

8<sup>th</sup> August, 2008

Committee Secretary  
 Standing Committee on Petitions  
 House of Representatives  
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 AUSTRALIA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
 STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
 PETITIONS

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Dear Committee,

We are pleased to submit to the Standing Committee on Petitions Inquiry into Electronic Petitions.

### 1.0 Introduction - GetUp! and online petitioning

GetUp! Is Australia's foremost online campaigning organization. Since 2005, GetUp! has attracted more than 280,000 members, and has become a significant force in Australia's social and political landscape. Over many campaigns, we have shown the willingness of Australians to engage with governments on the issues they care about. We have also demonstrated the power of Internet technologies for making new connections between Australian citizens and their elected representatives.

We are pleased that recent changes to the House's petitioning systems - adopted following the 2007 Making a Difference Report of the Standing Committee on Procedure - make the responsibilities of members and ministers clearer. We will monitor the ongoing implementation of these changes, and we are especially concerned to ensure that relevant ministers provide full and frank responses to issues raised in petitions. We still have some concerns around the complexity of the requirements for petitions before they can be put to the House - we are aware that this has the effect both of deterring petitions, and striking out some that have taken time and effort to assemble. We agree strongly with the observation made in the Report that the way in which the House responds to petitions is as important as improving the tools of petitioning, but we think the time has come for the House to embrace the possibilities offered by Internet technologies.

Our Internet petitions have attracted thousands of signatures, have been important in bringing the concerns of our members to politicians and other community leaders, and have nurtured the community's sense that campaigning for change through the institutions of our democracy can work. But most of our petitions have not met the current guidelines for submission of paper petitions to the House of Representatives.

We believe that the petitioning system could be more open and engaging if the House of Representatives adopted online/electronic petitioning. And we know that the current arrangements for petitioning to the House - which exclude online petitions - are out of step with community expectations and behaviour. As they stand, these arrangements risk hampering efforts to build political awareness and engagement, and they frustrate many in the community who support campaigns by organisations like GetUp!, or who want to build awareness around their own concerns, and put these to the Parliament. They also risk making the nation's Parliament seem out of touch. We have a strong interest in ensuring

that the House of Representatives adopts an electronic petitioning system that is as open as possible.

## **2.0 Towards electronic petitioning**

Around the world, provision for online petitioning has become a benchmark for parliaments looking to promote citizen engagement. We think that it is important that any petitioning system should encourage rather than obstruct the submission of petitions to parliament, and arrangements should make the petitioning process as accessible and convenient as possible. If petitioning systems are difficult or inaccessible, the gulf between representatives and citizens widens, and democracy suffers. If parliaments are less accessible than other social and political bodies, there is a real risk that citizens will become further disengaged from the political process, and begin to see their parliaments as remote institutions. Internationally, online petitioning systems have worked - they demonstrably bring people and community groups into closer contact with their parliaments, and contribute to the view that political institutions serve the interests of citizens. Online petitioning can help members of parliament monitor their constituents' concerns more closely, and help people communicate more effectively with their parliament.

By allowing electronic petitioning, the House would be bringing itself into line with contemporary community behaviour and expectations. As an online campaigning organisation, we can attest that Australians regularly use the Internet for accessing political information and for social and political activism. Increasingly, they demand that social institutions - including parliaments and governments - use the Internet to be more responsive to the needs and concerns of citizens.

Some factors driving this change in community attitudes include:

- *The availability of Internet access and high uptake of online services.* At the end of 2007, there were 7.1 million subscribers to the Internet in Australia, including 964,000 business and government subscribers and 6.14 million household subscribers (ABS). For many Australians, using the Internet for communication, information, and to access public services is a normal part of everyday life. Many libraries, schools and universities also provide Internet access to members of the public. The projected enhancement of the nation's broadband network will bring richer, and encourage more to use the Internet for accessing news, discussion and public services.

- *The adoption of electronic petitioning by parliaments in Australia and around the world.* Electronic petitioning has been adopted by parliaments such as Queensland's and Scotland's. The successful adoption of online petitioning by these Parliaments has offered "proof of concept" and a progressive precedent for parliaments everywhere.

