

Submission to

the Inquiry into

the e-petitioning system of the

House of Representatives Petitions Committee

SUMMARY

This 5-page submission notes many faults with the current system, ranging from the purpose of petitions to the method by which they are signed. It makes seven recommendations, although the last one is really an extension of the petition system

My background relevant to this inquiry

I recently instigated an e-petition, which means that I have first-hand experience of how the system functions, and I come from an IT background and therefore understand some of the underlying technical issues.

What's wrong with the current system?

As I see it the current system has multiple faults

- Poor method of creating of petitions
- Awkward to access
- System is slow to respond
- Poorly presented
- Poor signer authentication
- Supports a system that has little value in its current form

Discussion

1. The whole concept

Before doing anything else we need to consider whether petitions have any value.

The number of signers of any petition (i.e. paper or electronic) is influenced by the communication skills of the proposer and their ability to spread word of its existence. For paper petitions that usually means getting the support of some organizations to spread the

message by approaching the public; for electronic petitions the support is through online organizations and social networks. If the instigator of a petition is unable to utilise these "information relayers" and has little access to the public the petition, regardless of its merit, will gather few supporters

The number of signers means nothing of substance. Apart from the question of communication noted above

- we don't know if the petition was presented to a wide cross-section of society or select groups
- we don't know if people were coerced into signing (peer-group pressure?)
- we don't know how many people saw the petition and rejected it in that form
- we don't know how many would prefer a more nuanced position on the matter
- we don't know if the signers (or rejecters) were fully informed about the matter before deciding to sign (or reject)

And all this is before we consider the potential for fraudulent signers, including people who signed multiple times (which can be done even with electronic petitions, see below).

I conclude that in their current form petitions should be regarded as nothing more than a reminder that some members of the public have a certain view on an issue.

Perhaps petitions are "baggage" from an old British political and class system where a petition from a few wealthy financial supporters would have an MP scurrying to obey, but I don't see that as relevant to Australia today.

The obvious question is whether petitions can be given some relevance or simply scrapped. In that regard we might take a lesson from the Swiss who use petitions as a trigger for more formal political actions, specifically if a threshold number of signatures are obtained then the matter becomes one of the questions to be answered on one of the regular referendums in that country.

I think this idea of a petition triggering some event has significant merit but is unworkable with the current method of conducting referendums in this country. Fortunately I can offer a solution and will do so later in this submission.

Logically this submission should now describe the better referendum system alluded to above and then end but in anticipation of the committee trying to persist with petitions in their current concept then I make the following recommendation pertinent to what's above before addressing the issues I listed earlier.

Recommendation 1 - *The government could level the playing field regards communicating with the public and inviting signatures by publishing (web page, newspaper advertisements) an easy-to-read list of e-petitions open for signing. (If the government was generally keen to promote public participation it might at the same time also publish a list of parliamentary inquiries that are currently open to public submissions.)*

2. Petition Creation

This is currently clumsy, incomplete and unhelpful when it comes to the clear presentation of the reasoning behind the requested action.

Recommendation 2 – *re the creation of a petition:*

(a) A short title needs to be included for easy identification. For humans to identify things names are much better than numbers (e.g. domain names in Internet addresses) so the unique number needs to be retained for computer processing but a name, not necessarily unique, is needed for humans.

(b) The reasons for the petition are essential components and they need to be stated as clearly as possible. Formatting is an important part of clear written expression and therefore the format in which the instigator stated those reasons must be retained. (This would be an obstacle to the current system but is simple in the light of recommendations 3 to 5 below.)

(c) Optional supplementary information should be allowed (up to some practical word limit, 1000?) so that the instigator has the opportunity to present a more thorough case. I suggest Word or PDF format would be most appropriate, although checking for computer viruses would be required. This would be included in the pre-approval process where presumably there are already checks for distasteful material.

3. Accessing the petition in order to sign

The current situation with signing an e-petition is extremely clumsy and is in dire need of improvement. Access through the main "petitions" page is very poor and requires multiple steps (and some scrolling and reading) before getting to the web page for signing the required petition.

Access to the direct page for applicable petition is provided by such a long URL that its manual specification is very arduous and mistake-prone. (For my petition I used tinyurl.com to create a very short URL that could be provided verbally with a good chance of the listener remembering.)

