Submission to the Inquiry into the future of petitioning in the House,
Standing Committee on Petitions, House Representatives, Australia

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I'm submitting this evidence on the basis of my comparative research into parliamentary petitions systems, which has recently focused in particular on the UK Parliament's e-petitions system. I am co-Director of the University of Leeds *Centre for Democratic Engagement*, Co-Editor of the journal *Parliamentary Affairs* and Deputy Chair (Chair from January 2019) of the *Study of Parliament Group*.

Summary:

- This submission focuses on the UK Parliament's e-petitions system;
- This is the parliamentary e-petitions system receiving the highest volume of submission of e-petitions in the world and the one with the highest volume of signatures;
- Only a small number of e-petitions are directly addressed by Parliament, but this includes a wide range of types of activity, to include all of the following: parliamentary debate, government response, public engagement initiative, oral evidence sessions, inquiries, integration with other ongoing parliamentary business, correspondence with government departments and regular email communication with signatories;
- The system has performed mainly roles of linkage and of campaigning, but there is also evidence of it performing scrutiny and policy roles;
- Interviews with petitioners and analysis of live reactions on Twitter show that petitioners appreciate the regular contact kept by the Petitions Committee, and that they are satisfied with the petitioning system when they feel the issues raised by their petition have been addressed in Parliament, regardless of whether the issue is actually resolved.

Overview:

1. Online petitioning has become increasingly popular in recent decades. Whilst petitioning has existed for many centuries, the online form of petitioning has led to a resurgence of this form of participation. This increase in popularity has been particularly patent in non-institutional platforms such as Change.org. However, since the beginning of the 21st century a number of parliaments have also developed their own online petitions systems, with a particular rise over the past five years. It is important to distinguish between non-institutional e-petitions platforms and institutional e-petitions systems, in particular parliamentary ones, as the latter are integrated into the formal decision-making process. The extent of this integration and the possibilities available to consider a petition are key elements in the success of a petition[1].

2. It is important to recognise that the "success" of a petition can take different forms, from raising public awareness of an issue, to making policy-makers aware of specific issues, to forcing the government (or other institutions) to put on the record their view on a specific issue, to making

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[1] It is also important to distinguish between parliamentary petitions systems and government ones. The two are often confused and thought to be the same, but these are different institutions. This has direct consequences in the way petitions can be processed. Governments usually lead in policy implementation and speak in one voice, whereas Parliaments tend to focus on scrutiny of policy (at the most in the development of policy/law, but not implementation) and incorporate a multitude of voices (who usually disagree with each other). Governments should therefore be better equipped to address petitions' requests. On the other hand, submitting petitions to Parliament enables petitioners to address a wider range of decision-makers/representatives.

the government accept that a specific issue needs addressing, to actually achieving a change in policy or conveying to petitioners that they have been listened to.

3. The UK Parliament's e-petitions system was introduced in 2015. Prior to this, only paper petitions could be submitted to Parliament, through MPs. The paper petitions system is still in place, acting in parallel to the e-petitions system. The e-petitions system is a collaborative juncture between Parliament and Government. The e-petitions website is hosted on a Government webpage and is technically managed by the Government Digital Service. However, it is a Petitions Committee in Parliament that deals with the processing of all e-petitions. This includes moderating e-petitions to decide which was ones are rejected, which ones are accepted (to become live and collect signatures online), and undertaking any activity thereafter for those petitions accepted. The UK Parliament 2015 e-petitions system should not be confused with previous institutional UK e-petitions systems, which were government-led and did not include formal parliamentary procedures to process petitions.

4. This system has seen an extraordinarily high level of usage since it was inaugurated in July 2015. It is the parliamentary e-petitions system with the highest usage in the world, in terms of volume of petitions submitted and accepted, as well as in volume of signatures collated: 44,614 petitions have been submitted since it first opened, with 15,627 accepted (as of 19 December 2018). In the 2015-17 Parliament alone, over 14 million unique email addresses were used to sign e-petitions. Still, a far smaller proportion of e-petitions get to the key thresholds needed for a government response (10,000 signatures) or to be considered for a debate (100,000 signatures), and a high percentage are rejected (about 65%). Table 1 gives a breakdown of this data for the 2015-17 Parliament.

