

Submission No. 6

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Thursday, 11 January 2007

To: House Standing Committee on Procedure
Re: **Inquiry into the petitioning process**

This is a personal submission. I have no connection with political parties or other organised groups.

I support the aims of the process and I believe Parliament will welcome the results of this inquiry.

First, I wish to comment on the proposal from Mr Roger Price (House Hansard of 16 February, 2005, page 201) that the proponents of any petition could have the right to present their requests on the floor of the Chamber. I believe this should be put aside, as it is impractical and would distract from the business of Parliament. It could not allow equal access of all petitioners, due to geographical constraints, and this inherent inequity would diminish our democratic institutions. Also, the standards of personal demeanor that are accepted by elected representatives could not be imposed on visitors.

But, the essence of the proposal has great merit, and the question therefore arises that modern technology could help.

Some possibilities are:

1. Petitioners could be given a virtual presence on the floor, or in a committee, through video-conference linkages. This would overcome distance, and give wide access, but a significant investment would have to be made into foolproof technology. The administration of this avenue would contain significant difficulties, being a physically separated arm of Parliament.
2. Electronic petitions could be accepted.
3. A future Petitions Committee could set a cut-off, and greatly reduce the number of eligible petitions to be given the option of presentation in person. As example, say petitions with more than 10,000 signatures could be presented in person at the Committee. This would imply a process that would elect a spokesperson, and that would require involvement of the AEC. I cannot do the costing, but there would have to be significant recurrent expenditure to support a new committee that is properly equipped to do its work.

It is apparent (to me) that a greater deficiency in our democratic procedures is the lack of positive identification of electors. An individual is subject to verifiable checks on identity for many mundane civil tasks. At present, voting requires only a verbal assent that is recorded as a tick on a page. If I was asked to sign a petition, on paper or electronically, I would like to be assured that all the other signatures are *bona fide*, and appear only once. I would like to think that the designers of the Access Card have begun to plan how voters may use the card to record their presence at polling booths. And if not, why not?

T.Kerr: January 11, 2007

In the meantime, the innovation of pre-poll voting seems to be successful. It could be possible to build on this, by using the model for electronic petitions. The AEC could be responsible for registration of petitions, the listing of current petitions and supervising the petitioning interface by granting a one-time access code for use by the voter. Those localities without AEC offices could have the same facilities of electronic petitioning at libraries and civic centres.

In conclusion, this is a splendid opportunity to bring many more citizens into the democratic process, and give them valid voices in the years between general elections. But, my very strong view is that no advance can be made until the Parliament demands, and obtains for its constituency, a national identification register.

Yours sincerely,
Trevor Kerr
(submitted as attachment to email)