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Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

Reference: Electronic petitioning

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

Wednesday, 12 November 2008

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

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

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

COPER, Mr Ed, Campaigns Director, GetUp! 1

Committee met at 11.31 am**COPER, Mr Ed, Campaigns Director, GetUp!**

CHAIR (Mrs Irwin)—I declare open the first public hearing of the Petitions Committee inquiry into electronic petitioning. When the Petitions Committee was established earlier this year the issue of electronic petitioning was not addressed. The intention was that the committee would in due course look into this matter and make recommendations to the House on whether it should accept electronic petitions. The matter is more complex, however, than a simple yes or no to electronic petitions. What sort of system do we want to introduce? Will we have a system run and controlled by the House or will we accept to electronic petitions posted and collated by any organisations or individuals on their websites? What sort of security arrangements should be put in place to record the details of online petitioners to ensure that people are not signing up to petitions multiple times? Should electronic petitions be open to everyone or only residents of Australia? What information on petitioners should be available online? What information should be included when the petition is formally presented to the House? How long should a petition be open for signatures? Should petitions on the same topic but in slightly different terms be allowed? What is the role of members in electronic petitions? Indeed, do members have a role at all? How could a member associate themselves with a petition if they wished? What resources will be required to run an electronic petitioning system? These are just some of the issues that we will be exploring through this inquiry.

I welcome the representative from GetUp! to the table. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath you should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. Giving false or misleading evidence may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

I will start off the questions before handing over to one of my colleagues. In your submission on page 1 you have stated:

We still have some concerns around the complexity of the requirements for petitions before they can be put to the House.

Then on page 3, which is page 67 in our copy, you mention again ‘complex requirements’. Can you detail what requirements you feel are unnecessarily complex?

Mr Coper—I do not have the details of the House requirements in front of me. I think it starts from the basic principle of accessibility and openness as the guiding principle for people’s engagement with the parliament. I know that the requirements currently before the House are, first of all, obviously for it to be a paper petition with signatures. Obviously, it has to follow the quite onerous details of format as well. It is quite easily followed but our concern is that there have been instances of written petitions that have had a lot of work put into them being excluded from consideration by the House on account of small formatting details of the wording of the petition itself. So there is not a difficulty with cooperating with the requirements; it is just that the onerousness and formality of them is a deterrent for some to participate in the process.

CHAIR—If a principal petitioner is looking to start a petition they can go to a member’s office to get the correct format. Ms George has just given you a sample of our brochure. We are finding that people who are looking at starting a petition have suddenly become aware of the

Petitions Committee and they are contacting our secretariat staff. They can send the format down to them to see if it would be acceptable by the Petitions Committee.

Mr Coper—Absolutely. GetUp! really welcomes the improvements that are being made in terms of getting this information out to the public and facilitating their involvement with it as well. We see that as a key feature of the House, not just in establishing these procedures but also in communicating them and facilitating their effective operation.

CHAIR—You noted in your submission that you have 280,000 members. Do you have to be a member of the organisation or list any personal details to be able to sign up to GetUp!? How do you become a member of GetUp!?

Mr Coper—I just note that our membership is up to 295,000 since the submission was submitted. To become a member of GetUp! people enter their email address. There is the option of providing more details but the minimum is the email address. They sign up to receive alerts. We send out correspondence to them to alert them to campaigns. In terms of signing petitions, for example, again we will provide space for them to put their name, postcode and email.

CHAIR—What process do you have in place to authenticate their signatures when they are signing, say, a GetUp! petition?

Mr Coper—There are both technical and manual procedures in place. The technical procedures have recognised the internet service provider address of the signee of the petition and the email address and will not allow any duplicates to sign the petition—either an email address or an ISP address. Of course, we have manual checking. If we are to present a petition to parliament, when we are formatting that we print it and deliver it to the individual or group being petitioned and we will go over that to ensure that no duplicates have slipped through the technical procedures.

CHAIR—I am sure that you are aware that in the United Kingdom, Scotland and Germany they have an in-house e-petitioning system. Wording is accepted and petitioners add their names to that official site. What would you think to a system where GetUp! was the principal petitioner and had its approved petitioner on the parliamentary website and then you could have a link on your website—GetUp!—that would then take them into a parliamentary site? What are your feelings on that?

