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Petitions to receive greater attention

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KEVIN Rudd is to require parliament to formally consider and report on petitions lodged by citizens, ending more than a century in which petitions simply gathered dust on parliamentary shelves.

Labor will appoint a 10-person House of Representatives committee to review petitions and propose government action to address the issues they raise.

More than one million Australians signed more than 900 petitions to parliament during the Howard government's final three-year term.

But in almost all cases, the petitions were simply tabled and seldom raised again.

Labor's Leader of the House of Representatives Anthony Albanese conceded yesterday that since Federation in 1901, petitions had simply "gathered dust in the bowels of parliament".

"The creation of the petitions committee is an important reform which strengthens the democratic rights of citizens and ensures that parliament is listening and responding appropriately," Mr Albanese said.

Yesterday's announcement is expected to be the first of a range of changes to parliamentary practice under the Rudd Government.

In Opposition, Labor front-benchers frequently complained that they were treated unfairly and that the rules allowed ministers to avoid scrutiny by not requiring them to give straight answers to questions.

Mr Albanese said the petitions committee, which will include six government members and four non-government members, would give millions of Australians who organised or signed petitions confidence their voices would be heard.

Although the Howard government received 900 petitions between 2004 and last year, it had responded to only two, Mr Albanese said.

"The Rudd Labor Government is committed to boosting parliamentary democracy and scrutiny," he said.

"Almost 15,000 Australians petitioned the previous government in 2007 for a commonwealth dental scheme — which the Rudd Labor Government pledged to introduce during the election."

In another change, petitions will no longer need to be formally sponsored by an MP, as Mr Albanese insisted citizens had a basic right to petition parliament.

And he said the new committee would also investigate whether parliament should accept electronic submissions, which are allowed in the British parliament.

The new parliament will have 17 House of Representatives committees, two fewer than the previous parliament.

The old selection committee, which considered which private member's business would be debated, will be abolished.

Its function will be replaced by direct negotiations between the chief whips of the Government and Opposition.

The old Members Interests and Privileges committees will be amalgamated.