR considerations, I will refer you to the submission from the clerk, which states:

The department supports the introduction of electronic petitioning for the House. It supports a web-site based model but on the basis that it would be fully funded ...

Could you expand on that statement?

Mr Elder—Yes. It is possibly best if I respond to that. I obviously do not want to contradict what has been put in the department's submission but, perhaps just to clarify the position, clearly the department's submission was prepared at the time that we were looking at a UK model. There were figures in there about possible costs of a UK model. They were in the order of A\$1 million to put it together, with operating costs of perhaps A\$1½ million. We understand that there is possibly an alternative in looking at some adaptation of a system that has been developed in Queensland. We have had some discussions with our Queensland colleagues and we understand that there would be a preparedness to make that available to us, essentially at no cost. Clearly there would need to be some adaptations and so on to that. We would need to run a project to bring that on board and make it work effectively in our own system, but we think that could probably be done at a relatively modest cost.

The other point I would make is that projects such as that can actually be done using capital funds through the Department of Parliamentary Services. Whilst there is certainly a lot of pressure on our operational budget and on DPS's operational budget, for capital items such as this there is less pressure. We believe that we can probably develop the system without additional funding, using capital funds available to DPS. I have flagged that possibility with DPS and they do not see any great impediment to that.

On the operational side, we are a bit uncertain about what the ongoing operational costs of running it might be. We think a lot of those operational costs might be largely ones for your

committee secretariat rather than back-end IT sort of expenditure, if you like. Clearly, the department's budget is under pressure and every little bit extra makes a difference. We have been making that point: every little extra thing that we take on without additional funding puts pressure on us. We would hope that we could use something like this, depending on the extent of the resources involved, as a basis for seeking additional funds at some point in the future. That would perhaps be one of the things we would look at.

In conclusion, we do not see resourcing as necessarily being an impediment in being able to proceed overall, given the circumstances as we see them now, which are close to 12 months since the submission was made.

CHAIR—Should an e-petition be forwarded to the Table Office by electronic means or as a print out? What facilities would be necessary to accept an electronic petition?

Ms Mackinnon—For tabling in the House?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Mackinnon—Under the Queensland model, the document is printed out and the hard copy is tabled. Once it becomes a print out, it follows the same path as hard copy petitions. The e-petition system is really a method of gathering the 'joiners', as the Queensland parliament call them, rather than being a complete workflow system. It stops at the point where it is given to the Table Office for tabling.

CHAIR—Along with Queensland, you have also mentioned the UK model. Have you looked at what the Scottish parliament is doing? Would you like to comment on e-petitioning in Scotland?

Mr Elder—I am not familiar with the IT side of it and how it works. We could certainly take that on board and see what we can find out.

Mr BROADBENT—There is another extension, Mr Elder, in regard to its interaction. I think the Queensland model is just a receiving station, if I can say that, for petitions that are online, and they are structured. The Scottish model has an interactive capability where people can come in and talk about the petitions. We would have to consider very carefully whether we went along that track, because I think it would be labour intensive to monitor an interactive service petition.

Mr Elder—One comment I would make in relation to the resourcing issue is to say that, to the extent we go to a system with more bells and whistles, it becomes less affordable, and my comments about us being able to do this without additional resources may need some qualification. If we were to develop our own system, it would become more costly. Whilst we can fund these things through capital funds—and that helps—to the extent that it becomes an expensive proposition, we would need to think about whether additional resources might be needed.

Mr BROADBENT—Are there any other portals within the parliament where there is interaction?

Ms Mackinnon—Not to that extent; certainly not publicly available commentary. It is something that has been discussed.

Mr BROADBENT—Can you tell me in what other area it may have been discussed?

Ms Mackinnon—In general people talk about interaction with websites, whether they are our websites or other government agencies. As you know, it occurs on commercial websites, news sites and that sort of thing, where there is a lot of commentary.

Mr BROADBENT—Does the clerk's office have a website?

Ms Mackinnon—There is only one website, the www.aph.gov.au website.

Mr Elder—I think some other committees have spoken about that type of thing in relation to some of their inquiries where they are trying to tap into community opinion and get a bit of dialogue going backwards and forwards. That is the sort of context in which that has been discussed. I think, as Ann said, there have not been any developments of the system broadly to provide for that.

Mr BROADBENT—So for us to move to an e-petitioning process, such as the Scottish model, we would have to then go back and reconsider the resources that may or may not be available; is that correct?

Mr Elder—We would certainly have to have a look at the resourcing on the basis that we were looking at a different sort of model that might require a lot more work, firstly, to put it together and, secondly, to run the system, if you like.

Mr BROADBENT—It might be appropriate when we have the phone hook-up with the Scottish parliament that we ask them about how they resource their interactive processes.

CHAIR—We have already had one teleconference with the Scottish parliament, which was very beneficial to the committee. They have actually had an inquiry into their own e-petitioning system and they have recently tabled that report in the parliament. They are on their summer recess now. We are doing another teleconference in September. We will bring that to the attention of the Scottish parliament and hear what they have to say.

