# Online Petitions to Queensland Parliament

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## INTRODUCTION

The right of a citizen to petition Parliament is arguably one of the fundamental ways individuals can engage in democratic processes, by providing their views on what governments should do and requesting action on a particular issue.

In 2000, the Scottish Parliament agreed to a trial of an e-petitioner system whereby members of the Scottish public are able to lodge, sign and view petitions to the Scottish Parliament's Petitions Committee using the internet. Originally developed and hosted by the International Teledemocracy Centre, constituents can now place petitions on the Scottish Parliament Web site in a format that offers a discussion forum for each petition.

In 2002, the Queensland government (Australia) launched an e-democracy policy framework that introduced three digital democracy initiatives, including e-petitions. This particular initiative is presented in the case study below. A second Australian state (Tasmania) commenced a 12-month trial based on the Queensland model in July 2004. These three parliaments are the only parliaments to allow e-petitions as at October 2004, although the Canadian, Basque, European parliaments and the German Bundestag have apparently shown an interest in Scotland's e-petitioner system (MacIntosh, 2004).

Although these are only three parliaments that accept electronic petitions, online petitioning is also being used for engaging with governments and elected members. For example, in the United Kingdom, the prime minister's office accepts electronic petitions and lists those with more than 300 genuine signatures on the number 10 Downing street Web page, together with a link to the government's response to the petition. However, petitions are not hosted on that site and a separate Web site must be established to explain the purpose of the petition and to collect signatures. Fourteen petitions on a range of diverse issues were listed on the site for the period between April 2001 and July 2003, ranging from 306 to 83,440 signatures per petitioned issue.

There are also non-government Web sites providing information about, and tools for, creating online petitions. For example, www.petitiononline.com (Artifice, Inc, 2004) provides a privately sponsored free online hosting service for public petitions that includes an automatic formatting system for the Web petition; collects, displays and maintains petition signatures; automatically rejects duplicate signatures and confirms receipt to signatories; and allows for electronic delivery through e-mailing the petition URL to the target recipient. In mid 2004, the site claims over 20 million signatures have been collected on a range of topics.

## BACKGROUND: E-PETITIONING IN QUEENSLAND

The e-petitions service commenced in Queensland in August 2002 as a trial initiative. It was evaluated after 12 months of operation and became a permanent feature of the Queensland Parliament in late 2003 through the adoption of standing orders. It was designed for the purpose of making the petitioning process more transparent and responsive, to make it easier for the public to have their say on issues that are important to them, and to provide greater potential to reach a wider audience than is the case for paper petitions.

The e-petitions facility is located on a dedicated page of the Queensland Parliament Web site at www.parliament.qld.gov.au/petitions. It was developed in-house and is maintained by the Queensland Parliamentary Service. The Web site allows individuals to locate and join a current e-petition, find out information about the status of an e-petition, and view the ministerial response to the petition when it has been tabled in Parliament. A member of the public can also become a principal petitioner and initiate an e-petition, but for Parliament to host the e-petition on the site, it must be sponsored by a

*Table 1. Comparison of electronic and paper petitions (August 2002-November 2003)*

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|  | E-petitions | Paper petitions |
|---|---|---|
| **No. petitions** |  |  |
| tabled | 26 | 157 |
| closed but not tabled | 2 | n.a. |
| current | 5 | n.a. |
| **Total petitions** | **33** | n.a. |
|  |  |  |
| **No. signatures** |  |  |
| tabled | 9,050 | 164,161 |
| closed but not tabled | 289 | n.a. |
| current | 517 | n.a. |
| **Total signatures** | **9,856** | n.a. |
| average no. per tabled petition | 348 | 1,046 |
| range for tabled petitions: |  |  |
|   lowest | 11 | 10 |
|   highest | 1,952 | 29,686 |
|  |  |  |
| **Responded to in Parliament** |  |  |
| number of responses | 22 | 123 |
| % of tabled petitions | 84.6% | 78.3% |
| average time tabling to response (days) | 48 | 97 |

member of Parliament (MP) and checked for conformity with sessional orders by the clerk of the Parliament. Once an e-petition is closed, it is presented to Parliament by the clerk of the Parliament in hard-copy format. An e-petition is posted on the site for a minimum of one week and a maximum period of six months.

The Web site also provides a central reference point for information about the petitioning process generally. It displays all electronic petitions and all paper petitions tabled in Parliament since the commencement of the trial of e-petitions and the ministerial responses tabled in Parliament.

Key features of the petitions Web site are:

*   A list of all current e-petitions showing title, subject matter, exact wording of the petition, eligibility, the principal petitioner's name and contact details, a count of signatures to date, and a closing date
*   A list of closed e-petitions with the same details and also showing the name of the sponsoring MP, the date tabled and referred to the minister or the date of the minister's response together with a link to that response
*   A list of tabled paper petitions with the same details as for e-petitions including a link to the ministerial response where available
*   General supporting material such as information about the petitioning process, rules, conditions of use, privacy statement, and forms
*   A user survey and feedback mechanism

*   Links to MP contact details and information directly from the petitions page
*   A "send a link" function allowing users to post the link to other individuals
*   An option for signatories to select to receive an automatic e-mail notification when the ministerial response is posted

An analysis of statistics for the first 15 months of operation of e-petitions in Queensland (Henderson, 2003) showed 26 e-petitions had been tabled (compared to 157 paper petitions over the same 15-month period), a further two had closed but not yet been tabled and there were another five current e-petitions. Table 1 provides a comparison of e-petitions and paper petitions over this period. By mid-September 2004, 36 e-petitions had been tabled, two had closed but not yet been tabled and there were seven current petitions, compared with 363 tabled paper petitions.

Not surprisingly, given the relatively short period of time that e-petitions have been operating, the overall number of tabled petitions and signatures per petition over the 15-months of operation are higher for the traditional paper-based process.

It should be noted that differences between the paper-based and electronic petitioning processes will account for some of the difference between the numbers tabled over this period. The sessional orders establishing the e-petitioning system allowed only one petition "dealing

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