Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy

Response to call for evidence.

This response focuses on the question below relating to the Government's e-petitions system.

How effective has the Government's e-petitions system been in enabling the public to engage with parliamentarians and the democratic process?

Summary

1. The existence of the e-petitions system is a positive development. From the number of petitions submitted it is clearly popular with the public.

2. The current position where petitions that exceed the 10,000 signature threshold receive a response from the relevant government department, and the possibility of debates on those that exceed the 100,000 signature threshold are a useful starting point. However, the actions taken for the vast majority of petitions are limited at best. By and large the system enables the public to communicate their views to government but it does not enable real engagement or enable the public to learn about the democratic process.

3. The purpose of the e-petitions system is unclear. In addition, the hybrid nature of the system, with petitions being submitted to government and then passed to Parliament (if they reach the 100,000 signature threshold) risks creating confusion among the public about the difference between 'government' and 'Parliament'.

4. The ownership of the e-petitions system should be resolved, and should ideally rest with Parliament/the House of Commons.

5. The existence of the system is an opportunity for governments and parliamentarians to engage with the public and for the public to learn more about the democratic process, however in order to do this the above issues need to be resolved. There are also lessons that could be learned from the systems in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. Whilst not all practices in relation to petitions in the devolved legislatures are transferable, for example because of the much greater number of petitions received by the Government's e-petitions system, these systems can be seen as examples of good practice, and there are a number of possible recommendations which are set out below (para 11).

My research

6. I have been undertaking research into petitions systems in the UK for a number of years. In 2013 I submitted written evidence on petitions to the Political and Constitution Reform Committee's inquiry 'Revisiting the House: the impact of the Wright reforms', and I was also invited to give oral evidence. More recently (June 2014), I was invited to give oral evidence to the Procedure Committee's inquiry into the Government's e-petitions system. The paragraphs below are drawn from this work.

7. The statement on the e-petitions website is misleading and serves to raise expectations among the public that e-petitions are an easy way for them to influence government. The

current statement says 'e-petitions are an easy, personal way for you to influence Government and Parliament in the UK'. It is important that any statement on the website reflects what petitioners can actually achieve.

8. At the time of giving evidence to the Procedure Committee in June 2014, approximately 53, 500 petitions had been submitted, of which 28,500 were admissible. Out of these 25 had been debated and 145 had reached the 10,000 signature threshold and had received a response from the relevant government department. In total, actions had been taken on 170 petitions out of approximately 28,500. This illustrates that for the vast majority of petitioners' e-petitions are not an easy, personal way to influence government and Parliament in the UK, as is implied by the e-petitions website. Petitioners are able to express their views to government (and perhaps to Parliament) but there is little opportunity for real engagement or any opportunity to learn about the democratic process.

9. The purpose of the system is unclear. Is it aimed at two way engagement, is it educative, or is it for the public to express their views to government and parliamentarians? The hybrid nature of the system serves to compound this. People do not always understand the difference between government and Parliament and the fact that petitions are submitted to government and then only passed to Parliament (in reality, the House of Commons) after they reach the 100,000 threshold does not help to clarify this confusion in the minds of the public. Indeed, the way in which the question on e-petitions is phrased for this inquiry serves to underline this confusion, since the majority of parliamentarians are only likely to hear about a petition once it has been passed to Parliament in the form of the Backbench Business Committee to consider it for debate.

10. Clear ownership of the e-petitions system. This should ideally rest with Parliament/the House of Commons. Whilst this would not necessarily solve all of the problems listed in para 3, it might go some way to providing greater clarity than exists at present.

11. As noted in para 5, the petitions systems in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, are widely seen as examples of good practice, and we can draw on their experience here. Each system has a clear statement of purpose and gives examples of what petitioners can achieve, including *inter alia*, suggesting new laws, raising the profile of an issue, gathering further information on the petition issue, informing the scrutiny of legislation, lead to changes in the law and be considered as part of a wider review of policy. They set out how petitions will be dealt with including the process by which decisions are made and the role of petitioners in this process. The systems are presented in an open and transparent way and there is a clear attempt to manage expectations. In both the devolved legislatures each petition, assuming it meets the admissibility criteria, is considered by a Petitions Committee, and receives a response. Responses can include inviting a petitioner to give evidence to the Petitions Committee, requesting further information on the petition topic from relevant organisations (the most common form of action), requesting a debate in the chamber of the Parliament or Assembly, holding roundtable evidence sessions, commissioning inquiries, requesting that Ministers attend the Petitions Committee to give evidence in respect of particular petitions, or taking no further action and closing the petition. At a minimum each petitioner will have had the opportunity to have had their petition discussed by a Petitions Committee. They have therefore had the opportunity for engagement, albeit at different levels, and the opportunity to be involved in the democratic process and learn something about how it works. Whilst not all of the practices from the

devolved legislatures are transferable to the Government's e-petitions system, not least because of the much greater numbers of petitions submitted to the system, there are still lessons that can be learned, particularly in respect of clear ownership, an open and transparent process, the use of a mechanism such as a Petitions Committee, and flexibility in responding to petitions.

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