

*Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs — Thirty-seventh Report — “Overview of Petitions”*

Resumed from 23 October.

*Motion*

**Hon SIMON O'BRIEN:** I move —

That the report be noted.

It has been a feature of successive standing committees dealing with petitions in this house that, from time to time, we give feedback to members of the house about the petitions that we have received and dealt with, and how we have dealt with them. This overview report provides an interesting consolidation. My experience over many years is that such a report is generally read by members who are interested in finding out about the consolidated petition workload that has been received in the period covered and the sorts of outcomes that have been achieved. Of course, members also tend to take an interest in reviewing the report to see what was done with their petitions, and to perhaps take advantage of the opportunity to pursue some of the matters raised, to provide some further input, and maybe even to give an update to the house. Something that I am sure members of the committee will be interested in is what has since happened in the area of activity that the petition related to. For all of those reasons, it is historically a generally popular report.

The committee knows and understands that members like to get feedback, so we are proposing to provide overview reports perhaps a little more frequently than just annually. It was fairly late into the term of this Parliament that our committee got up and running, but this one deals with the less than 12 months up to June this year; others will follow. We are also adopting a process whereby there will be other reports—not about specific, stand-alone inquiries with their own terms of reference which, of course, are notified to the house on other occasions anyway—when we have petitions that lead us, in the normal course of our business, to quite extensive inquiries. Members can anticipate that we will be putting in a number of occasional reports, perhaps even one or two before we rise for Christmas, just to give a little bit more information than one would normally find in an overview report about matters that are of particular interest, matters on which we feel the house needs to take possession of certain information that we have acquired, or simply matters that are of such public interest that they have taken a great deal of work by not only members of the committee, but also committee staff. It seems silly to us that the benefits of all that work should not receive wider publication and, of course, at the same time assist the house generally in considering the affairs that come before it.

I commend this report to the house, and in doing so I would like to thank the members of the committee for their efforts; I would also like to thank our staff and I will make particular mention of our long-suffering part-time research officer, Amanda Gillingham, who has particular responsibility for petitions and does a heck of a lot of work. If any members think that any of that special acknowledgement is drawn from any additional workload that may or may not have emerged as a result of this morning's meeting—the details of which are, of course, confidential and will not be alluded to—then they probably would not be far from the truth. Thanks very much to Amanda for her ongoing work, ably assisted by our committee clerk, Margaret Liveris. I commend the report and its contents to members.

**Hon LYNN MacLAREN:** I note the thirty-seventh report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, “Overview of Petitions”, and I thank the committee for its diligent work over this long period. I, too, commend Amanda Gillingham for her work. She is an excellent research officer. I was on this committee during the last term of government, so I know that the standard of her work is very high and I really appreciate it.

This report really gives members no indication of the amount of work that this committee does; this is just the tiniest tip of the iceberg. It is a superficial consideration of the tremendous detail that that committee looks at. No fewer than seven of the petitions dealt with in this period are of direct interest to me. One was the great white shark cull petition that had no fewer than 381 signatures way back on 11 December 2013. That petition was tabled when we were just sort of talking about putting in drum lines. I know the Wilderness Society was very quick off the mark to get that petition in, to let members know there was considerable opposition to it. Members know that that campaign built into the biggest environmental campaign this state has ever seen, with more than 4 000 people protesting a month after this petition was tabled during the summer break. Recently we celebrated the win in that the proposal to put drum lines in was withdrawn by the Barnett government. We celebrated it last weekend at Perth Town Hall, and it was a tremendous event for all who had worked so hard and built such a great network in that time. That was one of the petitions the committee looked at, finishing its inquiries on 2 April. That campaign, of course, is ongoing. The “imminent threat” policy will target sharks off popular beaches, and as members well know I am continuing to scrutinise the government's choice to embark on that strategy. I do not think it makes the beaches any safer, and it certainly is wrong to kill great white sharks.

