



The Scottish Parliament

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Ms Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

27 June 2008

Dear Ms Irwin,

I am writing in connection with the inquiry which your Committee is undertaking into e-petitioning. This is an issue that we, the Public Petitions Committee (PPC) of the Scottish Parliament, has a particular interest and a long experience with. I do hope that our contribution below is helpful to you inquiry.

Perhaps I could briefly set out some background information on the path to the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, placing our petitions system within the political and institutional context in which it was established and has since evolved.

Background

The Consultative Steering Group (CSG) was established in 1997 with a remit to develop proposals for the practical operation of the new Parliament. It was representative of political as well as civic society. In creating the Parliament it was recognised that a more participatory form of democracy was required. Its report proposed the establishment of a dedicated petitions committee, designed to allow groups and individuals to influence the policy agenda. One of the CSG sub groups investigated ways in which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) could play a positive role in making that participation happen.

The CSG identified four guiding principles—

- sharing the power: the Scottish Parliament should embody and reflect the sharing of power between the people of Scotland, the legislators and the

**Public Petitions Committee, TG.01, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh,
EH99 1SP**

Tel: 0131 348 5186, Fax: 0131 348 5088, RNID Tynetalk: 18001 0131 348 5186
fergus.cochrane@scottish.parliament.uk

www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/petitions/index.htm

Scottish Government. A strong committee structure, the programming of parliamentary business, the role of the Presiding Officer, the role of civic society and public petitions are all emphasised as key factors in sharing the power.

- access and participation: the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation. The CSG Report states that 'Access to the Scottish Parliament is a cornerstone of our recommendations' and that: 'it will also be important to develop a culture of genuine consultation and participation if people in Scotland, particularly those who do not currently engage in the political process, are to be encouraged to participate.
- accountability: the Scottish Government should be accountable to the Scottish Parliament and both should be accountable to the people of Scotland.
- equal opportunities: the Scottish Parliament in its operation and its appointment should recognise the need to promote equal opportunities for all.

which underpin the work of the Parliament and in particular the work of the PPC. E-petitioning provides a direct and accessible means for petitioners to generate support and comment on a petition.

The Public Petitions Committee

The PPC is a public facing committee. Our workload does not come from the Scottish Government in the form of legislation or budget scrutiny but from the public. The petitions process provides a direct route into the policy scrutiny and development arena for citizens.

Our role is to ensure appropriate action is taken in respect of each admissible petition for which the Scottish Parliament has devolved responsibilities. We take responsibility for the initial consideration of the petition, perhaps through hearing oral evidence from the petitioner, conduct background research and seek comments from appropriate bodies on the petition. We have been successful in enhancing participation in the political process. We currently have around 200 petitions under active consideration. The Committee meets fortnightly and we will normally consider around 8 new and 12-15 current petitions at each meeting. The average life of a petition is probably 12-18 months before it might be closed by us (in closing, [Rule 15.7.2](#) of our Standing Orders requires that we give the petitioner a reason for this).

Since its earliest days the Parliament has been mindful of the importance in enhancing engagement opportunities. Some ICT based, some not. We recognise that no one approach can meet all needs or demands.

E-petitions

The e-petitions system was developed through a partnership between British Telecom Scotland, the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University in Edinburgh and the Scottish Parliament. The PPC accepted its first e-petition in February 2000. This was an historic event as the Parliament became the first

statutory body in the world to formally accept an e-petition and to collect signatures over the internet. The system was formally launched in February 2004.

The e-petition site (epetitions.scottish.parliament.uk/) is accessed via the PPC homepage (www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/petitions/index.htm). The system is not hosted on the Scottish Parliament's server but on a server operated by British Telecom.

The e-petition system provides citizens, not only throughout Scotland, but across the world with an electronic forum to voice their concerns to the Parliament. It can bring together groups or organisations from across Scotland with similar concerns.

A petition need have only 1 signature and, importantly, does not require the backing of an elected member (MSPs are not permitted to lodge petitions). That is the case for all petitions. E-petitioning does not replace the traditional method of paper petitioning - not all citizens have access to the Internet. Around 75% of the petitions we now receive are hosted as e-petitions on our website. Our template (available via our webpage) used by petitioners to lodge their petition gives them the option to have their petition posted as an e-petition (see section 5) (www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/petitions/guidance/petitionsTemplate.doc).

In terms of the benefits of e-petitioning, we would regard it as a much easier form of petitioning the Parliament. Essentially, a petitioner can present their petition to our clerks who work, where necessary, with them on the proposed wording. Once that has been agreed the clerks make arrangements to post the e-petition up to the site. The deadline for the e-petition will be set by the petitioner (we normally suggest around 6 weeks but this can be shorter or longer).

Once posted, the petition can attract e-signatures not just from the local area but also regionally, nationally and internationally. The burden on the petitioner to gather supporters is therefore reduced.

Some petitions may attract 1 signature, other a lot more. We recently considered a petition which attracted 8,500 e-signatures, the most since the e-system was launched in February 2004. Some petitioners will also gather hard copy signatures in tandem with their e-petition. All the signatures are then added together.

The discussion forum allows the possibility for an online debate on the issues raised. With traditional methods of petitioning the citizen can only support a petition through adding a signature. E-petitioning provides the opportunity to comment on the issues raised either in support or against and is therefore much more interactive. The discussion forum can assist in furthering the Parliament's goal of creating a 'culture of genuine consultation and participation.'

