

Petitions

A petition is a document that allows members of a community, through the gathering and presentation of signatures to Parliament, to publicly seek redress of their grievance by requesting that Parliament give consideration to a particular course of action.

The right to petition dates back to at least the reign of King Edward I (1239-1307) with its use being an important factor in the development of democratic values and institutions in Britain between the 13th and 17th centuries. The right to petition both the crown and Parliament was recognised in the Magna Carta (1215) and in the Bill of Rights (1689).

Originally, the terms 'petition' and 'bill' held similar meanings as parliamentary historians have noted that 'all or most ancient acts of Parliament were made by way of petitions as a means of providing formal redress for grievances'. The earliest forms of legislation were often little more than petitions agreed to by the King. Then during the English Civil Wars and Revolution between 1640 and 1660, there was an outbreak of mass political petitions. Individuals and groups, particularly from the 'lower classes', began to presume they had a right to instruct their 'social and political betters'.

Mass political petitions were brought to the crown and the Parliament protesting matters such as arbitrary imprisonment, excessive taxation, and the use of martial law.

In Western Australia, petitions were part of the parliamentary process at the beginning of responsible government in 1890; however, the procedure was very rarely used. In fact, there were many parliamentary sessions (and years) in which no petitions were tabled in either the Legislative Council or the Legislative Assembly.

Not until the late 1970s did petitions become a more significant strategy of political participation for pressure and interest groups and citizens.



The title of a petition from 1893

Famous Petitions

One example of the major use of a petition to express a public mood took place when over 100,000 signatures were filed in 1979 to oppose the government's decision to close the Perth-Fremantle passenger rail service. Another instance of the use of petitions to convey widespread public concern took place in 2007 with the campaign to stop the proposed Yarragadee water supply development. The plan was to transport 45 gigalitres of water from the Yarragadee aquifer in the south west to Perth. Petitions tabled in both houses of Parliament consisted of at least 15,000 signatures. Another issue that prompted the large-scale use of parliamentary petitions was daylight saving. This drew petitions in both support of and opposition to daylight saving.

Rules

In order to be tabled in either house of the Western Australian Parliament, a petition must conform to the Standing Orders of the house in which it is presented. It must be addressed either to the President of the Legislative Council or the Speaker in the Legislative Assembly and contain the name and address of each petitioner along with their original signature.



Petitions

The petition must not make an application for a direct grant of money to be paid to an individual, nor may it be tabled by a member of Parliament who has signed the petition as a petitioner. At the same time, the petition must not have letters, affidavits or other documents attached to it.

Guidelines on how to prepare a petition for presentation to the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council are available from the Parliament of Western Australia website: www.parliament.wa.gov.au. Your local member of Parliament can also assist in the preparation of petitions.

Petitions Committee

In the Legislative Assembly, a petition may be referred by motion to a parliamentary committee. However, in the Legislative Council, one of the terms of reference for its Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs is to inquire into and report on all petitions. The Legislative Council was the first House of Parliament in Australia to introduce automatic referral of petitions for consideration by a committee.

When reviewing petitions, the Committee seeks to provide for public discussion on matters of community interest and to allow interested persons or groups to bring their concern to the attention of the Legislative Council.

Upon receipt, the committee generally writes to the tabling member and to the principal petitioner inviting a one to two-page submission providing further information on the matters and issues raised in the petition.

The committee may also make preliminary investigations to obtain background information on the issues from government agencies, private organisations and individuals. If a petition comes within the terms of reference of another standing committee of the Legislative Council, it may refer the matter to that committee.

All transcripts of evidence taken in public and all the committee's reports and relevant government responses are available from the Parliament's website. Regular reports published by the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs contain details and responses to the petitions it has received.

PETITION

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled.

We, the undersigned, say
(outline situation which needs change)

Now we ask the Legislative Assembly
(detail the action which the Legislative Assembly should take)

NAME	ADDRESS	SIGNATURE

At least one signature on the face page is required.
The request for action must appear on each page which has signatures.