**Extract from Hansard**

[COUNCIL — Wednesday, 19 November 2014]

p8332c-8336a

Hon Simon O'Brien; Hon Lynn MacLaren; Hon Kate Doust

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Another petition that I tabled in this chamber about a week before that the committee reported on was about protecting the health of the environment. It basically just says that we do not need to have any more clearing of remnant bushland and removal of mature trees from public land. The committee chose not to look into that very deeply, but that issue, of course, is very important, especially in a time of climate change when we need to ensure that we have enough green space in the city to keep the temperatures down as temperatures rise.

Another one was the specific dog breed restrictions—known as BSL. That was a very strong campaign, again led by community activists who wanted to make sure that pit bulls were not unfairly treated by the new Dog Act. The committee reported on that and the work it did. The debate on that legislation in the chamber, of course, was quite thorough.

There were two petitions that are very dear to my heart. Roe Highway stage 8 was again looked at; gee, it must be for 10 years that we have had a Roe Highway stage 8 proposal in the committee stages. The committee finalised looking into the petition on 23 October, because the Premier announced that the Roe Highway extension would not be built in this term of government on 16 October 2013. As members know, that, too, has opened up debate because the federal government has pursued that relentlessly and has thrown on the table significant financial resources to build Roe Highway stage 8. We only recently have debated that in relation to the validation of the Environmental Protection Authority decisions made by board members with conflicts of interest. Watch this space; there might well be another petition for that.

There was also the free-range eggs labelling petition that was tabled on almost our first day of sitting, as I recall, by Hon Alyssa Hayden. I was very interested in that because I have a bill in my name on the notice paper on that. There were six signatures on that petition; no submission was ever received by the principal petitioner, and therefore that petition lapsed. That is what happens; if people do not make a submission after they put in a petition, their petition lapses. That was good news to me because I was concerned to see who could possibly want to not label free-range eggs; it is clear that there was not really a strong case, and one has not been presented yet on behalf of those six signatories.

The main petition I want to talk about is the Mangles Bay marina-based tourist precinct, which was tabled on 15 May and comprised 8 191 signatures. That looks like, by far, the biggest number of petitioners in this report. That was debated through a motion I put on the notice paper that was defeated on 14 August 2013. It looks as though the committee did not really look into that horrendous development proposed for Rockingham. Currently, members of the community are campaigning against that; in particular, they believe the impacts of that development on little penguins have not been taken into account or adequately assessed. Further, there is an SPP2.6, which is a state planning policy to do with sea level rise, and there are concerns that that development may fall foul of that policy. That remains to be seen, because we know the Western Australian Planning Commission is likely to have to consider whether that Mangles Bay development will proceed, in spite of all the hype to the contrary. Hon Phil Edman, who is now trying to interject, is more than welcome to make a comment on this report. It is on page 4, if the honourable member wants to make a comment.

I remind members that the local opposition is growing, and it has now become a city-wide and statewide matter. In fact, at the last rally I went to there were international people opposed to this because they love that marine environment. The community has gone to great lengths to explain and develop, in conjunction with all the people who care about that area, an alternative vision for a people's park. The notion that we would waste millions of dollars on that peninsula to actually carve out canals at a time when no-one in Australia is carving canals out for any kind of development is ridiculous. The sooner we talk about marinas that do not involve these canals, the sooner all the boat owners in this state will be happy. They need facilities, and that means the government needs to invest in environmentally sustainable facilities for boaters, not this ridiculously expensive what will be luxury housing in Rockingham. It is completely out of scale. Even the local council is now raising an eyebrow. A month ago the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility held its conference in Mandurah, and I was able to talk about my own climate change bill for sea level rise. At that conference the mayor gave a presentation and was very proud, spruiking the local government's credentials for climate change; in fact, Rockingham has an excellent climate change preparedness policy—perhaps the best in the state. Even the mayor was flabbergasted to try to explain how they were going to get this marina-sea canal development through his internationally acclaimed climate change policy and the new SPP2.6 that clearly states that such developments are no longer acceptable in today's day and age. Scientifically, we know coastal developments of this kind will be under tremendous pressure by storm surge, increased storminess and sea level rise. Too bad the committee missed an opportunity to look at those issues this time around, but it has reported and I commend it for its diligent work and I kind of miss being on that committee.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** I again congratulate the committee. These reports are indeed important for the rest of us in the chamber because they keep us up to date with the work this committee is doing. We get a fairly high volume of petitions through this chamber, and they often disappear to the committee and there can be a period of time

