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**Official Report
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Wednesday 15 April 2015

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

Mercredi 15 avril 2015

**Standing Committee on
the Legislative Assembly**

Petitions

**Comité permanent de
l'Assemblée législative**

Pétitions

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLYCOMITÉ PERMANENT DE
L'ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE

Wednesday 15 April 2015

Mercredi 15 avril 2015

The committee met at 1302 in committee room 1.

APPOINTMENT OF SUBCOMMITTEE

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): I wish to welcome the committee to our regular meeting of the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly for April 15. We continue to deal with standing order 108(g); that's our basic mandate. However, our first order of business would be the appointment of a subcommittee on committee business. Mr. Ballard?

Mr. Chris Ballard: Mr. Chair, I have a motion. I move that Mr. Mantha replace Mr. Singh on the subcommittee on committee business.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Any discussion on that motion? Yes, Mr. Mantha?

Mr. Michael Mantha: I hear that the proposed member is a heck of a great guy. I personally know him quite well and he's a decent person and represents his constituents quite well, so I have no objections to accepting that member on this committee.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I thought you'd say, "I love punishment."

Mr. Michael Mantha: I just thought I'd put that out there.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): So you did. Is there any further debate? Hearing none, shall this motion carry? I see unanimous consent. Thank you, committee.

PETITIONS

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Our next order of business we see on our agenda is petition procedures. We have Chris Chapin at the witness table. Chris, if you want to tell us a little bit about yourself. As you would probably know, you have up to 20 minutes, if you need 20 minutes, and members of the committee have up to 40 minutes for round-the-table comments and questions. So Chris, if you wish to go ahead.

Mr. Chris Chapin: Perfect. Thank you. First off, I'd like to thank you for the invitation to appear before the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly. Having seen the list of other witnesses who have been requested to appear before this committee, I wanted to share with you a little background about myself and my experience when it comes to electronic petitions.

As you may know, I'm an assistant to the member for Lanark–Frontenac–Lennox and Addington, Mr. Randy Hillier. I've worked here at Queen's Park for almost four and half years. While my job requirements vary every day, as I'm sure you can all attest to with your own staff, one of my primary focuses has been to help modernize Mr. Hillier's online advocacy efforts. I will speak more to this in a minute.

Aside from my employment here at Queen's Park, I also have a vast amount of experience in consulting, developing and mobilizing online advocacy campaigns. I've worked with small businesses, start-ups, non-profits, corporations and political campaigns at all three levels of government. My specialty in this regard, when it comes to my work outside of Queen's Park, is to help find or develop the necessary tools to help projects of all sizes achieve their desired outcomes online.

Through my external experience as well as my experience with Mr. Hillier, I've also provided my guidance and expertise to other members of the PC caucus in their efforts to better utilize online petitions.

For my presentation here this afternoon, I'd like to focus on three aspects that I think are very relevant for consideration when it comes to electronic petitions. Specifically, I will focus on what exactly an online petition is from a technical standpoint. I'll also focus on Mr. Hillier's experience, and mine working for him, in using e-petitions over the past four years. Finally, I'd like to provide an overview of what is currently being done here in Ontario at the Legislature from an electronic petition standpoint.

First off, what an e-petition is from a technical standpoint: Having researched this subject extensively for Mr. Hillier in regard to both his work on this committee as well as for his green paper on reforms to the standing orders that included e-petitions, I think there's a certain level of uncertainty of what exactly an e-petition is. As I've watched this committee debate the subject for a couple of years now, I want to provide a technical explanation of how exactly a petition works online compared to in a paper copy. Quite simply, it's far less complex than I think most believe it to be. Essentially, all an online petition consists of is a block of text on a website, what we would normally consider the body or the text of a paper petition, as well as a form with fields such as name, address, email, phone number.