Table 1 – Volume of e-Petitions in the 2015-17 Parliament

	Total	*% from Submitted*	*% from Accepted*
Submitted	31,731		
Accepted	10,950	*34.5%*	
Rejected	20,781	*65.5%*	
Achieving 10,000 signatures	487	*1.5%*	*4.5%*
With government response	487	*1.5%*	*4.5%*
Achieving 100,000 signatures	66	*0.21%*	*0.60%*
Achieving 100,000 signatures, debated	50	*0.16%*	*0.46%*
Achieving 100,000 signatures, not debated	16	*0.05%*	*0.15%*
Debated, regardless of number of signatures	65	*0.20%*	*0.59%*
e-Petition debates*	46	*n.a.*	*n.a.*
Debates of e-petitions**	53	*n.a.*	*n.a.*

Notes:*E-petition debates sometimes include more than one e-petition, when several relate to the same topic; **E-petitions can be tagged to scheduled debates taking place on related topics, which happened on seven occasions in this Parliament.
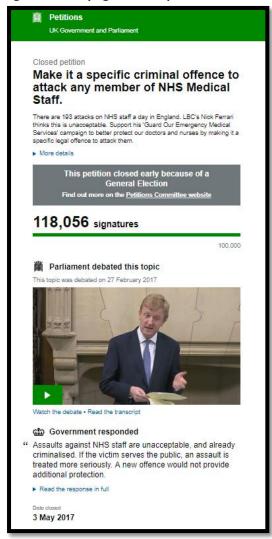
Sources: Author's own research, data from https://petition.parliament.uk/ and https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/petitions-committee/

The UK Parliament's processing of e-petitions:

5.   However, this data only shows part of what happens with these e-petitions. Although government responses and debates are a key component of this system, the Petitions Committee also develops a range of other types of activity. This includes web surveys to signatories to inform the debates and other public engagement methods to gauge petitioners' and signatories' views on specific petitions. It also includes inquiries and oral evidence sessions. Where possible, the Committee's staff also link specific e-petitions to ongoing relevant parliamentary business. It often also writes to government departments to follow up specific matters, such as a poor government response to a specific e-petition. Besides this, the Committee keeps signatories informed every time the petition they signed has achieved a specific step (such as receiving a response from government). This may seem a mundane action, but it is in fact one of the key ways through which the Committee is able to keep petitioners and signatories involved in the process. In the interviews I carried out, petitioners were unanimous in praising the Committee's regular communication with them and how they felt they were kept informed about the process. This communication is done via email, with each email including the direct web links to the relevant parliamentary activity taking place. This means it is very simple for petitioners and signatories to navigate the parliamentary material to, for instance, read a government response or listen to a parliamentary debate.

6.   One of the key strengths of the UK Parliament's system is its transparency and accessibility. Each e-petition has its own webpage (regardless of whether they were accepted or rejected), which lists all actions taken, written in plain English, avoiding parliamentary jargon, with links to the relevant parliamentary material, as Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate. Submitting an e-petition is also very simple, so much so that one could argue it is too easy. As one petitioner told me in interview, "it's dangerously easy". This explains the very high volume of petitions submitted, but also the high volume of petitions that are rejected. On the other hand though, due to its simplicity of use, the system is very accessible and therefore more likely to encourage the submission of e-petitions by people from all types of socio-economic and political backgrounds. Illustrative of this, one of the petitioners I interviewed had in fact never voted and had no interest or knowledge about Parliament until the moment they decided to submit an e-petition about an issue that seriously affected them.

Figure 1: Webpage of an e-petition

Source: Petition 176138 (2016) URL: https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/176138

Figure 2: Webpage of a rejected e-petition

Source: Petition 195745 (2017) URL: https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/195745

7. In the 2015-17, the Petitions Committee also developed two formal inquiries (for a petition on raising funding for research on brain tumour, and one on high heels and workplace dress codes), and it is currently carrying out an inquiry into online abuse and the experience of disabled people. Both of the inquiries developed in the 2015-17 Parliament have been key in securing development in policy in those areas. Each of these inquiries requires considerable input and time commitment from the Petitions Committee, as it usually encompasses extensive methods to consult the public affected, besides oral evidence sessions.

8. Besides formal inquiries, the Committee has also on occasion conducted other oral evidence sessions to develop a better understanding of the issues at stake within an e-petition, informing thereafter their debate. The Committee also regularly holds a wide range of other types of public engagement activities face-to-face and online. These include all of the following: online forum, online survey, Facebook discussion threads, Twitter dedicated hashtags, workshop with signatories inside and outside Parliament, small focus groups between signatories and MPs, one-to-ones between petitioner and MPs. Many of these initiatives reflect a particularly innovative approach this Committee has had in relation to public engagement.

9. My research has shown that petitioners and signatories value greatly these public engagement endeavours. This, combined with the regular communication kept by the Committee, and the system's transparency, results in petitioners feeling it is worth submitting an e-petition, regardless of whether they achieve a direct change in policy. However, this feeling changes when petitioners don't feel their petition was duly represented in the parliamentary debate.

