



PARLIAMENT of AUSTRALIA
HOUSE of REPRESENTATIVES

OFFICE OF THE CLERK OF THE HOUSE

PO Box 6021, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600 | Phone: (02) 6277 4111 | Fax: (02) 6277 2006 | Email: clerk.reps@aph.gov.au

22 January 2020

Hon. Matthew Swinbourn MLC
Chair, Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Legislative Council
Parliament of Western Australia
Parliament House
4 Harvest Terrace
West Perth WA 6005

Dear Mr Swinbourn

**Submission to the inquiry into the functions, processes and procedures of the
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs**

Thank you for your correspondence dated 25 October 2019.

The Department of the House of Representatives welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into the functions, processes and procedures of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs.

As invited, I have focussed on the history and operations of the petitions process in the House of Representatives. I understand the Chair of the Standing Committee on Petitions is to make a separate submission on that committee's behalf.

The department's submission to your inquiry is enclosed. I trust it might assist the committee in its work. Please don't hesitate to contact me again if you have any queries.

Yours sincerely

Claressa Surtees
Clerk of the House



Date: 22 January 2020

Submission from the Department of the House of Representatives to the inquiry into the functions, processes and procedures of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

This submission summarises the evolution of petitioning practices for the House of Representatives, showing incremental change over the years up until the current situation where the House has a dedicated Standing Committee on Petitions, electronic petitioning, and requirements for Ministers to respond to petitions. I understand that the Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions is also to provide a submission which I expect would provide more detailed consideration of current practices.

Evolution of petitioning practices in the House

Petitioning the House was a practice inherited at Federation in 1901 from the United Kingdom House of Commons.¹ Since then the practices of the House associated with the presentation of petitions have evolved, either to suit the convenience of the House or to reinforce the important role of petitions in the interactions between citizens and the Parliament. The House Standing Committee on Procedure (Procedure Committee), and its predecessor Standing Orders Committee, have played a large role in the development of these practices.

In the first five years of the Australian Parliament a total of 667 petitions were presented. However, in subsequent years petitioning seemed to fall out of favour. In the period from 1906 to 1959 a total of 552 petitions were submitted to the House, with no petitions presented in some years—1913, 1923, 1929, 1934, 1935, 1937, 1944 and 1945.²

In the period 1960 to 1969, the average number of petitions presented annually was 72; in the period 1970 to 1980 the average was 1453 and, in 1986 alone, 5528 were presented. These substantial increases reflect the practice at the time by Members to submit single sheets of a petition on multiple sitting days, rather than as one petition on a single day.³

Before 1972, Members themselves presented petitions, after certification from the Clerk that the petition conformed to the standing orders. Members identified the petitioners and the matters contained within the petition before moving that the petition be received and read. The terms of the petition were then read by the Clerk. As the number of petitions increased, the time spent presenting them increased substantially.

In 1972 new procedures were adopted by the House which were less time-consuming. The Clerk would announce the petitions lodged, indicating the Member who lodged it by electoral division, the identity of petitioners and a brief summary of the action proposed.

¹ *House of Representatives Practice*, 7th edition, 2018, p. 629.

² House of Representatives, "Statistics", https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Statistics/House_of_Representatives_Statistics, accessed 15 January 2020.

³ *House of Representatives Practice*, 1st edition, 1981, p. 689.

Resourcing support

In terms of resourcing, the Department of the House of Representatives supports the work of the Petitions Committee through the provision of three to four staff as follows:

- one EL2-level Committee Secretary, who additionally serves as Director of the Clerk Assistant (Committees) office, providing wider corporate support to the Clerk Assistant and the House of Representatives Committee Office;
- one EL1-level Inquiry Secretary, who manages the Committee's public inquiries into possible changes to the petitioning process and oversees the work of the PSL6-level Research Officer;
- one PSL6-level Research Officer, who supports the Inquiry Secretary and manages much of the ongoing processing work for the receipt and tabling of petitions and ministerial responses; and
- significant support, as required, from the PSL6-level Project Officer in the Clerk Assistant (Committees) office, who provides corporate support to the Clerk Assistant and individual workgroups in the House of Representatives Committee Office.

Department of the House of Representatives

22 January 2020