While a petition isn't a standard tool on most websites you may visit on a daily basis, from a technical standpoint you likely use the same functionality every single day. If you've ever made a purchase online, signed up for a newsletter, used a contact form or RSVP'd for an event, each of these functions have the same technical requirements as an online petition. For example, if you've made a purchase online, you've submitted your shipping info securely to a business while confirming your order. If you've used the contact form on a website, like many of you already feature on your legislative websites, you've filled out your contact information and submitted your message to a recipient. Signing up for a newsletter from a non-profit or a business is no different, submitting likely your name and an email into a form on a website in which you consent to receive updates in return.

From a technical standpoint, a petition is simply a variation of any of these actions on any other website. A constituent, on your website, fills out a form with the required contact information that you establish, and by submitting the form they inherently consent to signing the petition text that you already have on that page.

Most members already use this exact same function to allow their constituents, for example, to request a celebratory scroll. Technically speaking, there's really nothing different when a constituent requests the type of scroll they'd like to receive on your website and subsequently provides the required contact information compared to signing an online petition. Technically speaking, they're identical. You've set out the parameters of what the scroll will provide and they fill out the information you need to provide it to them.

On a far larger scale than the use of celebratory scrolls, for example, the government's recent budget talks initiative is very similar in terms of a technical standpoint. Although it's far more complex in nature given the size and scope of the initiative, from a technical standpoint it's the exact same. You were offered the ability to submit your ideas for the budget along with your contact information. If you chose to vote on the different ideas, you had to provide your contact information. It's the same concept inherently as a petition, with the petition text and the form to follow.

In short, I hope you can see, from a technical standpoint, that the concept of an e-petition is very simple, and in a larger scale it's being used not just by users on the Internet every day but, for the most part, by your constituents on your websites every single day.

Speaking briefly to my experience implementing electronic petitions for Mr. Hillier, having covered what I'll call the technical 101 of online petitions, in terms of usage, Mr. Hillier was one of the first members of this Legislature to start using e-petitions on his legislative website, offering his constituents and also people from across Ontario the ability to sign electronic petitions. Over the past four years, we've featured almost 50 different petitions on Mr. Hillier's website and to date have had over 50,000 unique signatures.

1310

Having read the table officers' recent research on various e-petition models across the world, we have found, similar to many jurisdictions, that the number of individuals who sign a petition online significantly outnumbers the amount who sign one of our off-line petitions that we feature in our constituency office, for example. In Mr. Hillier's case, the ratio of online to off-line signatures averages nearly 10 to 1 for every petition, in some cases reaching as high as 20 to 1 or 25 to 1 the amount of signatures we receive online versus off-line.

Without any dispute, I can confidently say we've found providing Mr. Hillier's constituents with online petitions to be an incredible success. Given the geographical size of his riding, for example, providing petitions online is a far easier way to reach all of his constituents than expecting them to come into one of his constituency offices to sign a petition physically. We've found countless times that the convenience that we provide by offering it online in this day and age significantly outweighs the hassle it is to come into the office itself and sign a hard copy.

I will say, though, that one of the biggest concerns we have faced, and this has happened time after time with various online petitions, is an awareness by many people that the Legislature doesn't, in fact, accept electronic petitions. We feature them on our website, but we've heard concerns time and time again; people recognize that they aren't considered official. In doing so, we've had to tell them, quite bluntly, that they're right. Even though the text of the online petition is identical to the off-line petition—we make the off-line petition available on each online petition page so that you can download it, print it off and sign it, if you so choose. But from a technical standpoint, we use the exact same text, same titles, and we require the same contact fields. A lot of people are very confused about why their signature online is not considered the same as an off-line signature—for example, we can't offer a ministerial response to them—when the petitions are identical.

