

Conclusion and recommendations

Introduction

- 7.1 The Committee has considered models and the other facets of electronic petitions specified in the inquiry's Terms of Reference. The Committee's recommendations for electronic petitions in the House of Representatives are presented below, under headings drawn from the Terms of Reference of the inquiry.
- 7.2 Recommendations are presented in two groups. Those under headings drawn from Terms (a) to (d) focus on implementing changes in the near-term to institute the practice of electronic petitioning in the House of Representatives. While there are no recommendations which correspond to Terms (e) and (f), the final two sections of this chapter raise matters which are relevant to these terms.
- 7.3 On the basis of the evidence brought before it, the Committee considers that the House of Representatives should begin to accept electronic petitions, by means of an electronic petitioning system and website under the administration of the House.
- 7.4 The Petitions Committee should manage this system and website on behalf of the House, set policies for use and management, and provide authority for petitions to be displayed on the site. As it does now, the Committee would provide authority for petitions to be presented to the House and for referral of petitions to Ministers.
- 7.5 The Committee takes this opportunity to record its view on a matter that is complementary to electronic petitioning, and central to the Committee's

role in general. Standing orders 207, relating to presentation of submissions, and 209, relating to referral to a Minister for a response, are in operation until the end of the 42nd Parliament. The sessional orders were originally put in place in June 2008 on a trial basis.

- 7.6 Standing order 207 currently allows, among other things, for the presentation of petitions by the Chair of the Committee and for a statement by the Chair, or another Committee member, in accordance with standing order 34. The order also sets out the times during which a Member may present a petition. Standing order 209 enables the Committee, following presentation, to refer a petition to the Minister responsible for response within 90 days of presentation, and for the Chair to announce any such ministerial responses.
- 7.7 In the Committee's view, standing orders 207 and 209 have been operating successfully and should be made permanent. Nothing contained in the recommendations that follow should affect their continued application.

A model of electronic petitioning for the House

- 7.8 Implementation of a system similar to that of the Queensland Parliament represents the most effective solution, at present, for the House of Representatives.

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.**

- 7.9 Discussion forums for petitions, as are available on the Scottish Parliament's electronic petitioning website, represent an additional cost, in terms of software development and system management, that is not warranted at present.

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.

Changes required to the practices and procedures of the House

- 7.10 Models considered by the Committee, if applied to the House of Representatives, would have different procedural and practice implications. The Committee intends that initial arrangements for electronic petitions will involve minimal changes to House practice and procedure.
- 7.11 The Committee has considered proposals that third parties be accredited to post and accept signatures for electronic petitions which could be forwarded to the House. It considers that this should not be adopted by the House, due to the absence of precedent for such an arrangement; to concerns over the validity of petitions; and potential implications for the standing of the House. The Committee also notes that the involvement of third parties would go against the tradition of petitions, which has seen individuals bring their concerns directly to Parliament.

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.¹**

¹ House of Representatives, *Standing and Sessional Orders as at 1 December 2008*.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that duplicate electronic petitions be treated as instances of the same petition, 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.

The role of Members in electronic petitioning

- 7.12 Under current arrangements paper-based petitions to the House either come directly to the Committee or are forwarded by Members to the Committee.
- 7.13 The Committee considers that the practice of ‘front-ending’ electronic petitions under which, as in Queensland Parliament, petitions are reviewed before being posted on the electronic petitions website, is sound.² However the Committee believes that, in keeping with the recommendation of the House Committee on Procedure’s report on petitions, that petitions to the House not be required to be lodged, or otherwise supported, by Members.³ This matter is considered in Chapter 3 under the subheading ‘The role of Members’.

2 Mr N Laurie, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 June 2009, p.1.

3 *Making a difference*, pp. 24-25.

- 7.14 Members may however forward the text of draft electronic petitions to the Committee for guidance, as is current practice for paper petitions.

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.

Privacy and security

- 7.15 The Committee considers that evidence presented to the inquiry suggests a strong relationship between the privacy and good management of petitioners' personal details, and willingness of the public to participate in petitions to the House.
- 7.16 A similar relationship applies between the verification of signatures, petitioners' willingness to participate, and the way in which petitions are regarded in the House. The Committee considers that maintaining good management of all of these elements is an essential component in creating conditions for public engagement with Parliament.

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.

Financial and resource implications

- 7.17 In the Committee's view, it is difficult to quantify this resource cost at present because some business currently created by paper petitions would move into the electronic domain if electronic petitioning were introduced in the House. If electronic petitions are to be accepted by the House of Representatives, resource implications should be monitored to ensure adequate support can be maintained.

The state of engagement

- 7.18 At present, there appears to be some agreement that the state of engagement between parliaments and their public is problematic. The Committee has considered whether the House should adopt an electronic petitioning system which emphasises continuity with previous practice, or whether a primary focus should be placed on improving the state of engagement. This question has implications for policy on electronic petitions, particularly as to whether discussion forums and other facilities are necessary in order to advance the relationship between the House and the public.
- 7.19 The Committee finds that there is insufficient information available to answer this question in any conclusive sense. It also considers that this is

an important question, about which the House should be better informed if it is to make sound decisions on its interface with the public, and this includes petitions.

Julia Irwin MP

Chair