

# The work of the first Petitions Committee: 2008-2010

House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Petitions

June 2010  
Canberra

© Commonwealth of Australia 2010

ISBN 978-0-642-79367-6 (Printed version)

ISBN 978-0-642-79368-3 (HTML version)



# Contents

Foreword .....	v
Membership of the Committee .....	vii
Terms of reference .....	viii
List of recommendations .....	ix
Executive summary .....	x

## THE REPORT

<b>1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Petitions to the House of Representatives: a fundamental right .....	1
The inquiry .....	4
The report .....	5
<b>2 Role and operations of the Standing Committee on Petitions .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Introduction .....	7
Establishment and work of the first Petitions Committee .....	7
Expectations and principles .....	7
Operations of the Petitions Committee .....	9
Considering petitions and obtaining Ministerial responses .....	9
Communications by and with the Petitions Committee .....	11
Private meetings during sitting weeks .....	13
Presentations and announcements by the Committee Chair .....	13
Inquiry into electronic petitioning .....	13
Round table meetings with petitioners and public servants—following up .....	14

Future operations of the Petitions Committee .....	15
Nature of activities.....	15
Resources.....	16
<b>3 Effectiveness of the Standing Orders as they relate to petitions .....</b>	<b>17</b>
Introduction .....	17
Previous arrangements .....	18
Preparing a petition: Standing Orders 204 and 205 .....	19
Form and content: 204 .....	19
Signatures: 205.....	20
Presentation of petitions: Standing Order 206 and Sessional Order 207 .....	21
Lodging a petition for presentation: 206 .....	21
Presenting a petition: 207 .....	21
Petitions presented without certification .....	22
Role of Members.....	23
Action on petitions: Standing Order 208 and Sessional Order 209.....	23
Previous comment on the revised Standing Orders .....	24
Standing Committee on Petitions: Standing Order 220.....	25
Standing orders of general application to House committees.....	25
Comments on the revised arrangements: revival of the petitions process .....	26
Conclusions and recommendations .....	26

## **APPENDIXES**

Appendix A: Submissions and hearings .....	29
Appendix B: Standing and Sessional Orders.....	31
Appendix C: Public hearings and round table meetings (non-inquiry related) ...	35
Appendix D: Draft Standing Order.....	43
Appendix E: Statistics on petitions to the House of Representatives.....	45



## Foreword

This report is the Petitions Committee's second report since it was established in 2008, the first being its report into electronic petitioning. The Committee's intention with this short inquiry was to review its framework under the Standing Orders and the way it has operated, so that any necessary changes could be identified and put in place for the Petitions Committee in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament. The report outlines the work undertaken by the Petitions Committee and assesses the Standing Orders that define its role and operations. The Committee concludes that its framework is generally effective and makes some recommendations for improvement.

The Petitions Committee was established with the objective of strengthening the petitions process of the House. The impetus for its creation came from a report of the House Procedure Committee in 2007, in which it was noted that there was no means available for the House to respond to petitions or to encourage Ministers to respond and, as a result, the tradition of petitioning the Parliament had declined.

In 2008 the Standing Orders of the House were changed to establish the Petitions Committee and to give it a role, not only to examine petitions to ensure they complied with the rules of the House, but also to inquire into matters relating to petitions and the petitions system. The changes to the Standing Orders also enabled the Committee to refer petitions to Ministers and to announce their responses and publish them.

One of the most important outcomes of the changes has been the compliance by Ministers with requests for responses. Overwhelmingly, they have responded in an informative and timely way. It is probably rare that the response has given petitioners what they asked but they have received an explanation of the government's perspective on issues they raised, and that explanation has been made publicly available by the Committee.

The Committee has followed up on matters raised in petitions and responses by holding round table meetings with petitioners and Public Servants. Its activities have been reported to the House regularly and its web page is a central information point for access to information on preparing a petition, the terms of petitions that have been presented to the House, Ministers' responses, and the transcript of meetings that the Committee has held with petitioners and Public Servants. In these ways, issues that concern people have been brought to the notice of the Parliament and government – and other Australians – all these things being valuable in themselves. By its activities and its openness, I believe, the Committee has contributed to building the links between the House and the Australian community.

In my view, the Petitions Committee has played a significant role in revitalising the petitions process to the House, and informing Australians of the opportunities they have to bring their grievances to the House for its notice and for consideration and possible action by the government. I am proud to have been the Chair of the first Petitions Committee of the House of Representatives.

I thank my Committee colleagues, in particular, the Deputy Chair, Mr Russell Broadbent, for their enthusiasm and dedication to the work of the Committee. I also thank the Committee's staff in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament.

I commend this report to the House.

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 Luke Simpkins MP (to 30/11/09)

Mr Darren Chester MP

Hon Alex Somlyay MP (30/11/09 to 10/2/10)

Ms Jennie George MP

Mr Craig Thomson MP

Mr Alex Hawke MP

Ms Maria Vamvakinou MP

## Committee Secretariat

Secretary Ms Catherine Cornish

Inquiry Secretary Dr Brian Lloyd (to 12/05/10)

Mr Shane Armstrong (from 28/04/10)

Administrative Officers Ms Naomi Swann

Ms Leonie Bury (from 7/04/10)



## Terms of reference

To inquire into and report on the work of the Standing Committee on Petitions, with particular reference to:

- (a) the role and operations of the Standing Committee on Petitions; and
- (b) the effectiveness of the Standing Orders as they relate to petitions.





## List of recommendations

### 3 Effectiveness of the Standing Orders as they relate to petitions

#### Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the House make Sessional Orders 207 and 209 permanent.

#### Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Standing Orders be amended to enable the Petitions Committee to refer a petition to a House committee for inquiry and report, should the committee so choose.



## 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.

In this inquiry the Petitions Committee considered the role that was set out for it by the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives, the activities it has undertaken since it was formed in February 2008, and whether any changes were necessary to enhance the role of the Committee and the petitions process.

In the first chapter the Committee outlines the Procedure Committee's views on the decline of petitioning and its recommendations aimed at renewing the status of petitions. Chapter 1 also contains a summary of the changes to the Standing Orders, beginning in 2008, and an overview of the inquiry and this report.

The role prescribed for the Petitions Committee is discussed in chapter 2, as well as the approach it has taken to its work. Different aspects of the Committee's work program are examined, including the regular 'petitions' timeslot in the business of the House, and the role the Committee has played in obtaining responses from Ministers to the issues raised in petitions. Communications with petitioners, Ministers, Public Servants and other interested parties are considered in the context of a more open and accessible system of petitions for the House.

In chapter 3, the Committee examines in more detail the impact of the Standing and Sessional Orders that relate particularly to petitions, as well as summarising the former arrangements. The Committee recommends that Sessional Orders 207 and 209, relating to presentation of petitions (by Members and by the Committee Chair) and referral of petitions to Ministers for written responses, be made permanent. The Committee also recommends that it be given the capacity to refer petitions to House Committees for inquiry and report, should those committees choose.

The report also includes a number of Appendixes that will assist to explain it:

Appendix A: Submission and hearings

Appendix B: Standing and Sessional Orders

Appendix C: Public hearings and round table meetings (non-inquiry related)

Appendix D: Draft Standing Order and

Appendix E: Statistics on petitions to the House of Representatives.