In terms of effectiveness and responsiveness, we've found online petitions to be far, far superior to the traditional off-line, hard-copy petitions. Our ability to quickly publish and spread a new petition online allows us to reach far more of our constituents than we ever could off-line using traditional means. Just as an example of this, yesterday afternoon, Mr. Hillier published his latest petition online in regard to Bill 45. In less than a day, the petition has been signed by almost 1,500 people online, and that's just here in Ontario. To put that in perspective, if that were an off-line petition, using the traditional hard-copy means, that would be over 60 full pages of signatures in less than 24 hours. The reach we're able to access online significantly outweighs what we could ever do off-line in this day and age.

Quickly, I also want to just sum up what others are doing, whether it's other members or other parties. Given that I've followed the deliberations of this committee quite closely in my role working for Mr. Hillier, I know

that one of the things that's been discussed is a lack of infrastructure, specifically for members, when it comes to implementing e-petitions. More specifically, I know that it's been discussed that primarily only the PC caucus is using e-petitions. In my research I found that to be, frankly, not completely accurate. Members of all three caucuses are currently using electronic petitions on their websites. While the PC caucus does have the largest number of MPPs who offer e-petitions, the member from Bramalea-Gore-Malton, Mr. Jagmeet Singh, for example, offers online petitions on his website. And at my last analysis, two government caucus members also use online petitions: The member from Ottawa-Orléans as well as the Associate Minister of Health, Ms. Dipika Damerla, both feature online petitions on their websites. I also had a discussion just the other day with I believe one of the developers for Liberal caucus services, and it's actually a functionality that I believe he said is built into every one of the Liberal legislative member websites. So the infrastructure is there, or it appears to be there. I know many of the PC caucus members use it, I know some of the NDP caucus members use it, and from what I've been informed, the Liberal caucus members also have access to the same technology built into their sites already.

Furthermore, not only MPPs from all three caucuses are offering online petitions, but all three parties are offering them as well. ontariopc.com, ontarioliberal.ca and ontariondp.ca—all are offering Ontarians various petitions that they can choose to sign. So it's not something that's currently just being limited—I understand that that's partisan in nature, but it's something that we're all using and we're all offering to Ontarians across the province.

While I don't mean to editorialize here, I would say that I think one of the largest concerns that I've seen, working both for Mr. Hillier and then for clients outside the Legislature, is that the growing use of third-party websites is starting to become the go-to for a lot of people. There are websites such as change.org or avaaz.org. They specialize in online petitions, and that's quickly becoming the go-to avenue for people who want to sign a petition online. Because in a lot of cases, members of Parliament or members of provincial Parliament aren't offering this to their constituents or to people in this province, people are choosing to go elsewhere. I think that ought to be a point of concern. Traditionally, petitions were used solely in hard-copy form and presented in the Legislature, and it's quickly becoming the case that the traffic that these sites are receiving and the number of signatures that are being signed on these online petitions on these various third-party websites are rapidly outgrowing those that are being signed here on members' websites.

In closing, from a technical standpoint, I hope I've addressed the implementation of an e-petition on members' websites. It's no more difficult than the contact forms most of you already use. In most cases, it's even simpler than a scroll request, which most of you, I believe, all feature on your website.

I think e-petitions offer all members a very simple and effective mechanism to connect with their constituents through a medium—the Internet—where people currently spend most of their time searching and researching issues.

Thank you very much for your time. I'd be happy to take any questions.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you very much, Chris. In keeping with tradition, I'll go to the government member. Garfield?

Mr. Garfield Dunlop: Opposition members.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Or opposition.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop: They're the government members over there. Would you rather go first?

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Years of habit, sorry. Garfield, go ahead.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop: I just had a couple of questions. You spoke earlier about the simplicity of implementing online petitions and that members of all caucuses already use these online petitions. Can you expand on that a little bit more?

Mr. Chris Chapin: Yes. Like I said, I believe there are two current Liberal caucus members who have online petitions on their websites. I know many PC caucus members do. The first one I came across for the NDP was the member from Bramalea-Gore-Malton.

From a purely technical standpoint, just about every member that I came across in this entire Legislature has the technical requirements already built into their website. From a functionality standpoint, it's text of the petition, which is no different than a news release. It's the same concept: You're posting or publishing text to a website.