Mr Coper—This is probably one of the key differences between our submission and other submissions and most of the precedents that we found in parliaments around the world and around Australia. GetUp! is suggesting that petitions are able to be hosted by a third party. That is not to the exclusion of petitions hosted onsite—we strongly recommend that as well. It is to complement that. There are a number of reasons for that recommendation. Some of them go to the issues of privacy and trust that the petition signee feels. We do not want to exclude those people on the basis of not wanting to give their details across to the parliament. A lot of members of the community have concerns about giving details, not just their email address and their physical address but their ISP information as well as their political opinions. That is a barrier to some people in taking action on issues. We would recommend to the committee that the government hosted petitions have very strict and stringent privacy procedures and requirements that are expressed to alleviate that concern in terms of not giving details to government agencies

or political parties. But at the same time, third-party organisations are in a position to build up that level of trust outside of the system and complement the in-house work done on petitions. That is one of the issues involving government hosting versus third party hosting.

Another one goes basically to the role that third party organisations play within the political spectrum as well. There is an expertise, a legitimacy and a viability for organisations working outside the system to design and implement effective campaigns. We do not see it as the role of the parliament to be encouraging action in a particular direction but we feel that petitions are designed with this campaigning element in mind and are often best done from without rather than from within. Also, the objections to hosting third party petitions would, I guess, be concerns around the verification and alteration of petitions. We do not think that these concerns are at all augmented by the fact that online petitions are able to be misrepresented, as opposed to paper petitions. In fact we feel that there are more safeguards in place for online petitions.

CHAIR—Are there more safeguards with e-petitioning than—

Mr Coper—Than with the paper petitions.

CHAIR—You mentioned privacy and trust, but with paper petitions you only need a printed name and a signature.

Mr Coper—Of course that is open to as much abuse as electronic petitions. The advantage with electronic petitions is of course that we can have the ISP-level verification of duplicates done much more easily and then once a petition is presented or submitted, either by the third party or the parliament, it is much easier to check that data and to examine it for duplicates than would be the case in hard copy.

Mr ADAMS—I wanted to ask whether it is not about your power as a third party—that you want to keep power over the campaign that you have established. What you are trying to do is upstage political parties, aren't you? You are trying to say: 'We are an active party. We are an activist group so we are going to upstage political parties and control hitting the parliament and the ministers or the government of the day.'

Mr Coper—I certainly understand the concern that you have raised.

Mr ADAMS—Let me say it is not a concern. I think it is a political exercise by your group to say: 'We are here. We are going to run campaigns,' which is quite legitimate. That is your argument. I am just trying to get where your argument is.

Mr Coper—Sure. I understand your point of view. I guess the response to that would be on a couple of fronts. First of all, the legitimacy of third-party organisations to be able to operate effectively outside of the sphere is actually quite an important part of the political process. So I would defend the turf that organisations such as GetUp! occupy in general. Further to that, I think that, outside of our organisation's concerns, the reality of Australia in this modern age is that more and more people are engaging with politics outside of the party political structure. They are doing it more and more in an online way or in a way that harnesses new technologies. The parliament has a responsibility to be responsive to those needs, and this inquiry is a great example of how that is happening in a living and breathing institution. Part of that is being

responsive to the behaviour of democratic participation. It has been clear over the last three years of GetUp!'s existence and is evident from the fact that over two million actions have been taken through our site by 300,000 Australians that this is how people want to engage in the democratic process.

Mr ADAMS—Can I just stop you there. I understand your argument, but isn't it just your organisation setting up what you want to campaign on, like a political party does, and then tapping into that sentiment and getting signatures to back up your argument and then submitting that? You are an organisation that runs campaigns. It is no different from other political processes that go on now, only using an electronic process.

Mr Coper—Without the provision for a third-party hosting the organisations, this political campaigning would still continue.

Mr ADAMS—Yes.

Mr Coper—And it has been going on, in GetUp!'s case, for the last three years without the provision for our online petitions to be officially accepted by the parliament. They are still a very valid and legitimate expression of public concern, and that will continue. But the other side of the point is that GetUp!'s campaigns and our online petitions are only as effective as the weight of numbers behind them. If there is a particular barrow to push, if you want to put it that way, that will rise and fall with the weight of community concern behind it. It is not a question of manipulation; it is a question of facilitation of those pre-existing concerns.

