

## **Evidence from the Hansard Society to the Inquiry by the Procedure Committee into e-Petitions**

**1. Introduction:** The Hansard Society is the UK's leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity. We aim to strengthen parliamentary democracy and to encourage greater public involvement in politics. We welcome the Procedure Committee's inquiry into e-Petitions, which starts from the premise that Parliament needs to include e-Petitions within a revamped public petitions system. We are pleased to take part in this inquiry and take this opportunity to highlight the need for a designated Petitions Committee – as discussed in our submission to the Procedure Committee's Inquiry into Petitions (October, 2006) – that will allow Parliament to consider e-Petitions during its deliberations.

**2. The current system of Petitions:** e-Petitions provide one of the most direct and popular means by which the public can engage with political processes.<sup>1</sup> At present, they are not given the same weight as handwritten submissions, and there are no systems in place within Parliament to accept or process them.

The absence of an established mechanism by which the House of Commons considers and acts upon e-Petitions means that decisions about whether they are considered and by whom are discretionary. At present, the Number 10 website which hosts e-Petitions can request that Ministers follow up on the issues raised within them, but there is no obligation for them to do so. As a result, public expectations are raised and often left unfulfilled.

Any practice that has the effect of disappointing the public should be changed – particularly since public disconnection and alienation from Parliament is now widely acknowledged. To overcome the 'democratic deficit,' it is important that the public knows that there is an established and effective mechanism which allows them to express their

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<sup>1</sup> The most popular e-Petition on the Downing Street website (against road pricing) was signed by 1.7 million people. Approximately 3.9 million people have signed ePetitions, yet these have no policy impact, serving at best to alert ministers to the scale of public sentiment.

concerns in ways that may influence the parliamentary agenda. Satisfaction when taking initial steps towards political engagement (by signing an e-Petition) will lead to longer-term efficacy.

**3. E-Petitioning:** The Hansard Society has undertaken a successful programme of research and development in the field of eDemocracy. Our work highlights how new technologies can be used to enhance the work of Parliament, in particular enabling it to connect with the public. If the House were to decide not to make use of electronic petitioning, it would send a signal that it was rejecting the advantages that new technologies can bring. These advantages are recognized by the public, and in particular by young people (by which we mean those in the 18-34 age groups) who use new technologies to communicate daily and among whom disconnection from politics and Parliament is well documented.

We refer the Committee to a 2002 study, *Digital Democracy through Electronic Petitioning*, by Ann Macintosh and Anna Malina, International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University and Steve Farrell, Scottish Parliament, which looked at the use of electronic petitioning in Scotland. Their report included these concluding points:

'Findings from this indicate considerable support for the e-petitioning system, with signatories applauding various advantages, in particular the opportunity to be included in what was viewed as more democratic interaction. There was, however, some marked concern that security and confidentiality may yet be problematic ... E-petition sponsors indicated that they viewed e-petitioner as a useful tool in influencing politicians about issues they considered important. They generally felt e-petitioner was a useful tool complimenting more traditional methods of petitioning. Indeed the ability to access at a convenient time and reach wider sections of society alongside the slower more deliberative processes made possible by e-petitioner were considered inherently more democratic.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Digital Democracy through Electronic Petitioning*, Macintosh, A and Malina A , International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University and Steve Farrell, The Scottish Parliament, (2002). .

Given the positive aspects of e-petitioning identified by the International Teledemocracy Centre, and while recognising that concerns about confidentiality, security and verification need to be addressed, we endorse its introduction at Westminster. Any system adopted should be piloted and monitored to evaluate its effectiveness as well as its compatibility with other parliamentary mechanisms and procedures.

Indeed, there is a case for considering the additional establishment of a Public Engagement Committee, to undertake consultations and debates, surveying and opinion polling (including e-Petitions). These specific models are outside the direct remit of the Committee's current inquiry but it could be argued that e-Petitions are simply one of a number of ways of connecting with the public and providing an opportunity to influence the agenda. Broader methods could be introduced. A Public Engagement Committee could liaise closely with other committees, including the Petitions Committee, and with the Scrutiny Unit and external bodies.