Then, from a submissions or data-collection standpoint, the form on the website is identical to the one that many members feature for scroll requests for an anniversary or birthday scroll. In many cases, it's almost more secure because you're not transmitting private data like birthdays or anniversaries. And most members, if not all, already feature a contact form on their website. It's the same technical concept. You're asking a user to provide their contact information and they're submitting it in a form. It's pretty straightforward.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop: Okay. One of the concerns some of the members of this committee have had has been the security of personal data. Could you explain how most online petitions store and protect that data?

Mr. Chris Chapin: It all depends on how the website that the e-petition is featured on sets it up. Most use some form of a back-end database. Most forms are encrypted. The levels of encryption vary, but when you submit a form you're transmitting private data inherently, so the data is submitted to the database securely.

I was reading the table officers' report on it and it was mentioned that many of the jurisdictions do use secured encryption as a requirement for transmitting data. On the base level, the data that's being transmitted is usually very commonplace. Most just ask for a name, an email address, maybe a physical address, but some don't even

require that. From a database standpoint, it just boils down to what you choose to use to store that information.
1320

If it's a member's website, for example, it's stored securely and it's only made available to those members. I think I mentioned earlier that with the trend of a lot of online petitions being third-party websites, that data's out of our control. If it's being submitted to a member, it's in their hands and ultimately you're responsible for that data—and you get re-elected or elected every four years. With a third party, there are no guarantees that that data isn't being sold off. It's illegal for the data to be sold off here.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Yes, Randy—

Mr. Randy Hillier: Yes, I just want a little bit more about the data integrity. The members' websites are governed by the Members' Integrity Act, which also includes our websites. There's been numerous rulings about the use of members' websites for activities, and a number of rulings have been made about the non-partisanship of members' websites. But the data integrity—that's built in within everybody's system, your own security that you have for each member's website. I know for the government side, all their websites are controlled by the government caucus, right? I'm sure they take adequate precautions to ensure that there's security on their websites.

The data that is transmitted—one of the other questions is the multiplicity of emails. How is that dealt with from a technical standpoint?

Mr. Chris Chapin: It all depends. Every website is inherently unique. There are platforms that do this on their own. There are certain providers that allow it to be set up in a certain way. I know oftentimes it's limited to a signature can only be counted for one email address. That's the equivalent of your unique ID.

From a security standpoint, it's pretty straightforward. Like I said before, while we may see it as an end-user as being an online petition, a database or the computer itself treats it like any other form on your website. The data is stored as securely as the data that's submitted for a constituent trying to reach you via contact form or whether it's a constituent submitting a request for a 50th wedding anniversary certificate. That data is submitted securely to each member or to the database itself and it's republished back out.

In terms of the email usage, that's the most common way it's implemented. Each individual email address is treated as one unique signature and that if you were to submit one unique email address, it will only count as one signature. You can keep clicking the button to sign the petition, but it's only going to treat it as one; it's only going to be submitted as one. We don't, in Ontario, have any kind of unique voter identifier that could actually know that Mr. Hillier is Mr. Hillier or Mr. Mantha is Mr. Mantha, but the way most online petitions treat it is that your email is your unique identifier, and if you've signed that petition before, it won't let you sign it again.

Mr. Randy Hillier: The other question that's been brought up is that these people don't really exist. It would be false attempts, putting in false email addresses, because the system will accept only one email address. What happens if somebody puts in a faulty email address?

Mr. Chris Chapin: It depends on the kind of system you're using. There's some software and some plug-ins, basically a feature that could be built into the form itself that will validate the email address itself. Essentially, it tests it without you really noticing. It sends a ping to the server and identifies whether it's a valid email address or not.

I know I can speak to the experience working for Mr. Hillier. We simply haven't found that people are abusing the system. I know we've heard stories about the White House and their implementation of electronic petitions requiring a response on building a Death Star, but in our experience we simply haven't found that people are trying to abuse it—you know, one person signs the petition.