Mr ADAMS—Okay. Traditionally, we have had petitioning to be able to put a matter before the parliament. I think historically that has been the case. With the e-petitioning and a third-party setting up a campaign and then doing that, it is more about raising the issue. Petitions have done that as well, but your exercise is really more about public awareness of an issue than about actually getting people's point of view before the parliament. Do you think that is a legitimate argument?

Mr Coper—I think there are elements of both the public awareness raising and the getting of the issue before parliament. I think, as you have identified, the reason for petitions is that the people and citizens are a legitimate source of the policy agenda as much as the parliament.

Mr ADAMS—Yes, of course.

Mr Coper—With that in mind, given the modern realities of the way we communicate and behave, it is logical therefore that the policy agenda will continue to come from the people, but in more sophisticated formats. That is the sphere that we are operating within.

Mr ADAMS—One would say that political parties actually try to do that through their own processes, but through other means and modern situations. I just want to go to third parties. If we have third parties petitioning, we could have corporations—it could become pretty clogged up. It could become more about groups structuring the political process than the original idea of having a petitioner putting something before the parliament.

Mr Coper—If the concern of the committee is the abuse of the system then GetUp! would recommend that safeguards are put in place to prevent that, whether it is a register of third-party organisations or whether it is accreditation for them. Certainly, GetUp! adheres to very transparent practices in order to maintain our legitimacy. We would recommend that for the in-house hosting of petitions. We encourage the government to set the benchmark for best practice in that way. We are certainly happy to follow best practice in order to alleviate those concerns and to encourage transparency in the process.

Mr ADAMS—Thank you. I have just one more question. I support the concept in your submission of people being protected in petitioning. I just think that putting your name on a petition is about standing up. It is about saying, ‘This is my opinion.’ We have that freedom of expression in our country. I was just a little concerned that you were saying that no information should be passed on. A person can put their name on a petition to the parliament of Australia without retribution. But the situation is that when you do put your name there you are saying, ‘This is my opinion.’ It is a bit like voting, isn’t it?

Mr Coper—That is absolutely right. It is probably less anonymous than voting. We are not suggesting that there is any level of anonymity in it. It is about the level of information that parliament would require and retain in hosting a petition. We recognise that will happen and we encourage, obviously, strict privacy regulations and procedures being put in place. But, further to that, under the principle of making this as open and accessible as possible we do not want there to be a barrier to those people who want to take part in the democratic process but have concerns over providing their details or a level of detail. We are concerned about excluding a group in the community.

CHAIR—Before I hand over to Mr Chester, because I know that he has a question, I know that you have done a lot of petition campaigns over, what, three years; is that what you said?

Mr Coper—Yes.

CHAIR—Can you give us an idea of the sort of responses that you have been getting from those petition campaigns?

Mr Coper—Probably the most relevant example today would be our petition on a matter that is going before the Senate on same-sex entitlements. That is a good example of how petitions can on the one hand show community support or community attitudes on an issue, but also how it has been operating kind of outside of the system, if you like, to date. We currently have 53,000 signatures on that petition. It has been running since HREOC released its *Same-sex: same entitlements* report in 2007 that sparked the push for this legislation. That will hopefully culminate this afternoon with the passing of that legislation. We have only been able to use those petition numbers as a gauge of community sentiment and as an expression of community sentiment rather than tabling it as a petition. We think that it is very effective in that way. The issue of same-sex entitlements is obviously one of the government, if you like, catching up to the opinions of the mainstream and of social opinions of the day. It is one particularly relevant example of where petitions can be useful in demonstrating that push for change.

CHAIR—But you know that by sending you e-petition to a minister or the Prime Minister it is really out of order. That is why a petition has to come really to the people’s parliament.

Mr Coper—That petition is out of order, and that is the environment that we have been operating in during the last few years. Our largest petitions have over 100,000 signatures—one on climate change and one on amendments to the migration act in 2006. They are out of order, but politicians who ignore that weight of numbers on any given issue do so at their own peril. The existence of these sophisticated expressions of one opinion or another is something that goes into the mix when making decisions as part of the political process.

CHAIR—I will pass that to Mr Chester.

Mr ADAMS—But that can be stirred up by a group like your own to get opinion. *Sunrise* does it of a morning on their television program. It is about getting some integrity, I think. If we get 100,000 people petitioning the parliament politicians ask whether people are really signing a petition to say, ‘Yes, I really care about that.’ Do you know what I mean? It is very hard for us to come to grips with that and how we get that integrity into it.

