

Ms Jodie Belyea MP
Chair Standing Committee on Petitions
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

February 6, 2026

Dear Ms Belyea (and the Committee),

I am writing with a submission to the *Inquiry into the Standing Orders relating to petitions*.

I am currently researching parliamentary e-petition systems in Australia, and I wish to share several insights that I believe have not been discussed in previous inquiries across the last decade (2017, 2018, and 2020).

The Terms of Reference for the current inquiry draw attention to matters of ‘emerging technology’, ‘integrity and authenticity’, and wider issues of administration and access. These Terms carry forward concerns raised in previous inquiries about the place petitions occupy within a complex digital civic landscape.

On these matters, I wish to highlight how public elements of the e-petition system may lack some sensitivity to contemporary forms of digital communication.

In sum, **the system is open to appropriation in several ways**. Some of these considerations are presently limited in the Standing Orders related to petitions. These include:

- External website information being shared despite rules against this practice,
- open petitions referencing past (i.e., Responded) petitions,
- the use of emoji and hashtags as part of petition text.

I also wish to offer comment on the boundaries of the ‘**moderate language**’ petition requirement, evidenced by heightened petitioning and Ministerial response challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (but present before and since).

These form part of my recent publication [‘Parliament, petitions and pandemic’](#) which can be found in the journal *Policy and Internet*.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me directly.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Benjamin Lyall (RMIT University)

Submission

The Commonwealth's 46th and 47th parliaments navigated a range of challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these was a well-documented rise in 'information disorder' (Wardle, 2018), and the acknowledgement of an 'infodemic' by the World Health Organisation (see Simon and Camargo, 2023). While complicated and contested, these issues are widely understood as a part of the social fallout of this global crisis.

During this period, the APH e-petitions system continued to see an increase in petitioning activity, beyond the previously noted 'renewed interest' (*Commonwealth Parliament*, 2019) in petitions since the digital system's introduction. The APH system also sits alongside the many private petitioning options available to Australians. Significant academic research has been undertaken to understand the impact of these many options, as well as how they are situated in the global context of digital civic activity (see Halpin et al., 2018; Vromen et al., 2022; Wright & Vromen, 2023).

Crucially for the current Inquiry, the wider conditions epitomised by the pandemic – social and informational turbulence – raise two distinct lines of concern for APH e-petitions: **system appropriation** and a **lack of clarity regarding 'moderate' petition language**. Again, these are not exclusive to the pandemic context but are exemplified by it, as evidenced in my recent research (see Lyall & Marple, 2024).

Regarding **system appropriation** I present several petitioning activities and their relationship to specific Standing Orders. These examples show both clear circumventions of existing Rules, as well as gaps revealed by novel approaches to petitioning. Researchers of digital media, platforms, and cultures often describe 'affordances': how users are enabled to or constrained by system designs, and how they use system functions in both intended and unintended ways (Ronzhyn et al., 2022). The current e-petition system 'affords' users forms of communication that are not fully accounted for in the system's design, Standing Order(s) (204), and petition Rules:

1. There is evidence of principle petitioners promoting websites despite explicit prohibition in the Rules and Order 204(f). There are many examples of this, as recently as 2023. While these website inclusions are not interactive links in the petition system, a specific web location remains clear or inferable.
2. Regarding Standing Orders 204(d) and 204(f), the hash or number sign ('#') – known for its use as a 'hashtag' on social media – has not been considered. Use of the symbol can be seen found in previous petitions. The popularity of these symbols is in decline on social media, but their appearance remains synonymous with their *purpose*: they identify a specific group or topic of conversation, and they also make these groups/topics more discoverable on internet search engines or social media. In this way, hashtags present both a language issue and a web link concern, while also circumventing prohibition of 'extra information' (per the Rules).
3. Some petitions' content addresses other petitions at the same time as the House. For example, one petition is *titled* with the EN**** designation of a previous petition. There are currently no considerations of this approach to petitioning, which – noting

that petition creation is relatively immediate and (potential) petition responses are delayed – appropriates the system as a communication medium between groups of principle petitioners rather than a petitioner request to the APH.

4. Standing Order 204(d), elsewhere communicated petition Rules, and the text-fields of the e-petition systems does not prohibit emoji. These are likely rare but have been featured in at least one petition. In this context, the symbol is additive: a decorative inclusion consistent with the meaning of the surrounding text. However, this is rare for emoji in general: they often *replace* text, and their meanings may be personal or cultural, and can be offensive or contested (Highfield 2018). The multiplicity and diversity of emoji (and how they are used) raise three considerations:
 - How pictograms and emoji (including the name of the visual symbol/character itself, the written description of the visual, or the emotions and actions ascribed to these) may contain hidden or coded meaning for individuals or groups. Emoji visual meanings are not neatly aligned with their descriptors or names.
 - Whether symbols and pictographs (including emoji) included in Unicode (the standard overseeing digital text) align with petition’s English-language stipulation. This is especially important given that emoji designs are platform dependent (i.e., their designs vary based on a user’s web browser, operating system, device etc.), may not display at all on some systems, or may present accessibility challenges for assistive technologies like screen readers.
 - Whether any or all the above points might constitute a circumvention the 250-word limit outlined in the Rules and Order 204(b), and present issues similar to that of URLs, prohibited at 204(f).

While clarifications made to the Rules (in the Rules themselves, as well as FAQs and other instruction provided by APH webpages) may have clarified in the instructions and information surrounding petitions or changes to House procedure (i.e., the 50-signature threshold for referring a petition; in-writing prohibition of URLs *and* non-URL references to web sources), some of these specifics have not been addressed. These matters of appropriation also dovetail with some the technical and communicative concerns raised in 2021’s *Inquiry into aspects of the House of Representatives petitioning system relating to security and accessibility*.

My final comment is regarding a more general issue for the Committee: how ‘**moderate language**’ is understood, managed, and communicated to the public. The nature of petition content is naturally reflective of our diverse (multicultural, secular, pluralistic) society. Following global traditions that petitions for protest and awareness, the extent to which a petition may genuinely make a request of the House can be limited by design or incompatible though intent. This is the case for petitions created for humour (i.e., changing an anthem or emblem) or misunderstanding (i.e., presenting a state/territory level concern, or incorrectly applying international laws, processes or conventions to Australia).

Yet petition language is often used very deliberately to promote beliefs and worldviews, target communities, and otherwise step beyond the realm of what might reasonably be considered ‘moderate’ language and/or actionable scope for the House.

These issues relate to Standing Order 204(c), the more general definition of petitions at 204(a) as ‘refer to a matter on which the House has the power to act’, and similar definition ‘...take action that is within its power to take’ (Standing and Sessional Orders, p. 9). There are some further elaborations and sensible advice provided by the Petition Rules resources (i.e., webpages at the APH). Differences in process and convention notwithstanding, Senate petitioning (Order 71(2)) has more detailed expectations against ‘...irrelevant statements’, and for ‘respectful, decorous, and temperate’ language.

At the end of the petitioning process, the responses provided by Ministers to APH petitions – particularly in difficult circumstances like the pandemic – show significant effort dedicated to providing careful and responsible redirection on facts and events, and clarifications on the relationship between various organisations and institutions at international, national, and local levels. Neither end of the petition process, however, adequately addresses the ‘moderacy’ of the communication to the public who may intend to utilise the petition system in the future.

While a balanced approach is needed and is likely very difficult to manage day-to-day (acknowledging that the Committee is not responsible for the facts of petitions), petitions that might exclude or dissuade others’ use of the system present a clear challenge. To maintain their vital function of direct democratic voice, the system must be a safe environment for all future users.

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