

## INQUIRY INTO E-PETITIONS

**Organisation:** NSW Legislative Council  
**Name:** Hon Mark Pearson MLC  
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### **Legislative Council Procedure Committee**

Legislative Council of NSW  
Parliament House,  
Sydney

### **Submission - Inquiry into e-petitions**

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the merits of introducing e-petitions into the Legislative Council.

### **Introduction**

The Animal Justice Party (AJP) is a young party with a single elected member of parliament and as such, we have a limited capacity to assist constituents in compiling paper-based petitions that meet the current standards required by the Legislative Council. Our supporters are also reluctant to print reams of pages when loss of habitat due to deforestation is a critical issue for many animals reliant on our native forests. That this inquiry was prompted by a petition of over 100,000 people calling for a ban on plastic bags due to the environmental harm caused by the creation of so much waste, and yet the petition itself could not be tabled without creating more landfill, is indicative of the need for reform.

In consideration of administrative resources and cost efficiency alone, e-petitions clearly have the advantage in terms of reduced printing and storage costs. It will also reduce the staff time required to manually transfer paper petitions to into electronic record keeping systems.

Our supporters identify many critical animal protection issues with which they are passionately engaged and we receive many requests for tabling of electronic petitions. With the advent of Facebook and other forms of social media, constituents frequently organise online petitions and are disappointed to learn that their efforts to draw the parliament's attention to their issues of concern are rendered invalid because of the electronic nature of their petition.

### **The Digital Future**

E-petitions should be seen as the logical progression of NSW Parliament's increasing public engagement via its website including real time webcasts and the online availability of Hansard, Committee reports and submissions.

Of course, e-petitions do not address the 'digital divide' based on socio-demographic disadvantage whereby older persons, those in remote areas with limited access to reliable internet services and those with low literacy are less likely to participate in electronic petitioning. These are issues not limited to e-petitions and must be considered by government to ensure disadvantaged groups do not miss the benefits of the digital revolution.

**Email:** [mark.pearson@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:mark.pearson@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

**Website:** <http://markpearson.org.au/>

## **Improving the Tools for Participatory Democracy**

Petitions are a valuable tool for participatory democracy, and given the oft-stated concern about declining political engagement in Western democracies, we submit that there is considerable merit in making the petition process as accessible as possible. Petitions are often the only tool for marginalised groups that can 't afford lobbyist fees or donations to party fundraisers for a seat at the table with influential politicians.

E-petitions would make it far easier for constituents to obtain more than 500 signatures, ensuring a response from the relevant minister within 35 days; this is affordable and accessible electoral accountability in action.

### **E-Petitions in other jurisdictions**

E-petitions have been introduced in Queensland, Tasmania, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Portugal, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Finland, Ukraine, Romania, Latvia, South Korea and the European Union. As at 2012, one third of EU parliaments were considering moving to a e-petition model<sup>1</sup>.

Victoria's Legislative Council has recently passed a motion in support of their implementation<sup>2</sup>.

### **Potential for Greater Participation in Democracy**

In a 2010-2011 study of 27 European Union member parliaments, e-petition systems were viewed as likely to increase the "participative and deliberative potential of petitions".

The EU study found that "e-petitions are not just a technical innovation to make a petition system more user-friendly by adding a submission channel. The important point is that the petition process goes public and may actively involve citizens."

In other words, there is the potential for e-petitions to draw in greater numbers of citizens to engage with legislators, make the political system more receptive to citizens' concerns.

The study did note however, that e-petitions did not significantly increase participation by groups previously underrepresented in submissions of paper-based petitions.

In a 2009 study by Lindner and Riehm, research was undertaken on the e-petition systems of Germany, Queensland and Scotland. and found that "the typical user of the German, the Scottish and the Queensland systems tends to be a middle-aged male with an above-average level of formal education<sup>3</sup>.

With the tripling ("Facebook Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2014 Results". Investor Relations. Facebook. 2015-01-28) of Facebook accounts since the study was commenced, this may no longer be the case. Facebook is a popular means for promoting e-petitions, as well as sites such as Change.Org and Get Up!

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<sup>1</sup> <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4220/3694doi:10.5210/fm.v18i7.4220>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/publications/research-papers/download/36-research-papers/13765-e-petition-research-paper-august2016>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jedem.org/article/view/3> (Table 2. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents)

The popularity of social media has grown significantly over the last decade, with 69% of Australians using some form of social media each week, with an average of four hours per day. Facebook is the most common platform utilised by 95% of social media users followed by Instagram at 31%. Those aged 18-29 have the highest usage, with 90% having a social media presence<sup>4</sup>. Empirical research has identified that e-petitions are able to reach and engage young people under 30 years of age<sup>5</sup>. Assuming this trend does not change significantly, e-petitions will reach the vast majority of the population over time.

Research has found that the most successful e-petitions utilise the potential of the Internet and considerably increase public engagement. These e-petition systems are seen as an easy entry into participating in direct democracy and the sheer volume of participants places pressure on parliament itself to become 'more open, transparent, accountable, effective, and responsive through the involvement of the public'.

## Conclusion

The environmental advantages are clear; reduced paper usage and waste with administration systems being relieved of managing and storing large volumes of paper. E-petitions have the capacity and the potential to reach greater numbers of people and a more diverse range of individuals. In turn, this will see a growth in participatory democracy at a time when the general public is perceived as expressing deep cynicism about government listening to and acting in their interests. In turn, parliamentarians and government will have the opportunity to become more responsive to issues identified as of concern of a wider range of citizens.

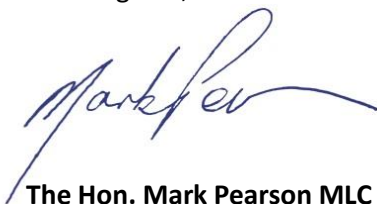
## References

E-petition systems and political participation: About institutional challenges and democratic opportunities by Knud Böhle and Ulrich Riehm<sup>6</sup>.

Broadening Participation Through E-Petitions? An Empirical Study of Petitions to the German Parliament Volume 3, Issue 1 • 2011 • Article 4<sup>7</sup>

Electronic petitions and institutional modernization. International parliamentary e-petition systems in comparative perspective JeDEM — eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government, volume 1, number 1<sup>8</sup>

Kind Regards,



**The Hon. Mark Pearson MLC**

**Animal Justice Party**

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sensis.com.au/about/our-reports/sensis-social-media-report>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tab-beim-bundestag.de/de/untersuchungen/u147/liri11.pdf> at page 13

<sup>6</sup> <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4220/3694doi:10.5210/fm.v18i7.4220>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tab-beim-bundestag.de/de/untersuchungen/u147/liri11.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.jedem.org/article/view/3>