before we know the outcomes of those petitions. I think it is very important to have this overview of petitions. I must say to the chair of that committee that this report is a lot less substantial than some of the overview reports that have been tabled in the past, but that must be because he is being more succinct with the information provided, and that is not a bad thing at all.

**Hon Simon O'Brien:** I am noted for my brevity; you should know that!

**Hon KATE DOUST:** How long is a piece of string? We will not go there.

I think it is important that we do this. I will sound as though I am banging on the same drum again, but if we want to get the community more engaged and to access this type of facility—this important method of raising an issue of concern in the community—we need to look at a variety of options, including e-petitions. A number of e-petitions have been organised over the past few years; the most substantial one was for daylight saving. We all remember that because most of our systems crashed with the high volume of emails that came through. We have to acknowledge that the world has changed and people use that vehicle to communicate. Quite often, e-petitions are organised through a central point.

In the last term of government the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs commenced looking at e-petitions. Given that there has been a change in the make-up of the committee, I am not too sure whether that particular line of inquiry has been resurrected. However, it would be useful to look at e-petitions and online petitions. I understand that there might be issues around the security of those petitions or the validity of the individual who signs off on those petitions. However, given the way that people access and use information and communicate, perhaps we need to modernise how we get that information from the community. Members are now used to working online for most of the things that we do, and that is how a lot of our constituents engage with us. It would be worthwhile for the committee to look at how petitions can be managed in other ways. The Parliament of Scotland certainly uses e-petitions. I think the Tasmanian Parliament has also gone down that path. From memory, I think the federal Parliament was looking at online petitions. I am not too sure whether it has introduced that system, but that is something the committee might want to look at.

Petitions are a very useful vehicle for the community to raise an issue when they may have exhausted other avenues. I have raised a few petitions recently that I hope the committee will inquire into. I look forward to a single report or the next instalment of the overview of petitions to be tabled in the house. I note at least one petition that I tabled is listed in this report, and that was about the changes to the Local Government Act. I note the petition was finalised, and I understand the reasons for that. It was an interesting time. The debate on local government boundary changes is ongoing and that petition was made, predominantly from people in South Perth and Victoria Park, to demonstrate the anger of those two communities about the potential decision of Burswood to be excised from the Town of Victoria Park. I think that we now have an outcome on that issue. We are not too sure whether it will be a permanent outcome, but we hope it is. Obviously, local government boundary changes are an ongoing matter that we all watch with great interest.

A range of other matters link to my electorate, particularly Roe Highway stage 8, which has been canvassed by Hon Lynn MacLaren, and Mangles Bay Marina; we have had a range of opportunities to speak on those matters. I was interested to read what happened with the Bassendean Fire Station. It is not in my electorate, but I have a personal attachment to it. I used to stay at my great grandfather's house just a few doors down from the fire station. When I was very young and I came to Perth from Coolgardie, my aunts would take me to the fire station to look around. For sentimental reasons I hoped that the government would give consideration to the terms of this petition and hand over that fire station to the Bassendean community so it could use it in an appropriate way and acknowledge the heritage of that fire station, but that is obviously not the case.