We've had more problems with the fact that elderly couples will only have one email address between the two of them—and so they submit both of their names for one email address—than we've had people trying to spam our petitions by signing it multiple times. It's just simply not been something we've encountered or, frankly, that I've heard anybody encounter, I think, when it comes to what's seen as an official legislative petition. People tend to respect that. But otherwise, there are those safeguards in place that a unique email address is considered a unique email address and if it's not real, it's not real and it won't accept it.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): I'll continue around. Michael, any comments?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes, sure. I'm one of those other individuals who actually uses these petitions on my website and they're a great tool. They reach far-reaching regions.

I just want to touch on stories. We always hear the stories in regard to individuals with the traditional format: "I agree with the purpose; I don't want to sign it because then I'm giving my personal information and then I'm going to be bombarded with information from whichever of the parties is there." The same case would apply here on the e-information, where, "I don't want to share that personal information, but I do agree with the issue."

Have you ever come across that issue? Again, trying to be non-partisan, I have a lot of constituents who may agree with some of the petitions that the opposition has or that the government has, but they do not want to be bombarded in providing their contacts. Is there a way, in your experience, where an individual can participate in the e-signature but not share that personal information?

Mr. Chris Chapin: Yes. Essentially, there are two different things. From our experience with Mr. Hillier's website, we, up front, give you the option of whether you want to be contacted again. What we'll traditionally do is provide the same printed petition as we do online and

then we'll forward them a copy, if they choose, of the official ministerial response. While the Legislature doesn't do it officially, we'll scan that document in and we'll provide them that update in lieu of the Legislature doing it itself. But we provide that option up front. We ask them whether they'd like to receive any updates on the petition itself.

There's certainly a growing concern, like you said, about people not wanting to share that information. I mean, there's no real workaround. We will count you as a petition signature and a signee, and if you choose to not receive any updates, essentially that's all you are. The data is stored as long as we host the petition online, and as soon as we do—we won't contact you anymore. And if you choose to never be contacted, we won't contact you, period. So there's certainly that concern and oftentimes it is those issues that raise it more often than not. It might be something from a partisan perspective; that they might not agree with, Mr. Hillier, for example—but on that specific issue they do, and so they choose not to provide or request to be contacted.

Mr. Michael Mantha: The infrastructure you were talking about earlier that seems to be in place for some but seems not to be in place, and the costs associated, if there are some costs that are associated with that—can you elaborate a little bit on those comments you were making earlier, particularly what's in place now and, if it's missing, what needs to be in place? Would there be a cost to that?

Mr. Chris Chapin: From that standpoint, I only know what I've discussed briefly with one of the Liberal IT developers. He told me that the Liberal caucus members, from my understanding, all have the same templated website. I believe that most of the NDP caucus members do as well, that it's a similar template. I've been informed that the Liberal caucus template does have electronic petitions built into their website, and it's just up to the members themselves to choose whether they want to use it or not.

From a cost standpoint, you don't pay per submission. You don't pay per petition you host. It's part of your website. If you have that feature built in, that comes down to just the implementation of your website itself. So from a cost standpoint, the only additional cost is if you don't have the feature built in already, but for the most part, it appears just about every member of the Legislature does. It would just be a matter of officially recognizing the online petition, which we currently don't.

1330

Mr. Michael Mantha: I'm a traditionalist. I like the old paper stuff. I still carry a lot of paper copies. My staff give me a hard time because I do that because they do everything electronically, but I love the paper signature. It seems like when you put your name to a document with pen and paper, it's a commitment that you're making. A lot of the newer ideas—the same thing is done on the computer. How do you validate that signature?