Mr Coper—Absolutely, and we strongly support delivering that kind of integrity to these processes. I would encourage the committee to view petitions not just as that statement of opinion but as an opportunity for engagement with a really broad section of the community. What we have seen, for example, in the Scottish parliament with the procedures post-petition signing are really valuable and effective ways of being able to engage with the people. Only last week I was speaking to someone within the Scottish parliament who was saying that outside of the specific issues that are getting traction with these petitions, it has had a really positive cultural change on the parliament by providing that extra element of the people more directly in the political process rather than outside of it. Political engagement and democratic participation should be at the core certainly of this committee’s thinking but also overall in terms of the parliamentary process. That is why GetUp! is recommending more engagement under a model like the Scottish parliament where debate is opened up as much as expressed.

CHAIR—I think that you will be happy to hear that I have just recently visited the Scottish parliament and that the committee is having a teleconference with them on 26 November when we come back. So I am sure that there will be some good questions put to members of the Scottish parliament for our public hearing into e-petitioning. Mr Chester.

Mr CHESTER—I would like to touch on a couple of points that Dick has already raised to some extent. You mentioned ignoring at your peril a figure of say 50,000 e-signatures, if you like. I am quite a new MP and tend to get a lot of letters to my electorate office, which then get very high priority. I might get a paper petition that would have a slightly lower priority and an e-petition right now would have an even lower priority because of the time and effort being taken by people to sign them. I just raise that as a comment.

The e-petitioning approach is a little bit age discriminatory because it tends to be younger people who are going to be on line, so we may be missing a corner of the market who do not ever get access to it. And I do not really know if it is coming from my electorate so the representation side of it is lost a bit; it might be just nationwide. How important is it for a group like GetUp! to have that status of being recognised within the parliament as a real petition that gets accepted? Is that status something of significance to you? Do you place a lot of value on that or is it just that you keep on doing your work the way you are doing it and you will still have the impact? How important is it to have an official status for e-petitions?

Mr Coper—Obviously this engagement is really part of our core business at GetUp! It is not so much a question of status but a question of how the concerns and issues are received post delivery of the petition, the effectiveness of GetUp! acting as a conduit for those individuals who have signed the petition or taken action through our organisation and the effectiveness of the outcomes that we can offer to them. It is not so much a question of status as a question of, I guess, efficiency and legitimacy of those individuals' actions. If that is done more effectively through it being an official petition and working within the system, which I think it will, then that is the basis on which we support it.

Mr CHESTER—The status question is more about whether it adds value to you, as a group, trying to get outcomes. Do you think it will encourage people to think that it is actually going to go to parliament? Do you think that will encourage people to get engaged?

Mr Coper—I absolutely think it will encourage people to be engaged and the more engaged the population, the more effective our organisation will be enabled to get action on their concerns. Also the success of GetUp! as an organisation rises and falls on the political outcomes we are able to achieve on behalf of the actions of our members. So anything that adds to that end would obviously be very important to us as an organisation. I should restate that our reason for being is in order to facilitate individuals' actions in order to get better outcomes on those individuals' concerns by putting them in contact and having them act in concert with other citizens in the community, who they may not know but who share the same concerns, under the assumption that the sum total is far greater than the individual parts.

I just want to reflect briefly on some of your observations made. The first one is regarding the relative worth of letters, emails, paper petitions and e-petitions. I think it is a question of gradual cultural change in all of our perceptions about the way that people communicate. I think that more and more people, and I know everyone here at this table, certainly fit into the category of being particularly time poor. People do not have a lot of time to spend on matters of democratic participation, but that is not to say that their concerns are not as valid as people who do; the people who have the time to write a letter. In the context of this inquiry we are not suggesting that e-petitions would operate to the exclusion of paper petitions but rather to complement them. I think that, as members of parliament, members of this committee would realise that more and more we are having communications via email and using the internet and new media as well. This inquiry is a great example of how we can deal with that effectively as a community and as a parliament. But obviously GetUp! using new technologies to communicate with decision makers sees those online forms of communication just as legitimate as offline forms.

Mr BROADBENT—Going back to 2006, I was probably very much a part of what was happening with GetUp! in the campaign to change the way we deal with refugees in Australia. You had 70,000 members then. I put it to you that the petition then was not of great significance but the interest that was created amongst your members was. They communicated with other people outside of your membership and got them to directly contact individuals such as me from all over Australia. They had the ability to say, 'I can talk to Russell Broadbent now about this issue.' About 3,500 of those emails came through and people had the expectation that I would respond to them that night before I went to bed. That had its problems.