It is useful to see how the committee progresses through these petitions. From having served on the committee, I know that we will not get an outcome for every petition, but I commend the committee for the methods it puts in place to seek as much information on the aspects of petitions as it can and to try to satisfy the requests of the principal petitioner. It is not always an easy task and quite often members of the committee are bombarded by truckloads of information. Members can drown in that information sometimes. The committee on which I serve has tried to change that by becoming paper-free. I am not too sure whether the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs has looked at this issue, but I encourage it to do so, because it may save it from drowning in paper and carting it around the countryside.

I wanted to comment because the committee does an excellent job in dealing with the petitions that are tabled and trying to get reasonable outcomes for the principal petitioners or, indeed, quite significant change via policy or legislation. However, there are ways in which we can modernise how that committee does its work to become more productive and assist members —

**Hon Simon O'Brien** interjected.

**Extract from *Hansard***

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**Hon KATE DOUST:** I am simply talking about how the committee manages paperwork. I am trying to be pleasant about this. It could help with the physical load of carting around paperwork and assist the staff involved, who do a superb job, so that they do not have to worry about photocopying and couriering and sending things out and the hard yakka involved. Given that resources seem to be shrinking around this place, it is better to utilise staff for their research and committee management capacities than have them standing over a photocopier. I am sure I will stand and make these comments on a regular basis and keep banging away on these issues, because we need to constantly look at how we can change to improve and get better outcomes for our communities. This committee operates as a very good vehicle for managing petitions and getting outcomes for principal petitioners. Well done to the committee and the staff. This report very succinctly sums up the outcomes of each petition from that period, and I look forward to the next overview report sometime in the future.

**Hon SIMON O'BRIEN:** If we have some time left, I am wondering whether I might seek leave to make a few concluding remarks.

Leave granted.

**Hon SIMON O'BRIEN:** I thank members for their contributions. A couple of matters that arise are about the nature of what we do with petitions. We can be very proud that we do something with petitions that are tabled in this place. The tabling of a petition in a public forum such as a house of Parliament is in some cases an end in itself. We have systems in place whereby if that were the intended end of a petition tabled in this place, we would note that and move on, the end having been achieved. However, other petitions seek something else, and each one of those is examined. Of course, that does not mean that the standing committee is in possession of a magic wand that grants the wishes of anyone who wants to present a petition, and that is unfortunate from some people's point of view. We do not care whether the petition has one signature or 8 000 signatures; one signature can sometimes be more important than 8 000. We make sure that the people who need to have their issue raised are heard. In particular, we come across situations fairly rarely in which a petitioner is in a parlous position through no fault of their own but they have slipped through all the checks and balances that the Parliament and government have otherwise established to deal with matters. That is when the committee is of very great value indeed. Most of the time, though, it is a matter of people wishing to bring matters to attention, and I will not go into the variety that we have had. I reassure members that the overview is just that; it is the tip of the iceberg of what goes on.

In conclusion, because members who were not in previous Parliaments may not have observed what we do, we have a process to establish the level of inquiry that a petition typically and reasonably requires. Even though it may be ages until we present an overview report such as this, that does not mean that a lot is not happening in the meantime. When we conclude a petition, we write to the petitioner and the tabling member and provide them typically with copies of all the material that we have sent for and obtained from ministers and local governments—we give them the lot—so that they have a full explanation of what is going on and a full demonstration of the avenues that have been pursued, particularly to make sure that those avenues have been travelled by those who are responsible for travelling them. Of course, by definition, every time there is a petition that some people might say colloquially did not go anywhere as there are still problems with the issue that concerns them because the government is determined to go with it, that does not mean that our processes or the petitioner's efforts have been in vain. One of the things that our committee does virtually as a matter of course—we may do it repeatedly—is to make sure that the petition and the subsequent submissions made by the main petitioner are forwarded to the responsible minister, and in some cases departments, local governments and all the rest of it, with a request—a please explain, if you like: “Could you please address the items raised in this petition?” That happens at a very early date, long before matters are finalised. I hope that reassures newer members in particular that our stewardship of these matters is done diligently and always in good faith.

**Question put and passed.**

**Progress reported, pursuant to standing orders.**