

The Wrap



DIRECT ACTION: Protest in support of a petition against child sex trafficking

Petitions spike sign of healthy democracy

Thousands of signatures collected.

Parliamentarians have lauded a 43 per cent increase in the number of petitions presented in the House of Representatives in 2011 as a reflection of a healthy democracy.

One hundred and ninety five petitions were tabled last year (including five petitions with over 30,000 signatures each) compared with 136 in 2010. This 43 per cent increase on the 2010 calendar year is significant, even taking into account that generally fewer petitions are received in election years, as was the case in 2010. The 2011 figures still represent a 28 per cent increase on the last non-election year in 2009 when 150 petitions were presented.

Petitions Committee Chair John Murphy (Reid, NSW) said the figures are not just another set of bland statistics, but show trends of a strengthening in petitioning activity across Australia.

“They remind us how fortunate we are to live in a parliamentary democracy

where people have the opportunity to air their views to those who represent them,” Mr Murphy said.

The largest petition in 2011 with 225,328 signatures called for action on child sex trafficking. This petition alone accounted for half the year’s total number of signatures.

There were also 136 ministerial responses presented, which indicates a response rate above 70 per cent. In practice, a tabled response may relate to issues in more than one petition, therefore the actual response rate is even higher. This is certainly an improvement on past years when sometimes no responses were received at all.

These upward trends follow the introduction of a more formal petitioning process and the establishment of a House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions in 2008.

The committee chair presents petitions in the House of Representatives on sitting Mondays and individual

members may also present petitions once they have been considered ‘in order’ by the committee. To be accepted, petitions must be on paper, show the terms and identify a ‘principal petitioner’ on the first page of the petition. The specific action requested in the terms of the petition must appear at the top of every other signature page. The terms should not exceed 250 words. The principal petitioner’s signature, which must appear on the first page of the petition, as well as all signatures to the petition must be handwritten originals

Once presented in the House, the terms of the petition are printed in Hansard and published on the committee’s website. The committee may also forward the terms of the petition to the relevant minister/s for a response, and may also decide to hold discussions with the principal petitioner and government officials to enable elaboration and clarification of the subject matter.

“The Petitions Committee does not see its role as one of advocacy for or against causes, but it does see its role as an enabler, enabling the issues that cause concern to be brought to the attention of the House and then to be considered and responded to by the government,” Mr Murphy said.

“As Australians engage with their federal parliament in this very active way, they are also engaging with other Australians. This is pertinent, especially given that the House currently does not accept electronic petitions.

“So collecting a large volume of signatures for paper petitions, as in the case of the five large petitions but also in other cases, would have taken physical effort and required petitioners to personally interact with others in their communities on the issues that matter to them.

“Given the effort required to engage in this way, in a society where we increasingly interact at arm’s length, Australians must still see value in participating in a traditional petitioning process.” •

LINKS

www.aph.gov.au/petitions
petitions.committee.reps@aph.gov.au
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