There were problems when we tried to communicate with someone. Say it was Ed Coper, for example, that I was replying to. I might have known Ed Coper already, but I might have had four

Ed Copers on the list and, when I replied to them all with a standard reply, the Ed Coper I knew might have been very upset because Russell should have known who it was et cetera. Emails do not have that acknowledgement. Say Alex Hawke or Alex Hawke's sister has written to me. I should know it is Alex Hawke's sister and I should make a personal reply in that situation. I am just saying that there are downsides as far as the intimacy goes. On the plus side, those people were of huge support at a difficult time because they were personally saying, 'I have an issue.' Many of them used GetUp! as that medium. I want to ask you about the interaction you have with your client base, your membership. What is the interaction? Do you, as was suggested by the member for Lyons, drive the campaign, or do they drive the campaign?

Mr Coper—I guess it is a matter of both the individual and the organisation playing their different roles. As I mentioned before, the success of a GetUp! campaign would be nonexistent without the actions of those individuals, but, in the context of the time constrained environment that a lot of the individuals work in, to a large degree they are outsourcing the implementation of their concerns to GetUp!. We are in a position to present en masse the collective weight of those concerns, as we did. But, as you also recognised, in that process around the migration amendment bill, there is a much broader dynamic happening there in terms of, first of all, politically engaging the individual who is taking action and then the role that they then play in the community as an engaged citizen. We have a lot of anecdotal evidence at GetUp! of people telling us that they have never done anything political before or, in the case of our older members, that they have not done anything political since the Vietnam War but are now prone to act, given the ease that we offer them to do so and the knowledge that they have that we will translate their action into effective outcomes, or at least make an attempt to.

I guess it goes back to the question raised previously regarding the market that would use online technologies and the barriers to people doing that. It may surprise members of the committee to find out that the average GetUp! member is older rather than younger. It is not that those taking action online are at the forefront of harnessing new technologies; it is that those people are the engaged citizens who are now finding new forms of engaging in a way that they may previously have done through writing letters in hard copy, signing paper petitions and phone calling. The barriers to online action include, obviously, access to the internet, but at the same time, for sectors of the community such as the disabled or those in remote areas who have other barriers to participating with members of their community on issues they share concerns about, the internet has been particularly liberating in giving them an accessible outlook to be involved in the democratic process.

Mr SIMPKINS—If they only need to provide an email address, how do you know how old they are and where they are from?

Mr Coper—Like any organisation, and especially given our role as a member driven organisation, we constantly survey and poll and ask these sorts of questions of our membership. As I mentioned earlier, there is the facility to provide as much information as members are willing to do, and a lot of them do that. We cannot say with a 100 per cent degree of accuracy the average statistics and demographics of our membership, but we have a very authoritative idea of those demographics.

Mr SIMPKINS—So you know from surveys that come back what the responses have been? Okay. I share some views with Mr Chester on this. We get emails from around the country and

sometimes from around the world but, given the number of constituents we have within our electorates, my approach to looking at and responding to emails is that I put all my time into those people I am meant to be working for and spend hardly any on those who send me stuff from around the country. I think we all know our electorates pretty well. What concerns me about GetUp! is that you have the control of the verification process. If we had an e-petitions system operating in parliament, verified within the processes of the parliament, I would be happy to know in the end the numbers of people within my electorate that signed a petition. I would not necessarily want the names or addresses, but I certainly would want to know that the parliament has their names and that parliament knows they are real people at real addresses. I am very uncomfortable with a third party just giving an assertion to the parliament that these people are all real people.

Mr Coper—And as a third-party organisation we would expect the parliament to seek further verification of those claims. That is perfectly legitimate, understandable and, in fact, recommended. Technology really is our friend here rather than our enemy. Internally for members of parliament there is the opportunity to be able, in a much more sophisticated way, to break down a petition by electorate and then respond accordingly to the concerns of your specific constituents rather than the concerns of citizens who are not your constituents. There are more and more increasingly sophisticated ways to store information about your constituents and respond accordingly. I think there is a level of understanding, or at least a growing level of understanding, within the community of the burdens members of parliament and senators are under in terms of volumes of correspondence. It is certainly a burden that I sympathise with personally as we are an underresourced organisation that gets a very significant amount of correspondence.

