

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
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Submission to
House Standing Committee on Petitions

Inquiry into Electronic Petitioning

8 August 2008



Introduction

Oxfam Australia welcomes this inquiry. As an organisation with a strong commitment to cultivating active citizenship, we believe it is important to provide multiple avenues for citizens to express their views, hold their political representatives accountable and actively participate in democratic processes. Electronic petitioning is one such avenue.

Based on our own experience, research and evidence from jurisdictions which already facilitate electronic petitioning, we believe the introduction of electronic petitions to the House of Representatives would help to increase community engagement with the processes of the House and strengthen the accountability of Members to their constituents.

This submission is not intended to address all of the terms of reference but simply to express Oxfam Australia's strong support for the introduction of an electronic petition system and share with the Committee our experience of using electronic petitions and other forms of electronic communication between citizens and their political representatives. The submission does touch on the final term of reference relating to the experience of other jurisdictions that use electronic petitioning.

About Oxfam Australia

Oxfam Australia has worked with local communities around the world to combat poverty and injustice for over 50 years. Our organisation undertakes long-term development projects, provides emergency response during disaster and conflict, and conducts campaigning and advocacy for policy and practice changes which promote human rights and justice. We support over 400 long-term development projects in 30 countries across Africa, Asia, the Pacific and Indigenous Australia.

Supporting active citizenship is one of the central commitments in Oxfam Australia's current Strategic Plan. We work with communities to promote active citizenship and increased accountability at local, national and global levels. As part of this work, we routinely use a range of online tools to facilitate the active participation of citizens in public debate and democratic processes.

In addition, our Youth Engagement Program seeks to engage a large and diverse range of young people in our work. Young people are a force for change; are present in large and growing numbers within communities affected by poverty and injustice and play a critical role in Oxfam Australia's campaigning, volunteering, donor and membership bases in Australia.

Using technology to facilitate active citizenship

In Oxfam Australia's experience, the barriers that prevent citizens from engaging actively with their political representatives include:

1. A lack of understanding of political processes and an associated lack of confidence;
2. The perception that engaging with political representatives is a "waste of time" and an ineffective way to bring about change; and

3. The reality that many citizens are time-poor.

We have found that electronic communications can be effective in overcoming some of these barriers. For example, because people are time-poor, they are much more likely to take a quick online action than they are to sit down and write a hand-written letter or go to visit a Member of Parliament.

Simple, online actions can also provide a non-threatening opportunity for individuals with a limited understanding of political processes to engage with their Member of Parliament for the first time. This can be an important first step towards becoming a more active citizen.

In addition, we have found that electronic communication can be used to combat the perception that engaging with political representatives is a waste of time. There are a number of reasons for this. First, and perhaps most significantly, electronic communication provides unprecedented opportunities for individuals to increase the impact of their actions by joining with others to take *collective* action. While it has always been possible for individuals to take collective action, including through the existing petition system, electronic communication provides the opportunity to reach larger numbers of people more quickly, and to bring together people from different geographical areas.

Second, we have found that electronic communication often generates more rapid responses from Members of Parliament, leading to the perception that Members of Parliament are receptive to their constituents. For example, we have received emails from supporters who have been both surprised and delighted to have received a quick response from their local Member after having sent an email to their local Member through our website. For many of them, this is the first time they have contacted their Member of Parliament and, because they feel that their views have been heard, they feel encouraged to take action again in the future.

Third, electronic communication enables organisations such as ours to monitor the responses of Parliamentarians more easily and to communicate those responses to our supporters. This means we are in a better position to show our supporters what the impact of their actions has been.

Electronic communication and the not-for-profit sector

The ability to communicate electronically with the community, to bring communities together online, and to facilitate electronic communication between citizens and their political representatives is particularly important for the not-for-profit sector. This is because it provides a quick and inexpensive means of communication and therefore helps to free staff and volunteers to concentrate on other work.

Young people and online engagement

Oxfam Australia believes the introduction of electronic petitions could help to facilitate greater participation by young people in the petition process.

As the first generation to grow up using new technology, the current generation of young people "*think and process information fundamentally differently* from their

predecessors”.¹ For this reason, they have been dubbed ‘digital natives’, in contrast to older generations of ‘digital immigrants’.²

European research suggests that 16 to 24 year olds spend 16.4 hours online each week,³ while Australian statistics show a significantly higher than average use of the internet among young people.⁴

Young people experience much of their learning, communication, social interaction and leisure electronically, so it follows that, if they are going to engage with decision-makers, many of them will feel more comfortable doing so electronically.

Moreover, a number of the barriers to active citizenship outlined above apply even more acutely to young people. Research conducted on behalf of Oxfam Australia revealed that young people want “leaders that *really* listen”. Moreover, young people expect fast-paced communication and are looking for two-way interaction rather than a one-way flow of information.⁵ So, the ability to interact with political leaders in a timely manner – and ideally to receive quick responses from those leaders – is crucial to encourage young people’s participation in democratic processes.

The experience of other jurisdictions

Oxfam Australia notes with interest that a range of other jurisdictions are already using electronic petitions, including here in Australia.

Significantly, there is evidence to suggest that electronic petitions encourage greater responsiveness by parliamentarians to their constituents. For example, the Queensland Parliament’s e-petition system was examined by Tasmania’s Joint Select Committee on the Working Arrangements of the Parliament. Evidence presented to the Committee indicated that:

“A major outcome of the entire process has been the increased responsiveness to petitions generally. Each month the percentage of petitions being responded to by Ministers grows. Currently 75% of petitions have received responses during the period. This is much higher than in previous years. The higher profile of response on the website – or to be more correct, the absence of any response – is likely to be the reason for this increase in ministerial responses.”⁶

E-petition systems have been introduced not only in parliaments but also to facilitate communication with the Executive Government. For example, as a result of a partnership between the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and a charitable organisation, British citizens are able to set up electronic petitions which are hosted on the Downing Street website. The website explains that:

¹ Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”, *On the Horizon*, MCB University Press, Vol.9 No.5, October 2001. See: <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Mediascape Europe 2006 Study from the European Interactive Advertising Association, cited in MediaTrust, ‘Communication for the Next Generation’, http://www.mediatrust.org/youth-media/docs/COMM_GUIDE-1.pdf

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Household

⁵ Media Trust, ‘Communication for the Next Generation’.

⁶ Parliament of Tasmania, Joint Select Committee on the Working Arrangements of the Parliament, Report No. 12, 2004, E-Petitions. See: <http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/CTEE/REPORTS/workingarrange-report12.pdf>

“Petitions have long been sent to the Prime Minister by post or delivered to the Number 10 door in person. You can now both create and sign petitions on this website too, giving you the opportunity to reach a potentially wider audience and to deliver your petition directly to Downing Street.”⁷

Oxfam Australia considers the Downing Street e-petition website to be particularly user-friendly. It is easy to use, with a simple, step-by-step guide to starting an e-petition. It also provides the opportunity to search existing petitions by subject matter, by size or by date. We encourage the Committee to examine this website as it considers different models of e-petitioning.

Conclusion

Oxfam Australia thanks the Committee for its consideration of this important issue. We believe it is time for the House of Representatives to establish an electronic petition system. Such a system will increase opportunities for engagement between Australian citizens, particularly young people, and their political representatives, and will also strengthen the accountability of parliamentarians to their constituents.

Recommendation:

That the House of Representatives introduce an electronic petitioning system in addition to the existing paper petition system.

⁷ <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/>