Mr CHESTER—You refer to e-petitioning being introduced in a way that minimises the risk of the new system being used for partisan purposes. That is a concern that I have too. What protocols would need to be put in place to avoid the database being used for partisan purposes? Is that a significant concern from your perspective? With e-petitioning itself and having access to so many email addresses, I would have thought there would be a temptation.

Mr Elder—Perhaps I will get Ann to comment on the privacy protections that are available for the material that people provide to authenticate their bona fides, if you like, in lodging themselves for the petition.

Ms Mackinnon—Certainly I discussed with the Queensland parliament the considerations they had when they were developing their system. I know the Queensland system does not make

any of that information available to anyone other than what is printed out on the tabled documents, which is actually just the names and addresses of the people who have joined the petition. In building the system privacy considerations were taken very seriously, so that information is not available to the other people who sign the petition or anybody else—even the sponsor of the petition. They do not get to see that information; they just get to see the final result and that is a hard copy so it is not able to be used for other purposes any more so than any other document. Certainly that would be our aim.

We already have a privacy statement on our website. It is along the same lines: if you take information, you are not going to be disclosing it to other people or use it for any other purpose than what has been stated that the information will be used for, so anyone giving information is fully aware of what will happen to that information. I know the Queensland parliament only stores the information for each petition for a limited period.

CHAIR—About six months I think.

Ms Mackinnon—Yes, that is right, and then it gets destroyed. I think the Queensland parliament have done a very good job in the way they have designed their system to take the privacy considerations into account. Whether we adopt the Queensland system or build a new one we will be doing the same thing and taking that sort of thing very seriously.

CHAIR—So you do not see any disadvantages then if we look at piggybacking on the Queensland model?

Ms Mackinnon—No. From my discussions with them, from an IT point of view it would be a relatively straight forward process. It would be a project, but they have established this system and we would be re-implementing it and modifying it here slightly for our situation. It would be relatively straightforward. I am not aware though whether it will meet the requirements of our petitions.

CHAIR—I would like you to also have a look at the Scottish model. When I was over in Scotland I met them, saw it in operation and was very impressed. It would be great if you could have a look at that and get back to us with your views.

Ms Mackinnon—From what you have said, it sounds like it is a much more elaborate system with a lot more interaction.

Mr HAWKE—Your department administers all the website and IT related issues publicly; is that right?

Mr Elder—No. It is a Parliament House website, so different aspects of it are administered by the different departments. We certainly administer the House of Reps site; the Department of the Senate administers the Senate site; and DPS is the overall administrator of the site more generally as well as putting on it own content—*Hansard* and broadcasting material—that it is responsible for.

Mr HAWKE—So the committee would come in as a component of the website?

Mr Elder—Yes.

Mr HAWKE—Are you aware if anyone is looking at the overall interactivity of the site?

Mr Elder—There currently is a project to look at the website more broadly and to basically develop a new website. That is in its quite early stages. I do not know whether Ann knows more about it at this stage than I do.

Mr HAWKE—This would seem to me to be an opportunity for some interactivity on the site, which I think at the moment is not very interactive. Is there a body that we can approach and put the view that this would be a good opportunity to explore interactivity?

Ms Mackinnon—As David said, there is a project being run by DPS with input from the House of Representatives and the Senate to look at the website. The stage they are at is gathering requirements. I know people have put those sorts of views forward—that they would like greater interactivity, more Web 2.0 functionality I guess. The committee could suggest that to that project team because it is still in the requirements stage. I know they will be going out to tender soon to get someone to help with the redesign. It is at an early stage of the project.

Mr HAWKE—That is good. You said it would cost \$1 million. Is there a breakdown of that? Is it the privacy that costs a lot? What is it that costs so much to provide it?

Mr Elder—The \$1 million was based my translation of the UK's estimate to develop a system for themselves. They talked about £500,000.

Mr HAWKE—Just for the system requirement to be interactive?

Mr Elder—No. Certainly, if we adapted the Queensland system, I think the costs would be very modest. Even if we developed our own system, I doubt very much that it would cost \$1 million, but clearly the more that is involved in adapting it for our own system then the more it will cost. I was simply saying that the UK believed it was going to cost them A\$1 million. We do not envisage it will cost anything like that.

CHAIR—Is there any way that you could give us a rough estimate? I know you are using the UK model, but if Australia went down that line with e-petitioning could you give us an idea of the costs?

Mr BROADBENT—I would have thought it would cost nothing to just take on board the—

Mr Elder—Are you talking about Queensland?

Mr BROADBENT—Yes.

CHAIR—It is going to cost us \$1 with the Queenslanders.

Mr Elder—It will cost. We will have to have people look at it and adapt it to our system, but the cost would be quite modest. I cannot estimate it.

Mr BROADBENT—Will the standing orders have to change?

Mr Elder—I think evidence was given about the standing orders. My understanding is that there would need to be some changes to the standing orders, yes.