In terms of the veracity of a third-party-hosted petition, GetUp! would certainly strongly recommend that there are procedures in place for interaction between the parliament and the organisation to ensure the validity of those signatures. We would not be desirous at all of a situation where third parties are able, simply on their word, to present petitions or information to the parliament because that undermines the legitimacy of our petitions. That is the reason we endeavour to be as transparent as possible, in order to enhance the effectiveness of our petitions by having that level of trust that we are in fact operating legitimately and that there has been no alteration of either the petition text or the information of the signees. What that would look like is a question of detail for the parliamentary processes in terms of how information is stored and shared, but as a current example I would cite GetUp! working in a very productive and collaborative way with the ParlInfo website for our Project Democracy, which parses the *Hansard* directly from the Senate and puts it on the website in a much more searchable and accessible way. We have found through that experience that there are possibilities for very productive collaborations between third-party organisations and parliamentary services.

CHAIR—I will just follow on from that and then hand over to Mr Hawke. Do you have any restrictions on who can sign a petition? Do they have to be an Australian citizen or an Australian resident? I know that you were talking earlier about the Scottish model. When I was over in Scotland, they were actually saying that people outside of Scotland can sign petitions. They have had people from all over Europe—even a few from Australia—signing a petition that has gone before the Scottish parliament. The question I am really asking is: do you have any restrictions on who can actually sign your petitions? Do you feel that it should only be Australian residents and citizens that can sign a petition?

Mr Coper—Yes. The Scottish parliament has obviously opted for the more open model whereas the UK Prime Minister’s office at No. 10 Downing Street have provided only for the signature of UK citizens.

CHAIR—Correct.

Mr Coper—As to GetUp!’s practices, we do not use geography to limit people from signing our petitions or from taking our actions for the main reason that a lot of Australians living abroad are still politically active through GetUp! and we do not want to exclude their concerns. We know, through our electoral enrolment efforts before the last election, that there is a very large and engaged expat community who want to be included in the political processes over here although they are residing abroad. That is why GetUp! does not restrict action to Australians currently living in Australia.

As to the government hosting of online petitions, obviously the petitions have a greater weight and legitimacy when they come from the constituents who are directly affected by the decisions that are at hand. The question is whether the parliament opts to include and then examine the demographic details of the petition, which is eminently doable given new technology. We require postcodes when people are signing petitions, so it is something that we can do and have done—breaking down petitions by geography and presenting them to the relevant decision makers. GetUp! would recommend that the government pursue the most open model possible, which would include provision for signature regardless of geography, but remain cognisant of the fact that it can then be refined to measure the response of citizens against international citizens.

Mr HAWKE—There is a lot in what you say in relation to participation and increasing involvement in politics. Certainly, I am one of the people on this committee that wants to see a greater use of new technologies and more communication. I have a couple of reflections/questions on what you have said today. I have got the most out of the campaigns you have run where I have had communications from your members when I can validate that they are indeed the people whom I am supposed to be representing in this place. I find that interaction the most worth while. I have a concern about third-party hosting and the question of legitimacy. The word ‘parliament’ needs to be at arm’s length from any particular political persuasion or a particular campaign that is being run. I think ‘legitimacy’ is the right term, because if we give your enterprise that legitimacy it is almost like an endorsement from the parliament, which I do not think we could do, given different partisan views on issues and other core elements.

I do think, however, the parliament needs to follow a very open model. How would you reflect on a two-tier system? You could have an anonymous petitioning system where people could restrict their details and—this is the most valuable part—a system where they were verified as Australian citizens who were making a comment. If they wished to do so, they could leave their details for a response for forwarding to the member of parliament. I enjoy getting emails, and when I get individualised or personalised emails I respond. When I get standard campaigns I give standard responses, but some of your members take the time to individualise or personalise an email and I appreciate that. What would you think about some of those ideas?

Mr Coper—Yes. Certainly it is something we recognise in our campaigns as well and you will note the email will come from the individual and not from GetUp! and thereby provide the opportunity for engagement back with the member. We know also from feedback on our side

that that is an incredibly and highly valued engagement from the members. Receiving responses to their concerns not only generates a lot of goodwill but is fundamental to the future of democratic participation if people's efforts are seen to be, if not heeded, at least engaged with. Whether or not the decision maker agrees with their opinions, that level of engagement has to be there. We agree that that is a fundamental principle and I am very happy to hear that feedback from your side. In terms of having third party organisations at arm's length from the government, we agree that is a fundamental principle and endorsement—

Mr BROADBENT—Not the government, the parliament.

