

# D.I.Y.

## Project page for students and teachers

### THE RIGHT TO HAVE A SAY

There are various ways in which the community can have a say in decisions taken by the national parliament. You can talk to your federal MP or you can participate in public inquiries undertaken by parliamentary committees. You can also sign a petition, which is a formal document that allows members of the public to put their concerns directly to parliament.

A citizen's right to petition parliament has existed in Australia since the national parliament was established in 1901.

It is a tradition that dates back to thirteenth century England. The right to petition the monarch was established as early as 1215 under the Magna Carta. It became common practice during the reign of King Edward I.

Today in Australia hundreds of petitions are presented each year to parliament. Petitions can be made to either the House of Representatives or the Senate.

A petition usually asks the House or the Senate to take action on an issue and is often signed by many people. Sometimes a petition will ask for no action or no changes to occur.

### Keeping it real

There are certain rules that must be followed when making a petition. These rules help to ensure petitions are authentic and also help to protect people making petitions.

A petition to the House of Representatives must be presented on paper. It must describe in no more than 250 words what the petition is about and what action you want parliament to take.

The petition must be on a matter controlled at the federal level – it can't be about an issue which is governed at the state level.

Petitions must be written in moderate language and not promote illegal acts. If the petition is not written in English, it must be accompanied by an official translation.

The person who initiates or organises the petition (known as the principal petitioner) must sign the petition on the first page and also provide their address.

Only original handwritten signatures are allowed on a petition. Photocopies, faxes or electronic signatures are not permitted.

### Voice of the people

Since 2008 the House of Representatives has had a Petitions Committee to ensure all petitions to the House are considered and receive a response.

Petitions can be sent either directly to the Petitions Committee or to your federal MP who can deliver the petition to the committee.

Once a petition has been received and checked, it is presented to the House of Representatives either by the Chair of the Petitions Committee or by the federal MP to whom the petition was sent.

The details of the petition are recorded in Hansard, which is the record of what is said in the House. Details of petitions lodged are also placed on the committee's website: [www.aph.gov.au/petitions](http://www.aph.gov.au/petitions)



CALL FOR ACTION: The historic Yirrkala petition



SPEAKING UP: Canberra student Chris Inglis at the first Petitions Committee hearing

The petition may then be sent off to the relevant government minister for a response. In addition, the Petitions Committee can invite the principal petitioner to meet with the committee and discuss the petition.

Ministers are expected to respond within 90 days to petitions referred to them. Responses are presented to the House of Representatives, made available on the committee's website and a copy is sent to the person who initiated the petition.

### *History in the making*

There have been many petitions presented to the Australian parliament that have made their own history.

One of the most famous petitions was presented to the House of Representatives in 1963 on behalf of the Aboriginal people at Yirrkala in the Northern Territory. This petition asked that parliament listen to the claims of the people at Yirrkala before land was removed from the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve. The petition was written in English and Yolgnu, the Yirrkala language, and decorated with Aboriginal illustrations. Parliament responded to the call for action by establishing a select committee to investigate the issue.

The petition with the greatest number of signatures ever recorded in Australian history was presented to the House of Representatives on 4 December 2000. It concerned taxation and beer prices and contained 792,985 signatures. Another petition presented to the House in 1993 concerned healthcare funding and was signed by more than 500,000 people.

In 2008 a 17-year-old Canberra student, Chris Inglis, organised a petition calling for parliament to raise community awareness of the plight of child soldiers in Africa. Chris Inglis became the first petitioner to be invited to speak with the House of Representatives Petitions Committee.

## OVER TO YOU...

### *Look into it*

Go the website at [www.aph.gov.au/petitions](http://www.aph.gov.au/petitions) and look at some of the petitions that have been presented to the House of Representatives. Pick some petitions on subjects that interest your class. Discuss whether you support the petitions.

### *Create your own*

As a class, talk about community issues that concern you. In small groups, write a petition asking the House of Representatives to take action on one of those issues. Read the petitions out and discuss the action that could be taken by parliament.

To find out how you should set out the petition, visit [www.aph.gov.au/petitions](http://www.aph.gov.au/petitions)



YOUR SHOUT: A petition on beer and tax got the most signatures