

PROCEDURE AND PRIVILEGES COMMITTEE

Fifth Report — Electronic petitions — Tabling

MR S.J. PRICE (Forrestfield — Deputy Speaker) [10.07 am]: I present for tabling the fifth report of the Procedure and Privileges Committee of the forty-first Parliament, titled *Electronic petitions*.

[See paper [2498](#).]

Mr S.J. PRICE: Today I present the fifth report of the Procedure and Privileges Committee, which recommends e-petitions for the Assembly. Petitions are the oldest of all parliamentary forms and a fundamental method for citizens to voice their concerns and request action from their elected representatives. However, our world is evolving and technology plays an increasingly integral role in our daily lives. It is in this context that the PPC recommends the introduction of e-petitions to complement traditional paper petitions, recognising the value that petitioning in all forms brings to our democratic system.

The report outlines the advantages and challenges of e-petitions, carefully considering factors such as accessibility, convenience, efficiency, reach and transparency. We also acknowledge the challenges related to verification, the digital divide, and a phenomena known as slacktivism. However, after thorough deliberation, we are convinced that the benefits of e-petitions outweigh these challenges and note that the vast majority of legislatures have had e-petitions in place for years. We have examined the experience of Australian lower houses with e-petitions from the Legislative Assembly of Queensland, which first adopted e-petitions in 2003, through to the more recent adoptions by the Legislative Assemblies of New South Wales and Victoria. In Australia and New Zealand, apart from this place, only the Parliament of South Australia is yet to adopt e-petitions.

In forming the report and its recommendations, the committee paid particular attention to e-petitions in the Legislative Council of Western Australia, which introduced them by temporary order in 2021. The experience in the Legislative Council, as detailed in the sixty-ninth report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges, suggests that e-petitions have been a user-friendly and effective alternative for both members of the Council and the public. In light of this positive experience, our committee recommends the adoption of a similar temporary order to the one in the Council to govern e-petitions in the Assembly until the end of 2024. This temporary order will include several new provisions for e-petitions, such as WA residency requirements for petitioners. The temporary order will also introduce the roles of principal petitioner and facilitating member. The committee also proposes safeguards to protect personal data and privacy by ensuring that only the names of the principal petitioners and facilitating members, and the number of signatures, will be made public on the Parliament website. It will be possible for members to request a full copy of a presented petition. This aligns with the current practice of the Assembly regarding paper petitions. Furthermore, we propose a set of conditions of use for e-petitions that petitioners must acknowledge before signing. These conditions will align with the conditions for Council e-petitions.

In conclusion, we firmly believe that the adoption of e-petitions is both feasible and desirable and reflects the changing technological landscape and the desire to enhance public participation in the democratic process. E-petitions have the potential to empower our citizens and bridge geographical gaps, especially in a state as vast as Western Australia. Therefore, the committee recommends the adoption of a temporary order, as outlined in the report, to govern e-petitions in the Assembly until the end of 2024. This order will set out clear requirements and procedures for e-petitions, ensuring transparency, accountability and the responsible management of electronic personal data. I invite the house to consider the recommendations contained in this report and take the necessary steps to modernise and improve our democratic process by adopting e-petitions.

I thank all members of the committee for their deliberations on this issue. I commend the report to the house.

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [10.12 am]: I rise as Deputy Chair of the Procedure and Privileges Committee to say a few words about e-petitions. It is important for the Legislative Assembly to move with the times. I note the graph in the committee's report, *Electronic petitions*, that shows the number of petitions tabled in the Legislative Assembly from 2013 through to 2023. The number of petitions reached a peak of around 130 petitions in 2015 but has dropped to somewhere between 10 and 20 for 2023 to date. That is a pretty good indication of the way the world has moved on. The Legislative Council adopted e-petitions this year, and one of those petitions received up to 30 000 signatures. From my perspective, that is a good indication. Of course, the number of signatures on Legislative Assembly petitions has also declined. The graph shows that the number of signatures has dropped from close to 100 000 in 2013 to around 10 000 in 2023 to date. That is a pretty good indication of the way the world has moved on. It is important for us, as a contemporary Legislative Assembly, to look at adopting e-petitions. As the Deputy Speaker noted, the benefits of e-petitions include accessibility, convenience, efficiency, reach and impact, transparency and accountability, and also, of course, a smaller environmental impact. We need to take all those things into account. As a member of the committee, I support the recommendation outlined by the Deputy Speaker.

I especially thank our principal research officer, Thomas Moorhead. We asked him to search all the other Legislative Assemblies of Parliaments around Australia to see what our contemporaries are doing, and he certainly

came back with a raft of information. It was great for the committee to have that information at hand to consider. I also thank our committee staff, Kirsten Robinson and Scott Nalder. I also thank the other committee members—the Speaker, Hon Michelle Roberts; Mr Stephen Price, our Deputy Speaker; Dr David Honey; and, of course, Ms Margaret Quirk.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms M.M. Quirk): Last but not least, member!

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Yes! I thank all the members of the Procedure and Privileges Committee. I think we have a good committee that considered this issue in a sensible way. I again thank Thomas Moorhead for his quality research; it was much appreciated. I support the report.

DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe) [10.16 am]: I also rise to support the proposition put forward by the Deputy Speaker. Even in the time that I have been here, I have seen a significant decline in the number of physical petitions that have been presented. Although petitions were once the bedrock of community activism, with people going out and collecting signatures, that social norm has changed and we have seen a dramatic decline in them. A contributor to that could be the fact that people do not like sharing things in this post-COVID era. I notice that people are a lot more hesitant about touching things that have been touched by lots of other people. However, I think it is a broad social change, as people are busy and do not have time. We have also moved into the era of magic electronic devices. The overwhelming majority of the community gets its information through those devices. I reflect on my own family. All six of my kids are very interested in public affairs. They have very diverse political views that they like to strongly express.

Mr P.J. Rundle: Surely they are all Liberals!

Dr D.J. HONEY: Maybe not, member, but I am proud of every single one of them. None of my children reads a daily newspaper, watches television or listens to free radio. They rely on communication through digital platforms, whether it is Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok or whatever it might be. They also get long-form communication from podcasts. People have become progressively more attuned to using electronic devices for communication.

We have already seen the success of moving to electronic petitions in the upper house. I reflect on the recent petition submitted by Hon Neil Thomson in relation to the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2021. That petition gained 30 000 signatures in a very short period of time. I have no doubt that that was one of the reasons, amongst others, the government saw the importance of repealing that act such a short time after it had been brought into effect.

There are a couple of important aspects that I would like to highlight. Only residents of Western Australia will be eligible to join an e-petition, which I think is really important. We are the legislature for Western Australia. In the past, e-petitions have been brought to this place—they were not official e-petitions—and more than 90 per cent of the signatories were not from this state or lived overseas. It was used to influence policy in Western Australia, but in fact it largely did not reflect the opinions of Western Australians. We all know it is very easy to have a view about something from a distance; it is only when people are local that they really know the truth of matters. I think it is very important that this will reflect the opinions of Western Australians, as would a written petition.

With regard to the safety and security of data, one of the recommendations is that the Clerk dispose of all electronic personal data relating to the posting and joining of an e-petition within six months of the e-petition being printed; they actually have to be printed out and presented to the Legislative Assembly. That will reassure people that their data will be protected, so it is an excellent recommendation.

I join in thanking all members of the committee for their good work. In particular, I thank Thomas Moorhead, Kirsten Robinson and Scott Nalder. Thomas did an exemplary and thorough job of researching this topic in the different chambers in all states. That gave us a good basis for knowing that we were on safe ground with the recommendations we made. Thank you.