Mr Coper—Sorry, the parliament. It certainly would not be something that we would seek either. The question is: striking a balance between ensuring the legitimacy of third party actions while maintaining the separation of their operations from the parliament. There are, as I say, technological opportunities in order to do that in terms of how the data is used without compromising that separation. There are other models that the committee could investigate in terms of whether it be a register, or an accreditation or something that would definitely lean towards the side of closing the circle in terms of separation between the two parties. Another way to do it is to have clear guidelines of the transparency that would be required for petitions to be created and delivered. Much the same way as the current system operates, petitioners would have to adhere to an order in order to have their petition accepted. Out of the options suggested there that would certainly seem to be the one that strikes the best weighted balance between having the organisations at arm's length and having the transparency to ensure that the petitions are well regarded and the information is bona fide. The processes of transparency are as important to third party organisations like GetUp! as they are to the parliament. We would be very happy to work with the committee and the parliament in terms of developing best practice to ensure that.

Mr HAWKE—Your argument essentially is user-generated content. For example, YouTube is the No. 1 website in the world essentially today because people generate their own content. You are saying that if you generate a petition you would have more interaction than if the parliament generated a petition.

CHAIR—You could have a link.

Mr HAWKE—It would work the other way. That is what we are trying to get at. You are saying that you would get more effective participation in your model than we could generate out of our model or that you could get people to generate in our model.

Mr Coper—It would be a combination of the two and it would depend on the particular circumstances of an issue. The realities of how people interact with new media and new technologies are that this kind of peer-to-peer political engagement spreads through networks and online and can, in doing so, reach an audience that it could not previously reach in an offline sense. Campaigning organisations like GetUp! are able to bring into contact really diverse people from every corner of the country in order to take action.

There would be the facility for GetUp! to direct people to the government hosted petitions, but really the thrust behind our recommendation for having third-party hosted petitions is partly privacy and trust and partly the legitimacy and viability of having a third party use their

expertise to activate people rather than having the parliament assume that role in garnering support and designing campaigns and petitions in the best possible way to get them the most amount of sponsors. But it is also about bringing current parliamentary practices into line with current campaigning practices.

So already we have a great prevalence of online petitions created and hosted by third parties that we are seeking to have officially regarded as legitimate in the parliament's eyes. Moving forward, I think there is a great capacity for it to be hosted in house, done transparently and privately in terms of how it is regulated, but there is also an element of having the parliamentary services catch up to the current campaigning practices and current practices of engagement, which would mean allowing our online petitions to be viewed officially and hopefully responded to at a ministerial level—and there has been a recent improvement made in that regard.

CHAIR—We have to finish now because another committee wants to use the room very shortly, but I know that Mr Chester wanted to ask a quick question.

Mr CHESTER—Firstly, I congratulate you on your evidence, Mr Coper. It has been very interesting and informative for me personally and, I am sure, the other committee members. The only question I have is regarding the database security. If you have a million people signing a petition, that is gold for somebody who can get their hands on it. We could not even have the government of the day having it—the opportunity to send a million video clips at the click of a button by the Prime Minister of the day, whoever it may be, would be just gold for them if they were responding to your petition. Are you comfortable that that sort of security is there?

Mr Coper—As I say, the ongoing effectiveness of GetUp! relies on ensuring the privacy and legitimacy of our actions. It is obviously something we put a lot of work into, as we would hope any organisation, business or parliament would do. We have procedures in place to ensure that the privacy of our members' details is sacrosanct. We certainly strongly encourage this committee to ensure the best possible outcomes in that regard as well, in terms of in-house petition hosting.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for today's presentation before our public hearing. We have a number of other questions that we would like to ask you. Is it all right if I just send them to you? If you can respond to them, that will also be on the public record as well as up on our website. Before I conclude, I would like to thank you again for your participation today. A copy of the transcript will be forwarded to you in due course and the secretariat will be in contact about other questions that might occur to committee members following on from this hearing. Thank you very much.

Mr Coper—Thank you.

CHAIR—And thank you, Hansard. What would we do without you? You have done a wonderful job. And to our great secretariat team: thank you again.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Hawke**, seconded by **Mr Chester**):

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 12.23 pm