**4. The e-Petitions system in Scotland:** The situation at Westminster, where e-Petitions have very little impact, stands in marked contrast to the Scottish Parliament. At Holyrood the Public Petitions Committee plays a pivotal role in connecting the public and the Executive. All Petitions (handwritten or electronically submitted) go to the Committee which then assesses the merits of each submission by consulting with the Executive, MPs and, if necessary, by taking evidence from the petitioners, other individuals and organisations. The Commission filters out petitions where action is already being taken or where the case is weak.

Following this stage, there are multiple options including:

- The committee can agree that a more detailed investigation is required and the Petition can be referred to the relevant Subject Committee;
- If there is a particular point within a Petition that's noteworthy, the Petitions Committee may set up an inquiry. Its findings can be reported in the Parliament, and followed by a debate or Executive response;
- Points within the Petition can be Included into the scrutiny of relevant legislation;

- Petitions can be sent directly to the Executive for consultation but the Public Petitions Committee retains ownership

Even when the Petitions Committee or the relevant subject committee or the Executive decides no action should be taken, a point of connection is established between citizens and campaigns around particular issues and meanwhile the possibility of ongoing engagement is created between signatories and elected representatives.

**5. The Operation of a Petitions Committee:** The Hansard Society has argued that a Petitions Committee for Westminster, along the lines of the Scottish model, represents the most straightforward and effective way of dealing with Public Petitions and e-Petitions. Such a Committee if established in the Commons would assess the merits of the petitions and the issues arising and if appropriate to make referrals for the further consideration. This might happen in a number of ways:

- through a short debate (in the main Chamber or Westminster Hall);
- by referral to a select committee for an inquiry or evidence session;
- by enabling individual Members to speak on behalf of the Petition in the chamber;
- through a referral to a Government department for a formal response.

It is vital that expectations of petitioners are managed realistically and that Parliament has sufficient capacity and mechanisms to deal with petitions (whether handwritten or electronically submitted). It is also important to avoid overburdening select committees by binding them to certain work as well as avoiding taking up too much parliamentary time.

**6. Creating the appropriate culture:** Procedural changes and new mechanisms will not be sufficient on their own to create a successful e-Petitions system. The introduction of a successful e-Petitions system would require some cultural change.

It is vital that Parliament should raise awareness that the e-Petitions system has been changed and that e-Petitions are positively welcomed. Efforts should be made to make the public realise that their concerns will be taken seriously even if it cannot be promised that Parliament will necessarily agree or take action. As a first step, advertising in various forms of media, and most obviously on Parliament's own website, should be used. Once an e-Petition has been received by Parliament, petitioners should be able to receive feedback on its progress and find out about the action being taken. It is also crucial that a newly established Petitions Committee should act as a filter to ensure that offensive or inappropriate petitions are excluded.

**7. Conclusion:** The Hansard Society very much welcomes the Procedure Committee's inquiry into e-Petitioning, which follows on from its earlier inquiry into Public Petitions. We have recommended on a number of occasions that Parliament should reform the system of Petitions, most notably by establishing a Petitions Committee of the House of Commons. Such a Committee would provide a clear mechanism by which the public would be able to make a case to influence the parliamentary agenda as well as a means of providing a connection between the public and government. The Committee itself would play a mediating role between issues of concern raised by the public and other parts of the parliamentary process, such as select committees. The most obvious model, and parallel, is the Public Petitions Committee in the Scottish Parliament.

At present, the only opportunity for members of the public to send e-Petitions to the UK government is via the Number 10 website. Launched in November 2006, the e-Petitions site has received over 29,000 petitions: over 8,500 are currently live, over 6,000 have finished and 14,601 have been rejected outright. E-Petitions have attracted just under 6 million signatures from just under 4 million email addresses.<sup>3</sup> During its first year of existence, the Number 10 website has implemented systems for dealing with repetitive or malicious or extreme petitions. The lessons learnt by the Number 10 website and the

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<sup>3</sup> This data comes from the 10 Downing Street Website (url: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page11051.asp>)



systems developed by the Scottish Parliament could be drawn upon at Westminster if it adopts e-Petitions.

One of the themes of our recent work is that Parliament should make greater use of pilots in order to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of innovations, and an experiment with e-Petitions would be an ideal candidate for such an approach.

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