- *A range of political actors using the Internet to spread their message and gather support.* Campaigning organisations like GetUp! have managed to reframe the national political agenda by mobilising a national member base around key issues. More broadly, political parties, community groups and NGOs are now using the Internet to spread their message and mobilise people. Prominent Australian examples include the ACTU's "Your Rights at

Work” campaign, and the ALP’s online “Kevin 07” campaign in the 2007 election. Political activism

- *The uptake of technologies that allow political bloggers and “citizen journalists” to provide new forms of reportage and commentary on political issues and events.* The availability and uptake of online self-publishing technologies like blogs have allowed ordinary citizens to put their own views on political issues and events. New voices and communities of interest have arisen online that challenge familiar models of political communication, and stimulate new forms of activism and debate. Experiments in citizen journalism in Australia and around the world have confirmed that citizens will engage as active participants in the political process when online opportunities are presented to them.

- *Mainstream news media using their online services to break stories, engage their audiences, and facilitate political discussion.* According to studies such as the Australian Election Study 2007, online news sources are often now the first port of call for many citizens - especially the most politically active and aware.

As a result of these and other changes, online campaigning, debate and activism has become mainstream. This can only be seen as a positive development - these trends represent a strengthening of social capital and political engagement. In the midst of such changes, limiting petitioning to traditional, paper-based methods seems anachronistic.

### **3.0 Benefits of online petitioning.**

Online petitioning has a number of benefits that traditional paper petitioning does not. The advantages of e-petitioning include:

- *Accessibility and convenience.* E-petitions are easier for citizens to organize, circulate and promote. Organising an online petition is cost-effective for citizens, and e-petitions may provide administrative and handling efficiencies for members and parliamentary staff.

- *Building national political engagement.* E-petitions encourage engagement by allowing citizens to overcome geographical constraints in organising petitions and building. Online petitions can be signed from anywhere in Australia, and do not need to be circulated in hard-copy form.

- *Building links between citizens and the parliament.* The best way to combat political disengagement is to build institutions that welcome and accommodate active citizenship. On the one hand, online petitioning allows parliaments an insight into the most pressing current concerns of citizens, and avoids the delays associated with paper petitions.

- *More petitions submitted in line with parliamentary requirements.* Our information and experience suggests that many painstakingly-assembled paper-based petitions do not measure up to the complex requirements laid down by the House for petitions. This deters engagement with the parliament. Online petitioning offers the possibility that more petitions presented will be correctly presented and able to be accepted by the House. Online templates, forms or guidelines will promote the submission of petitions that meet requirements and guidelines.

For these reasons, we believe that the House should move to accommodate electronic petitioning as quickly as possible.

#### **4.0 Models of electronic petitioning**

For us, the most important question in developing a model for electronic petitioning is how petitions are to be hosted. While most existing models tend to restrict online petitions to sites government- or parliament-hosted sites, we think that a more open model is preferable. We think that in addition to e-petitioning on parliamentary websites, individuals and community groups should also be allowed to host online petitions and then present them to the House of Representatives. We believe that past reasons for rejecting non-governmental hosting are often spurious, and in practical terms problems with non-governmental hosting are easily solved. Benefits and concerns with both methods of hosting are canvassed in the remainder of this section.

#### **4.1 Parliament-hosted online petitions**

The system whereby governments host petitions is the most common model adopted in practice so far - for example in the Scottish and Queensland Parliaments. In this model, parliaments effectively "run" petitions, although petitions are still initiated by interested parties.

In our view, there are many advantages to be had from parliament or government hosting, which are evident from international experience. Setting up a petition on government sites is both time- and cost-effective, and reduces the administrative and logistical problems with paper petitioning. Also, a centralised site helps groups and individuals who do not themselves have a strong online presence draw attention to their cause. Parliamentary hosting of online petitioning therefore addresses issues with the petitioning process that especially affect smaller community groups or individuals.

If parliament-hosted online petitioning services are well-designed and implemented, they can also provide transparency on the petitions process. The Scottish and Queensland Parliaments provide clear information on what petitions have been presented, how to sign a petition, see what stage in the process the petition is at, and what responses or actions have been recommended or taken. Any moves to develop parliamentary hosting for online petitions should take on board the guarantees of transparency embodied in these models.