Mr ADAMS—The software which the Queensland parliament has could be adapted to ours, but the continuation of that software to an interaction situation—the interaction could be what somebody thought of the matter they were petitioning on and then that being put into some sort of form I guess or there could be comments on the views of the government, opposition or other parties—would require work, which takes people, so it feeds into that software—

Ms Mackinnon—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—With good software a lot of this work where people e-petition could then be presented to this committee reasonably simply. Would that be a true statement?

Ms Mackinnon—Are you talking about having an online discussion board about each e-petition?

Mr ADAMS—Let's go back to, say, the basic Queensland model where people e-petition in. I take it that the software organises that into some form and spits it out?

Ms Mackinnon—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—The secretariat would then put that before us and that is when we go to the next stage of interaction. I think that we would like to report on that. We would certainly like to have some sorts of costs to say that to go the next level the parliament would need to put some money up or the executive would have to put some money up for that to occur, and we would certainly like to have that information to express that, I am sure. So if there is anything that we can do about some sort of budgeting—

Mr Elder—Madam Chair, specifically you are asking us to try and get some sort of costing about an interactive element in addition to the Queensland model? We can certainly see what we can do through DPS to get some idea of what that might cost and we will advise you—

Mr ADAMS—We appreciate that. As a committee, we would not like to put a burden on you but if we make a recommendation we would like to have some costings in it, at least a ballpark figure, that might go on to be something.

CHAIR—Another concern I have with e-petitions is multiple signing. How could you stop that? If you had a certain petition there and all of a sudden you might have 3,000 or 4,000 people who have come online to sign the petition and you find out that about 300 are really the same person—

Mr BROADBENT—It is the same, I think, as when you try to vote twice online. You can vote online now and if you try to vote twice you cannot because it says that you have already voted.

CHAIR—Mr Broadbent has tried that so many times, has he? That would be similar—is that correct?

Mr BROADBENT—It would have recognised that—

Ms Mackinnon—Yes. I guess there are various ways that you can tackle it, and I think that Mr Broadbent is saying that, if you go to a particular Newspoll site, you vote and then it recognises your current IP address and then prevents you continuing.

Mr BROADBENT—And you cannot get around that?

Ms Mackinnon—No, and there are various ways they have done that. I discussed this with the Queensland parliament. There are difficulties around that if you have a household that all want to join a petition—

CHAIR—They have one computer: mum wants to sign the e-petition and dad wants to sign—

Ms Mackinnon—Yes, and they have got the same email address too. So what do you want to do? Do you want to have only one person per email address and per household? They are the sorts of considerations to be addressed. I think that when Queensland went through it, from what I understand they started with the approach of trying to minimise duplication as much as they could. But they have since taken more of an approach of trying to align it with the paper based petitioning system. They do not necessarily prevent duplicates but what they have done is prevent auto-generation more than anything. Duplicates are a different thing from auto-generation. They have stopped the auto-generation by the way that you have to fill in a number that is auto-generated in a graphic that a machine cannot replicate so it has to be done by a human. So if someone wants to come in and sign or join a petition 500 times they are not going to be able to set up a process to do that automatically; they will have to do it 500—

Mr BROADBENT—They will have to sit there and do it.

Ms Mackinnon—They will have to sit there and do it. But as far as preventing duplicates, of course you can write things into code to try to prevent it, but what is it that you are trying to prevent? Are you trying to prevent mum and dad both joining a petition or not, or do you just say that there are other ways of—

CHAIR—The household—one computer, one vote.

Ms Mackinnon—I guess the other side of it is to ask: is it a voting system or is it just a petition system? Authentication is a very difficult thing, I guess, if you want to get it right—

Mr ADAMS—And how important it is?

Ms Mackinnon—That is exactly right.

CHAIR—From your discussions with the Queensland government, do you think that e-petitioning is the way to go, that it is the future?

Ms Mackinnon—I think that it is interesting. It may actually increase interest in petitions. If people are interested in doing this, and people, as we know, increasingly like to do these sorts of things online—as you have said, with online polls on other websites—that might create some interest in certain topics.

Mr Elder—It will make it a bit easier as well.

Ms Mackinnon—Yes. It will make it easier and it might genuinely increase interest. There might actually be greater numbers of people signing petitions. Talking to the Queensland parliament, in terms of numbers their biggest one was around 100,000. How do we cater for it if it is suddenly an Australia-wide one or we have a million people who join a petition? That is great from the point of view of interest.

CHAIR—We have seen this happen with GetUp!, with their petitions.

Ms Mackinnon—Yes. So obviously scalability of the system is going to be very important for us, in terms of both each individual petition and the processes of printing them out and tabling something that is a lot larger than we have experienced before. I think it is all very interesting.

Mr ADAMS—Would voting on proceedings and tabling the printout be the official way of the parliament recognising it?

Mr Elder—We anticipate so, yes.

CHAIR—I gather there are no more questions.

Mr BROADBENT—I am sure there are lots more questions.

Mr Elder—Madam Chair, if there are any more, we are happy to respond.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I thank Mr Elder and Ms Mackinnon for their participation today. Their contribution to the work of the committee is definitely much appreciated. I would also like to thank committee colleagues for being here.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Broadbent**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.51 am