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Comments on the Review of Petitions, by Miss Margaret Clinch, 30/10/2006

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1. Introduction

The essential role of elected members of Parliament is to represent the needs and wishes of the people of Australia. With strong political dependence on the (two)party system, it can be difficult for the messages of constituents to get through. Respect for the very important petition process has declined

Petitions have floundered because of dependence on much respected, but largely unwritten understandings. Community depends on the petition process. In times of urgency, and when community feeling is strong, people should be able to know the petition is an effective democratic tool.

2. Background of author

This brief submission is based on extensive experience with petitions to the Northern Territory government. As a major member of a 10 year old community organisation promoting good town and rural planning, I have found the petition process abused, petitions ignored, and petitioners insulted. Our petitions have varied from about 1500 signatures to 6500, and more recently, close to 10,000 signatures.

Politicians, including relevant Ministers, have said things like:

"Anyone can sign a petition"

"Nobody in Alice Springs signed it." (A petition on Darwin Harbour)

"I'll bet it mainly tourists signing"

"It was a mischievous petition"

I will add that our petitions are scrupulously composed, and non-adults and visitors excluded from the count.

We get no/ no meaningful written feed back from our petitions. There may be a short parliamentary response, but I cannot remember any cases where this was favourable.

Although these are Territory experiences, the principle applies that :

**ALL GOVERNMENTS SHOULD RESPECT PETITIONS FROM THEIR  
CONSTITUENTS AND RESPOND MATURELY.**

Constituents do not agree that an election gives a mandate to the government for all actions for the life of a Parliament.

I have also recently had experience with very efficient Get-Up email petitions, to the Commonwealth which appear to have had a big impact.

### 3. Ongoing

The status and processes of the petition system need to be more properly defined, so that people know they can depend on them, politicians treat them seriously, and the major parties respect them.

The status of petitions should be re-established in our democracy.

The rules should be clear.

The introductory words should be modern and respectful, and no longer demeaning.

All conforming petitions should be formerly presented to Parliament. Hostile local members should not be able to refuse them.

Politicians should not be able to ignore them, deride their content, and/or insult petitioners. They should be taken respectfully, and seriously for consideration, as any elected politician should do. This does not mean that all petitions will be successful.

### 4. Some Terms of Reference Questions Addressed

Petitions should all be received and examined by the Parliament, not just sent directly to the relevant Minister.

There should be a fully documented process for receiving and dealing with petitions, so that they cannot be ignored, or lightly treated.

Petitions should have a better chance of being effective than they have now. There should be a requirement for consultation with the organisers of the petition. If it is localised, the local member should be involved. The petition should be a precursor to genuine consultation on the issues involved. If a petition is rejected, the petitioners should be informed of genuine, and not 'token' reasons.

There should be a formal written response from the Government to petitions, addressing the issues in a detail. Prime Ministers, Ministers, and local members, as elected members, should be obligated to participate seriously in this process. It should be left in bureaucratic hands.

The lobbying process has a strong impact on government outcomes. The petition process is an open community bases process. It should be at least as effective as lobbying. Petitioners most often sign for community reasons, rather than for personal gain.

All petitions should be archived, rather than destroyed.

Electronic petitions should be facilitated, because they are usually raised on matters of major significance throughout the nation. It should be possible to regulate them for double listing.

#### 4. Conclusion

Petitions have long played an important role in the democratic parliamentary system. Loss of political respect for them has rendered them less efficient. Good representative government in the last ten years, has been suffering from a lack of reference to the wider electorate on many issues. The media and lobbyists have gained great influence.

The balance must be restored, and bringing back the status of petitions is a significant part of this. There needs to be a restoration of status, and definition of formal process, so that the electorate which Parliament represents, is respected.

This is an important role for the Procedures Committee.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit. Please acknowledge receipt.

M A CLINCH