So what are the key learning points?

- First, the site must be easily available. It can be accessed directly from the Committee's webpage or from the front page of the Parliament's webpage.

- It must have easy to follow guidelines and be simple to use.
- We must ensure there is open communication with clerks. While some people are quite comfortable using the system, others are not.
- Importantly, it must work. In keeping the system simple, we reduce the risk of it (a) confusing people and (b) being so clever that it ends up not working or putting people off.
- Finally, we must be confident that the system can have an impact. Hosting an e-petition can open up consideration of the issues behind the petition to a worldwide audience.

E-petitioning transforms an old style of petitioning into a more open, accessible and deliberative participation process. For example, without e-petitioning—

- it is difficult for an individual or community group to get their petition campaign noticed outside their own circle of friends - e-petitions allow a much wider audience to know about a campaign and allows them to sign online
- it is difficult (if not impossible) to read illegible names and addresses of those who have signed a paper-based petition - e-petitions allow everyone to easily view who else has signed
- it is difficult for an individual or community group to highlight the importance of their campaign and explain real issues - e-petitions can provide more information in text and pictures and links to other websites to better explain the importance of the petition to others
- Traditional petitioning would only provide a list of the names of the supporters without the reasons why they support the petition whereas e-petitioning allows those people who do and do not support a particular petition or campaign to say why. Effectively, e-petitioning allows an online debate of the issue.

To date, there has been fairly little abuse of the system. Offensive comments, spam and rogue signatures are quickly removed (the monitoring of the site is undertaken by our clerks). This helps maintain the system's integrity. Striking a balance between maintaining an open system, which allows the robust exchanges of views, and preventing abuse can sometimes present challenges but we have found that these are not insurmountable.

Wider aspects of the petitions process

On the wider issue of the petitions process, from the outset, there has been enthusiastic political buy in to the process, particularly as it is seen as a means by which the Parliament can engage directly and meaningfully with people. Elected representatives have been willing to innovate in methods of public involvement and this has been matched by the enthusiasm and expertise of officials.

Perhaps most importantly, petitioners must have confidence that petitioning is worthwhile, that they can achieve something and at the very least they will be listened to. Although not all petitioners achieve the outcome they are looking for, most recognise the importance of simply being given the opportunity to present their case at the heart of the political process and of being listened to.

This fits in with the founding principle of 'sharing power'. The policy agenda is not dictated and controlled by government and/or parliament. The public can highlight and initiate policy development. The petitions system provides a platform for individuals to air their grievances, initiate and contribute to policy development and participate at the heart of the political process.

It is now an integral part of the Parliament's founding principles and the e-petition process has added further credibility to our commitment to improve accessibility and participation in our work and in holding the Scottish Government and public bodies to account.

The need to engage and going forward

Engaging with groups traditionally marginalised from the political process is a real challenge. Europe has witnessed a steady decline in democratic participation over the last decades. The Scottish Parliament is aiming to reverse this and lead the way by embracing new trends in civic activism and participation.

We must continue to be innovative and seek to employ ICT and emerging technologies, where suitable, in promoting accessibility, transparency and participation. The continued development of, and commitment to, the e-petitions system is vital to broadening the parliamentary process to greater and more diverse audiences and the informal contract between the Parliament, its Members and the public whom they serve.

These are some of the issues that we, as a Committee, will be taking forward through our own inquiry into the petitions process. This was launched on 26 June (www.scottish.parliament.uk/nmCentre/news/news-comm-08/cpp08-s3-003.htm) and we are seeking views from both home and abroad into how we can further develop our procedures. We need to do more to ensure the views of the disadvantaged, minority communities, young people and those who have been excluded from the democratic process are heard. We will look at new ideas on how to match dialogue with action and I am sure many exciting and innovative ideas will emerge on how it can not just increase accessibility and participation in the petitions process but also the overall effectiveness of it. Full details can be accessed via our inquiry webpage (www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/petitions/inquiries/petitionsProcess/InquiryintothePublicPetitionsProcess.htm).

By overall effectiveness we mean what Parliament does with petitions in terms of scrutiny. If the result of widening access to the petitions system, for example through ICT, and increasing the volume of petitions from disadvantaged communities etc is reduced scrutiny by Parliament then clearly something has gone wrong. We will seek to consider every aspect of the system. In particular, how can we use more the e-petitions process, what simple, practical steps can we take to bring about added benefits to citizens.

Conclusion

We must continue to be innovative and seek to employ ICT and emerging technologies, where suitable, in promoting accessibility, transparency and participation. The continued development of, and commitment to, the e-petitions system is vital to broadening the parliamentary process to greater and more diverse audiences and the informal contract between the Parliament, its Members and the public whom they serve. We have a number of ideas that we will likely develop through our inquiry in terms of improving the user friendliness of the e-petitions site and the systems functionality.

A Parliament was created to meet the political demands of the 20th Century. What is now needed is a Parliament and a petitions process to meet the demands of the new society and how it engages with citizens.

I will be interested in learning how this important inquiry progresses. I have asked our Clerk to monitor this and to consider, as part of our inquiry, what experiences we can learn from each other.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact either myself or the Clerk. We are more than happy to elaborate any of the issues highlighted in this letter.

Yours sincerely

Frank McAveety

Frank McAveety MSP
Convener of the Public Petitions Committee