

## House Rules

# Turning up the volume on petitions

New arrangements for petitions to the House of Representatives will help the voice of the people be heard in the federal parliament.

HAVE you ever signed a petition to federal parliament and wondered whatever happened to that?

The reality is, in most cases, petitions have been far more effective in gathering community support around an issue than they have been in getting people's views heard in parliament.

Petitions are announced in the House of Representatives chamber, and occasionally may generate some discussion in the House by federal MPs. After that ....

The biggest criticism of petitions has been the lack of follow-up to them. Even the procedural guide for the House of Representatives suggests that the importance of petitions has diminished over time.

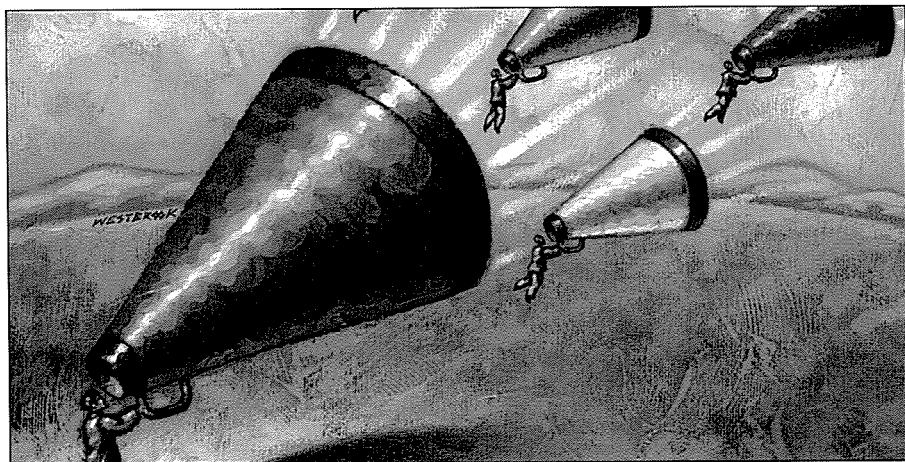
“Individual grievances can often be dealt with by more direct non-public action by members, by the Commonwealth Ombudsman and by such bodies as the Administrative Appeals Tribunal,” *House of Representatives Practice* states. “Public grievances may be more effectively brought to public attention through other parliamentary forms such as questions, debate and committee inquiries, and through direct communication with members and ministers.”

But now, new arrangements for dealing with petitions are set to inject new life into the process.

A Petitions Committee has been established for the House of Representatives to ensure all petitions presented to the House are considered and responded to appropriately.

The committee, comprising six government and four non-government members, has been given the power to inquire into and report to the House on any matter relating to petitions and the petitions system.

“Before now, people have rightly felt that the lack of response to their petitions meant that their opinions have



**NEW PROCEDURES:** *Getting people's views heard in parliament. Pic: photolibary*

not been heard,” said the newly elected chair of the Petitions Committee, Julia Irwin (Member for Fowler, NSW).

“Petitions provide a measure of a community's strength of feeling on an issue, which in turn is communicated to members of parliament,” Mrs Irwin said. “The new rules for petitions will ensure that those concerns are properly heard and, more importantly, responded to by the House.

“The Petitions Committee will consider each petition and let the petitioners know the response made on behalf of the House. It has powers to conduct roundtable meetings and inquiries which will involve petitioners directly, and the committee will report from time to time on any discussions or other actions that have been taken in relation to petitions. There will be greater transparency in the process.”

In order to improve the ability of the House to respond to petitions, the rules for petitions now require there to be a principal petitioner, even where a group of people sponsor a petition. This person, who initiates, sponsors or organises a petition, must provide their full contact details on the first page of the petition. This will enable the Petitions Committee to contact him or her regarding any response or follow-up to the petition.

Contact details are for the use of the Petitions Committee and will not be published. It is not possible for a member of the House of Representatives to be a principal petitioner or indeed to sign a petition.

While electronic petitions are not currently accepted by the House of Representatives, this issue will be reviewed in the future.

“Internet-based petitions have been used by groups such as Amnesty International and Get Up, but currently these can't be accepted by the House of Representatives. We hope to review this situation in future and will call for input from members of the public,” Mrs Irwin said.

“It is hoped that the new arrangements for responding to petitions will result in them becoming an important means for placing community concerns on the parliamentary agenda, and for the community to be involved in the work of the parliament.” •

### LINKS

Web: [www.aph.gov.au/house/work/petitions.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/work/petitions.htm)

Email: [petitions.committee.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:petitions.committee.reps@aph.gov.au)

Phone: (02) 6277 2152