Focusing on the debates:

10. As explained above, when an e-petition obtains 100,000 signatures, the Petitions Committee considers it for a debate in Parliament. Unless the issue has been recently debated in Parliament, the vast majority of such e-petitions are indeed debated. Besides this, the Petitions Committee sometimes decides to debate an e-petition that has not achieved the 100,000 threshold, when the issue may only affect a minority of people, but warrant debate, and/or when debating slots are available but no e-petition has achieved the formal threshold. The debate takes place in the Westminster Hall, a parallel chamber (e.g., not in the main Chamber), on a Monday afternoon slot, reserved for the Petitions Committee.

11. My research has shown that obtaining a debate is seen as the highlight of the petitioning process. This creates in petitioners and signatories a feeling of great anticipation and potential achievement. However, some of the petitioners interviewed expressed disappointment with these debates. Likewise, an analysis of live reactions to parliamentary debates on Twitter, also demonstrated considerable disappointment with the debate. This happens when petitioners feel their petition is not appropriately portrayed in the actual debate. Any MP can participate in these debates. This means that sometimes these debates become highly partisan. Besides this, some of the debates analysed focused mainly on arguments against the petition. In some cases the petitioners were not even mentioned. This explains why in some cases the debate may in fact have led petitioners to feel disappointed with the process.

12. All of the debates on e-petitions are initiated and closed by an MP from the Petitions Committee. This gives an important opportunity for the petition's case to be put forward. When this is done well, and the petitioner (and signatories) acknowledged, then it reinforces the sense of value in submitting a petition. The integration of petitioners and petitions' focus has improved in the 2017 Parliament. To note, in particular, that petitioners are now automatically invited to attend their petition's debate, and that MPs are more careful in acknowledging the purposes of the petitions being debated.

13. Some debates are very well attended, but most have only a minimum or below average attendance. However, this does not seem to affect the effectiveness of the actual debates. The effectiveness of the

debates relies more on the extent to which they focus on the original purposes of the petition, and on the government's response. The value of having the government respond on the petition at the actual debate can be key in securing support and/or development of the petition's campaign. However, a very well attended debate has the potential of helping more effectively in raising awareness of the issue petitioned; but this needs nonetheless to focus on the purposes of the petition and the petitioner and signatories.

Types of petitions and roles performed:

14. Categorising petitions into different types helps to identify alternative approaches to consider them according to their purpose. My research has shown that petitions submitted to the UK Parliament's e-petitions system can be divided into three main types: *protest* petitions, *substantive* petitions, *cry-for-help* petitions. These different types of petitions may expect different types of resolutions and processing.

15. Petitions perform a number of different roles, which I group within four main types: *linkage*, *campaigning*, *scrutiny* and *policy*. Despite also performing a role in scrutiny and policy, the UK Parliament's e-petitions system has performed mainly linkage and campaigning roles. This is reflected in the way it has conveyed to petitioners they were being listened to and in the way it has helped in raising awareness of specific issues.

16. Overall, the UK Parliament's e-petitions system has seen extraordinarily high levels of usage. Only a small portion of e-petitions submitted are actually addressed in Parliament. However, from these, one should note that some have resulted in a change in policy and in better scrutiny; and that overall the system has encompassed innovative public engagement initiatives, leading to important roles of linkage and campaigning.

This submission of evidence is based on the following outputs:

- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2015), "The Petitions Committee's first six months – paving the way for a new style of public engagement" *Constitution Unit blog*, 10 December 2015, accessible at: https://constitution-unit.com/2015/12/10/the-new-petitions-committees-first-six-months-paving-the-way-for-a-new-style-of-public-engagement/

- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2016), "A year on, the new Petitions Committee has much to celebrate", *Constitution Unit Blog,* 20 July 2016, accessible at: https://constitution-unit.com/2016/07/20/a-year-on-the-new-petitions-committee-has-much-to-celebrate/

- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2017), "What is the point of e-petitions in British politics", *LSE British politics and Policy Blog*, 7 February 2017, accessible at: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/what-is-the-point-of-petitions/.

- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2017) *An evaluation of the UK Parliament's e-Petitions System*, final report of Impact Acceleration Account Knowledge Exchange Fellowship, for the House of Commons Committee Service – Petitions Committee, July 2017.

- Asher, M., Leston-Bandeira, C. and Spaiser, V. (2019), 'Do Parliamentary Debates of e-Petitions Enhance Public Engagement with Parliament? An Analysis of Twitter Conversations', *Policy & Internet*, forthcoming.

- Leston-Bandeira, C. (currently under review, R&R), 'What do e-petitions achieve? The UK Parliament's case', submitted to *Policy and Politics*.