#### **4.2 Concerns with parliament-hosted online petitions**

As made clear in our 2006 submission to the Inquiry into Petitions, our most serious concerns regarding parliament-hosted online petitions are around privacy. The process whereby government hosts petitions would potentially allow the collection of data on petitioners - their opinions, their whereabouts, their Internet use, personal details and other information. To overcome these concerns, there would need to be strong guarantees and procedures that guaranteed the privacy of petitioners, and which ensured that the government did not store or collect unnecessary information about them.

GetUp! would not support any model of parliamentary hosting that did not carry explicit guarantees on petitioner privacy. Information should only be used for the purpose for which it was intended, and government agencies or political parties should not be allowed access to this information.

Given that strong safeguards for petitioners' privacy are in place, we believe that provisions for parliament-hosted online petitions will be a positive step.

#### **4.3 Non-governmental hosting of online petitions**

Parliament-hosted petitioning should not be the only means of collecting online petitions. We believe that for some issues, and for some citizens, a petitioning process that allows hosting at arms length from government is more likely to build awareness around particular issues. Individuals and groups outside governments will often be better placed to communicate and mobilise people around specific issues than government. Groups campaigning on particular issues will benefit from being able to direct members or supporters to their own websites, and directing administering their own efforts at bringing about change.

We believe that the Australian parliament should be consistent in the way it treats electronic or online petitions. At the moment, the Senate is prepared to accept petitions gathered online by a range of organisations. The disparity between the ways in which the House of Representatives and the Senate treat online petitions is confusing and contradictory.

More than this, though, the major principle underlying petitioning - that citizens and community groups should be able to directly communicate with the house - demands that unless there are serious concerns about non-governmental hosting, the petitioning process should be as open and accessible as possible. We believe that the major objections that have been raised around hosting petitions on non-governmental sites are unfounded, or are equally applicable to paper petitions.

#### **4.4 Concerns with non-governmental hosting of petitions.**

There are two main reasons that parliaments have given for not accepting online petitions gathered by individuals or organisations outside government - the difficulty of verifying signatures, and the concern that the terms of petitions might easily be altered after they have been signed.

We are not aware of any instance where any petition - whether paper or online - has been altered. Even if this had happened, we believe that concerns about tampering are at least equally applicable to paper petitions. Internet petitions - such as those hosted at GetUp! - are configured to prevent more than one signature from each email address. Other procedures can be implemented to audit this authentication procedure. GetUp's Internet-based petitions have one point of data entry and collation, with monitored access - the whole process is controlled by a reputable and accountable organisation which demonstrably ensures the integrity of its petitions. No such controls are available with respect to paper-based petitions - these are often circulated on photocopied forms,

distributed through a range of environments and networks. A considered view might hold that paper petitions are more prone to potential "tampering" than online petitions.

Simple measures can be taken in order to guarantee the integrity of online petitions hosted by non-parliamentary groups or individuals. Our suggestions include

- Involving sponsoring MPs at the beginning and the end of the process of preparing the petition - to vouch for the integrity of the terms of the petition, the process of signature-gathering, and the credentials of the individual or group hosting the petition.
- Requiring a report to be delivered with the petition on how signatures were gathered and the mechanism used for identifying petitioners.

Given that, as discussed, paper petitions are actually relatively insecure, allowing wider use of e-petitions with provisions like these might actually enhance the integrity of the petitioning system as whole.

## 5.0 Conclusions

We believe that the House should adopt the model that most encourages engagement, and which is the most accessible and convenient for citizens and community groups. Given the separate advantages presented by parliamentary hosting and non-parliamentary hosting of petitions, we would recommend that the House should implement arrangements for both models of petitioning. In this way, individuals and groups without a strong web presence, who want to draw attention to their concerns, should have available a parliamentary petitions site that handles petition in a transparent and informative way. Campaigning organisations and individuals who are able to mobilise petitioners using their own website should also be provided for in any electronic petitioning system, since the concerns about the integrity of petitions are easily addressed with simple safeguards. There need not be any conflict or contradiction in having these arrangements running simultaneously - together they add up to the best solution for open and accessible parliamentary government in the twenty-first century.

Thank you for your consideration,

**Brett Solomon**

Brett Solomon  
Executive Director

***About GetUp:** GetUp.org.au is an independent movement to build a progressive Australia. GetUp brings together like-minded people who want to bring participation back into our democracy. GetUp has over 280,000 members nationwide, more than every political party combined. [www.getup.org.au](http://www.getup.org.au)*