

SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS OF THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BACKGROUND

While the creation of an electronic petitions system was first proposed at the House of Commons as early as in 2003, the current system was only established following the adoption by the House of Private Members' motion M-428, proposed by Kennedy Stewart (M.P. for Burnaby–Douglas), in January 2014. The motion asked the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to study the creation of an electronic petitioning system and report back to the House within 12 months.¹

The Committee undertook its study from November 2014 to February 2015. Its 33rd report, presented to the House on February 26, 2015, and concurred in on March 11, 2015, recommended the establishment of an e-petition process and provided a detailed description of how this new system would operate. The report also proposed relevant changes to the Standing Orders.²

As a result, the House of Commons Administration created a new e-petitions website, launched at the opening of the 42nd Parliament on December 3, 2015.³

In its report, the Committee also agreed to conduct a review of the e-petitions system after two years. It is expected that the Committee will undertake this review in the coming year.

PROCESS/SYSTEM

In order to initiate an e-petition, an e-petitioner is required to visit the e-petitions web page hosted on the House of Commons website. They must first create an account and provide some basic personal information. After they authenticate their email address, they can begin drafting their petition using a standardized template provided on the website. To ensure that the petition has some degree of support, the system requires the petitioner to identify at least five other individuals who must sign the e-petition before it can advance in the process. The petitioner must also choose a Member of Parliament to act as the sponsor of the petition.

Once five individuals have confirmed their support of the e-petition and authenticated their email addresses, the text of the petition is automatically submitted to the Member selected by the e-petitioner. The Member has 30 days to respond to the request. Sponsoring an e-petition does not necessarily mean that the Member supports or agrees with its content. If the Member identified refuses to sponsor the petition or if no response is received within 30 days, the petitioner is notified and given the opportunity to select another Member. This process may be repeated until five Members have declined to sponsor the petition, in which case the latter will not be allowed to proceed.

Once a selected Member agrees to be the sponsor, the e-petition is automatically sent to the Clerk of Petitions for review. The Clerk of Petitions is responsible for assessing all draft e-petitions against the current guidelines, standards and rules, which are generally similar to those applied to paper petitions. Essentially, the Clerk of Petitions must ensure that the petition does not contain any inappropriate language, that the matter it raises is within federal jurisdiction, and that its format is in keeping with the usual standards established for petitions.

Once satisfied that the e-petition respects the guidelines, the Clerk of Petitions arranges for its translation into the other official language and publishes the e-petition on the e-petitions website. Once an e-petition is published, it remains open for signature for 120 days.

¹ The full text of motion M-428 reads as follows: "That the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs be instructed to recommend changes to the Standing Orders and other conventions governing petitions so as to establish an electronic petitioning system that would enhance the current paper-based petitions system by allowing Canadians to sign petitions electronically, and to consider, among other things, (i) the possibility to trigger a debate in the House of Commons outside of current sitting hours when a certain threshold of signatures is reached, (ii) the necessity for no fewer than five Members of Parliament to sponsor the e-petition and to table it in the House once a time limit to collect signatures is reached, (iii) the study made in the 38th Parliament regarding e-petitions, and that the Committee report its findings to the House, with proposed changes to the Standing Orders and other conventions governing petitions, within 12 months of the adoption of this order."

² The full text of the report is available at <http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/41-2/PROC/report-33>.

³ The site can be accessed at <https://petitions.ourcommons.ca/en/Home/Index>.

In order to sign an e-petition, individuals must provide and confirm their email address; provide their full name, postal code and telephone number; confirm that they are a resident of Canada or a Canadian citizen living outside of Canada; and confirm through self-declaration that they have not previously signed the same e-petition. It is not possible to sign an e-petition using an email address or an IP address associated with the Government of Canada or the Parliament. Members may sign e-petitions, but may not sponsor or present an e-petition that they have signed. Signatories of an e-petition can also ask to receive email updates on the status of that e-petition (e.g. to be notified when the petition is presented in the House or when the Government's response is tabled).

Following the expiration of the 120-day period, the e-petition is closed to signature. An e-petition that has garnered fewer than 500 signatures is simply archived on the site and no further action is taken. If an e-petition has garnered 500 signatures or more, the Clerk of Petitions prepares a certificate containing the prayer of the petition and the total number of signatures and forwards it to the sponsoring Member for presentation to the House. The process of presenting the e-petition to the House is identical to that for paper petitions.

The Government is required to respond to both e-petitions and paper petitions within 45 days. Its response is tabled in the House and posted on the e-petitions website.

USAGE

Since the e-petitions website was launched in December 2015, it has had over 3.5 million views. It is the second most viewed page on the House of Commons website, after the main landing page.

During this time, almost 1,200 e-petitions have been created, 28% of which have been published to the site. The primary reasons for which petitions are not published to the site are that the draft is simply not completed by the petitioner, the petition is withdrawn before reaching the publication stage, or the petition fails to garner support from five other individuals. Together, these three scenarios account for more than half of the e-petitions created. It is quite rare for e-petitions to be rejected by the Clerk of Petitions; only 19 have been deemed inadmissible based on the guidelines established by the Committee and outlined in the Standing Orders.

As of July 13, 2017, 336 e-petitions have been published to the House of Commons website, collectively garnering over 1 million signatures. Among these, 199 reached the required minimum of 500 signatories and were therefore certified, while 63 failed to meet that threshold. There are currently 71 petitions open for signature, and 3 have been withdrawn after being published.

While a slight decrease in the number of paper petitions presented to the House has been observed since the launch of the e-petitions website, this number has historically fluctuated from year to year. Given that, it is too soon to tell what impact the e-petition system will have on the volume of paper petitions.

SUPPORTING THE SYSTEM

The e-petitions website contains not only standardized templates to assist in the drafting of petitions but also a series of technical and procedural guides for various types of users (petitioners, supporters, signatories and Members), which are updated on an ongoing basis.⁴ These have all contributed to ensuring the usability of the system.

As with any new technology system, the volume of inquiries from users was initially high but has fallen as technical glitches have been ironed out.

⁴ The guides may be viewed at <https://petitions.ourcommons.ca/en/Home/About>.