Recommendation 3 – Web page <http://petitions.aph.gov.au> (or similar) should display a summary list of petitions, the main information being the number and short title of each petition, presented on a single line. Other information that might be displayed for each petition is identifier for House of Representatives or Senate, number of signers and closing date. Either the petition number, the short title or both would provide a link to the web page of details specific to that petition (see recommendation 5).

Recommendation 4 – The summary web page described in recommendation 3 would, by default, be a list of only open petitions but the reader be given the option to list in a similar

fashion petitions that fall under other classes (ie. presented, referred etc.) AND to enter text or numbers into a search utility to obtain lists of all petitions meeting the criteria. (NB. Listing all petitions regardless of class might require that the display include a class indicator.)

Recommendation 5 – *Following from recommendation 3, each petition to have its own web page, with the page to have its own simple URL (eg. <http://petitions.aph.gov.au/ID=#####>) with either direct access by the reader or via the link from the "summary list" page. This petition-specific web page would display the following:*

Header area ...

- Petition number,*
- short title,*
- possible flag to indicate House of Reps or Senate petitions,*
- closing date,*
- number of signers,*
- status (open, closed),*
- class associated with status (presented, referred etc),*
- instigator's name,*

all followed by ...

- the requested action*
- the reasons presented as formatted by the instigator*
- if supplementary information is available then a means to display it*

The box for signing might be between the requested action and the reasons or at the bottom of the page.

4. Issues with signing and authentication

The current reliance on email addresses has some gaping flaws

- People who share email addresses, such as couples, can sign only once
- Anyone with multiple addresses can sign multiple times , each time using a different address (e.g. more than one private email address, a work email address, a university email address ...)
- People of any age can sign if they have an email address
- the system is clumsy and requires access to a web page, then to an email package, and then the users' browser needs to access a web page again

Recommendation 6 – *Authenticate signers via some unique identifier. An Australia-wide ID card with a unique number would be useful¹ but we don't have one. Tax file number is one possibility but it might be too loose (i.e. might include people under 18 who pay tax, people outside the country who pay Australian tax etc.). If it is sufficiently secure, the full Medicare number, including the individual's sub-number, could be used, with signers required to enter their name and full number.*

¹ and potentially useful for holding other information too (e.g. emergency medical data)

The data required for authentication could be extracted once a day from the main Medicare system and put onto an "authentication computer" for petitions (and possible other purposes) and it's the authentication system that would handle all the checking. (Even better would be an initial load of data followed by daily transfers of any changes - additions, deletions, modifications). The data required for authentication would be name, Medicare number and sub-number, date of birth and maybe any codes, if we have them, to identify Australian citizens from other residents with a Medicare card.

The advantages of using the Medicare number (if it's safe) are

- one-step authentication
- shared email addresses would not preventing people signing
- prevents multiple signers (i.e. multiple email addresses is no advantage)
- restricts signers to Australian citizens
- can test date of birth to ensure signer is over 18
- might allow Australians to sign from anywhere in the world (unless restricted to Australian IP addresses)

5. About Referendums

I mentioned earlier that I believe petitions to have little practical value in their current form and that they would be better used as a trigger for more formal action. The Swiss use of petitions as triggers for referendum questions seems wise but in their current form in this country referendums are expensive to run and time consuming. Here's how this might be achieved cheaply and conveniently. (It's not quite a recommendation about petitions but for simplicity I'll frame it as such.)

Recommendation 7 – *If recommendation 6, for authentication, is adopted then the method of signing and authentication is easily incorporated into an online referendum system that would be accessible from any computer, tablet device or mobile phone that has Internet access. The features of this approach are*

- *authentication using a unique identifier restricts everyone to one signing*
- *access to the Internet is wide-spread, including in most libraries*
- *lower cost than current system (at least when set-up costs are spread over time)*
- *less inconvenience to the public*
- *ideally referendums remain open for a period of time (e.g. 2 weeks) to allow people to vote at their own convenience, but with no announcements of interim results*
- *results known immediately on the close of the referendum (no counting required)*

6. Concluding remarks

I thank the committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry and hope that the inquiry is productive.
