The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Electronic petitioning to the House of Representatives

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Petitions

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Foreword

This inquiry into the introduction of an electronic petitioning system for the House of Representatives has been more than a technical challenge involving the ways and means of introducing e-petitioning. The potential to engage a greater number of Australians in the working of their Parliament has been behind every consideration made by the Committee. The belief that the petitions process can be a sounding board for the Australian people, giving individuals and groups direct access to their Parliament has been foremost in the minds of committee members throughout this inquiry.

On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank the Deputy Chair, Mr Russell Broadbent MP, for his enthusiastic support for the work of the Committee. Together with all Committee members, this inquiry has been conducted in a genuine spirit of bi-partisanship and a commitment to deliver the best outcome in the development of our parliamentary democracy.

The Committee has been fortunate to have dedicated and professional staff and I would thank the Committee secretaries Ms Catherine Cornish and Ms Joanne Towner. The inquiry secretaries Ms Julia Morris and Dr Brian Lloyd have ensured that the committee has had access to the most up to date information and developments in the field. Together with Ms Naomi Swann, the Committee staff have made my task so much easier.

I would like to thank the individuals and organisations who have presented their ideas to the Committee. While the Committee shares the view that it is essential to engage many more people in the process of public policy making, our conclusions are admittedly influenced by our own experiences and our belief in the integrity of the institution of the Australian Parliament.

A special thank you goes to the Queensland Parliament and the Scottish Parliament. Their experience with electronic petitioning has provided invaluable insight into the potential and pitfalls its operation. A highlight of this inquiry for

me has been the opportunity to discuss this issue with the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee. The system evolving in Scotland shows us the scope for petitioning in giving the people a more direct role in their Parliament.

I would commend the report to the House of Representatives and to the people of Australia.

Julia Irwin MP

Chair

Membership of the Committee

Chair	Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Deputy Chair	Mr Russell Broadbent MP
Members	Hon Dick Adams MP
	Mr Darren Chester MP
	Ms Jennie George MP
	Mr Alex Hawke MP
	Mr Shayne Neumann MP (to 17/6/09)
	Mr Luke Simpkins MP
	Mr Craig Thomson MP
	Ms Maria Vamvakinou MP

Committee Secretariat

Secretary	Ms Catherine Cornish (from 10/03/09)
	Ms Joanne Towner (to 10/03/09)
Inquiry Secretary	Dr Brian Lloyd (from 12/06/09)
	Ms Julia Morris (to 12/06/09)
Administrative Officer	Ms Naomi Swann

Terms of reference

To examine 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.

List of recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the House:

(a) establish an electronic petitions website and system under the administration of the House; and

(b) make necessary arrangements with the Queensland Parliament to enable the use of software supporting that Parliament's electronic petitions system.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that, at present, no discussion forum be provided but that in the 43rd Parliament, the Committee review this recommendation and report to the House.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Standing Orders of the House be amended to make specific provision to accept electronic petitions. Accordingly, standing orders:

(a) 204 (b), (e) and (f), relating to the form of petitions;

(b) 205 (a) and (b), relating to signatures; and

(c) 206 (a), relating to lodging a petition for presentation;

be amended to take account of the electronic format.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that duplicate electronic petitions be treated as instances of the same petitions, as is the case for paper petitions, such that duplicates are not displayed on the House of Representatives electronic petitions website.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that signatories to petitions be required to provide an address and postcode in addition to name and signature and that, as for paper petitions, neither addresses nor postcodes of signatories, or the principal petitioner, be published by the Committee.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that electronic petitions be printed prior to presentation so that a hard copy is presented to the House.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that electronic petitions be forwarded to the Committee for review and certification before being posted on the Committee's electronic petitions website.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the personal particulars of petitioners included on original petitions be available for inspection in the Table Office, as printouts only, as is currently the case for paper petitions.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that:

(a) electronic copies or lists of petitioners' personal details derived from electronic petitions be deleted six months after the close of the petition; and

(b) petitions be posted on the Committee's website for the life of the Parliament and then removed.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the electronic petitions system use verification methods currently employed in the Queensland Parliament's electronic petitions system, and that improved methods of verification be adopted as they become available.

Executive summary

The 2007 report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Making a difference*, led to a number of changes to petitions to the House of Representatives, including the creation of the Petitions Committee. The report also suggested that the House change its practices so that it could accept electronic petitions. The present report inquires into this issue.

In this inquiry the Petitions Committee considered whether the House should accept electronic petitions and, if so, how that should be implemented. To answer these questions, the Committee considered the models employed and the experience of other parliaments which had taken this path (Chapters 2 and 6). To a certain extent, the Committee also inquired into models and experience of organisations outside of parliament that were involved in electronic petitioning (Chapter 2).

In each case the Committee explored the implications of these models if they were applied in the House of Representatives, particularly with regard to: changes that would be necessary to House practice and procedure (Chapter 3); concerns over security and privacy (Chapter 4); and the implications of costs and financial constraints (Chapter 5).

After considering the models and experience of these other parliaments, the Committee has recommended that the House adopt electronic petitioning (Recommendation 1). The Committee saw particular relevance in the experience of the Queensland and Scottish parliaments (Chapter 6). These two parliaments employ models of electronic petitioning which are different in many respects. Indeed, they appear to represent contrasting directions: one emphasising continuity with existing parliamentary practice, the other public engagement.

The first of these two approaches, which the Committee recommends to the House, offers the lowest barrier to entry for introducing electronic petitioning to the House of Representatives. This model entails the House implementing an electronic petitions system and website, under its own administration, where electronic petitions can be submitted, signed, and published once they are closed

(Recommendations 1, 2, 6, 8, 9 and 10). Relatively modest costs and changes to the procedure of the House would be involved if these recommendations were to be adopted.

However the Committee also finds much to recommend in the second approach, in which electronic petitions are seen as a significant contributor to an enhancement of the parliament's engagement with its public. For this reason the Committee has recommended that an electronic petitioning system, if adopted by the House, should be designed to allow further expansion of facilities in the future so that the House, and its constituents, can receive the full benefit of contemporary modes of communication.