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

Dear Ms Belyea and Committee Members,

## Inquiry into the Standing Orders relating to petitions

### Executive Summary

Modernising the e-petition process is essential to safeguarding democratic engagement in an increasingly digital environment. The current online petitions system has low engagement in comparison to mass-generated email campaigns and requires additional protection against bot attacks and AI-driven fraud. To ensure the continued integrity and credibility of public petitions, Elected Technologies proposes the implementation of real-time verification protocols that validate signatories against the Electoral Roll, ensuring that every voice represented is legitimate and verified.

In addition to improving security, this ensures petitions remain a powerful vehicle for civic participation while enabling a more data-driven approach to representation, increased opportunity for constituent engagement and more transparent, responsive dialogue between representatives and the public.

### About Elected Technologies

Elected Technologies is a privately-held, non-partisan company that delivers technology and data solutions to elected representatives, parliaments, local government organisations and private sector companies across Europe, North America and the Australia/NZ region.

With programs built by former political staffers, Elected Technologies works closely with its client base to build tools specifically tailored to the unique needs of elected

representatives in each country. It also provides training to new and existing Members of Parliament across the political spectrum on effective constituent engagement.

Elected Technologies' VoterID product is used by hundreds of members of parliament across Australia to manage constituent correspondence and engagement. A particularly valued feature enables Members of Parliament to handle mass-generated email campaigns, verifying the enrolment status of the sender in real time and using automation to log the concern and provide a response directly to the constituent. Our data suggests this feature saved Australian staff users over 54,000 hours in the past year.

## **Integrity and the impact of emerging technologies on the petitions process**

The right to petition Parliament is an essential cornerstone of Australian democracy and is the only way an individual can directly place grievances before the Parliament. In addition, members of the public also wish to raise grievances directly with their local elected representative. As society changes, the ways in which constituents engage with their representatives evolves. The physical town square is increasingly being replaced by the virtual town square. Members of the public prefer to engage in civic debate through fingers on devices rather than feet on pavement.

It is vital that Australian citizens can continue to have input into the policy areas which directly affect their lives in a way that is accessible and makes sense to them. As such, we have seen a move away from conforming parliamentary petitions to mass-generated email campaigns often coordinated by third-party advocacy groups. Members of Parliament are also more inclined to host informal petitions on their own websites as it allows them to provide ongoing communication with signatories and build their community engagement.

In order to protect the efficacy and validity of petitions within the Australian democratic process, it is essential that petitions and the petitions process maintain integrity, transparency, and public trust.

Online petitions are vulnerable to spam attacks using automated data entry bots and the escalating capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI), with the potential for invalid or fraudulent signatories. Similarly, it is difficult to ascertain the legitimacy of support for the petition's subject matter if volumes can be artificially inflated.

Conventional security measures designed to verify a signatory's eligibility, such as simple tick-boxes to confirm Australian residency or citizenship, can be easily circumvented.

In order to maintain the credibility of online petitions as a true reflection of the Australian populace's views, more robust and advanced verification protocols must be developed and implemented.

## Responsive democracy for 21st century petitions

Initial validation against the Electoral Roll provides the most efficient, low-barrier way to verify petition signatories, as well as increasing information for petition respondents and Members of Parliament directly.

Elected Technologies could collaborate with the Parliament to provide the same instant verification that Members of Parliament use with mass generated emails to verify the e-petition signatory against the Electoral Roll. Petition signatures from permanent residents, those unenrolled to vote (such as under 18s) and others can still be collected through a method similar to the current steps, with unverified or unmatched signatories added to a separate tally.

This allows petition recipients to easily see which petitions have gained significant traction from the voting public, while also building the capacity of the parliament to generate usable data to respond more effectively to public concerns. For example, in verifying petition signatories against the electoral roll, the responsible Minister can easily see the geographic spread of responses and break the data down by electorate.

The ability to sort petition signatories by electorate also presents an opportunity to keep individual Members of Parliament directly informed about issues of high concern in their electorate, enabling them to be more responsive to the needs of their constituents.

A further expansion of this tool would also allow the Parliament to offer a service to interested Members of Parliament whereby validated petition signatures could be sent to the Member of Parliament either in real time or in bulk when the petition closed. This would allow Members of Parliament to engage directly with their constituents on select issues of interest or responsibility, providing initial information on the Member's stance on the issue and ongoing developments in the policy area. This would provide a valuable resource for elected representatives in a sustainable manner, allowing them to understand key concerns of the electorate and build further avenues for ongoing community engagement.

It also increases much-needed direct democratic engagement at the constituent level, building faith in democratic processes and institutions. Where Ministerial responses to petitions are made, this may take a significant amount of time and not reach individual signatories. Should local representatives also be informed of the petition and choose to respond, there is another opportunity for dialogue and continued policy engagement. This opportunity for increased responsiveness is likely to increase the public perception and satisfaction with the petitions process.

### Further extensions

1. In spite of the tendency toward self-hosted petitions, some Members of Parliament have expressed to us the desire to be able to initiate conforming e-petitions for tabling. In collaboration with the Parliament, a tool could be developed to allow MPs to create and embed e-petitions on their own website which could feed into the Parliamentary process.

2. In addition to providing pre-verification of individual signatories, Elected Technologies also has the capacity to extend the e-petition platform beyond a single name and address, allowing constituents to add their own message to their local elected representatives. This would replicate the services offered by platforms such as DoGooder and OneClick politics with the increased legitimacy of pre-verification of the petition organiser and the safeguards of the Parliamentary process.

In addition, it would reduce the workload for Members of Parliament by filtering out of invalid or fraudulent content before distribution. Members could be assured that the messages that reached them are on a valid petition that met the Parliament's standards and that the message is from an enrolled voter in their constituency. For users of VoterID, the messages can be fed directly into their VoterID platform – reducing friction and lost time for staff – or sent as an email to MPs for inclusion on their own platforms.

We thank the committee for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry and appreciate your consideration. We would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee or provide additional information or clarification as needed.

Yours sincerely,

Danielle Forsyth  
Managing Director  
Elected Technologies Pty Ltd

  
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