Mr. Chris Chapin: How do we validate it?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes. How do you validate the signature that is going on? Put my mind at ease in regard

to me feeling the same amount of commitment that I do when I put pen to paper and sign that petition as you would probably feel typing in your name. I need to get my mind into that—

Mr. Chris Chapin: I guess it's kind of two different universes. The similarity is the same as you handing over cash, making a purchase in a physical store versus you pressing “process order” on an online store. There is no effective equivalent. The way that most, if not all, online petitions work relative to that same concept is that you'd fill out your information on the form on the website—and, for example, our website says, “Add your signature.” It's the same mental concept that we're asking you to do. We're asking you to add your signature. Obviously we don't make you sign your computer screen, but it's the same concept.

From that standpoint, they're two different universes, but it's the same thing as when you press “process order” for an online purchase. It's the same thing as handing cash over in a store.

Mr. Michael Mantha: So to validate the signature—my understanding is, there were discussions between the committee before where there was a concern that was raised that it's not an electronic program that is building up all these signatures within the petition, that there is an actual human part of it where there's a code that you have to visualize, which you have to enter in as you're signing the petition, to build it in.

Mr. Chris Chapin: There's definitely that. There are various forms of secure capture code that you can build into a petition online. A lot of different websites feature it. If you've ever tried to buy tickets to a concert online, most times they'll have—it's called CAPTCHA. It's usually frustrating because they blur the letters or it's some weird combination of letters and numbers that you have to refresh multiple times before you get it right. There is that option.

Those are typically done for things like online purchases or online ticket sales where there's an anticipated rush that's going to happen where somebody might try to take advantage of it. There's something to be gained, whether it's tickets to the Blue Jays games that go on sale—for example, they feature on their website a CAPTCHA that basically prevents you from building a robot or a program that would process that form incredibly fast.

Those technologies do exist, and they're quite easy to implement. Like I said earlier, from my experience working from Mr. Hillier, we haven't found that—there hasn't been a rush to scam our petitions online. They're not that interesting.

Mr. Michael Mantha: He's working for you?

Mr. Chris Chapin: Simply put, there's not a rush to sign a petition like there is to acquire baseball tickets.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes.

Mr. Chris Chapin: But the technology does exist. It's nothing more than just a plug-in on most websites. It's very easy to implement, and that is one way to increase the likelihood that it is in fact a real person submitting

that form. It's just not a problem we've ever felt we needed to address.

Mr. Michael Mantha: So it's not something that you're experiencing right now with the petitions that—

Mr. Chris Chapin: We don't currently use any kind of capture plug-in.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Is the government, on their websites—that they're utilizing it if they have it?

Mr. Chris Chapin: No. Currently, none of the online petitions for any of the caucus members from all three parties that I've come across, or either three official party websites, use any kind of capture technology.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I've actually just come across maybe a couple of them that I participated in in the 10 years that I've been working with e-petitions. Other than that, you're right; it's just basically putting your name and off it goes.

Mr. Chris Chapin: Yes. Typically, they're solely used just to protect from abuse. When it comes to those kinds of things where something could actually be taken advantage of or you could prevent others from gaining access, like purchases or a limited-quantity supply of something, you put it in place so that it slows down any kind of a program or prevents a program outright from taking advantage of the form.

Mr. Michael Mantha: One last question on the format of the petitions that you're sending out: Are you obligated to go through the actual petition before you sign or do you actually go to the—can I skip the whole reading of your petition and you say, "Sure, Randy's a good guy," and just not absorb the content of what that particular petition is?

Mr. Chris Chapin: I suppose. It's listed out, but you have to scroll down to get to the form itself. If you choose not to read the petition, I guess it's no different than walking around an event with a paper petition saying, "Will you sign this?" and them not reading it. We don't make you take a quiz to see whether you read the petition or not before you add your signature, but nine times out of 10, the text of the petition on our website at least requires to you to scroll down to input your information and then add your signature. There's nothing that prevents you—like I said, we don't make you take a quiz to sign the petition. I don't think anybody does for a paper petition either.

Mr. Michael Mantha: All right. Thanks, Chris. And I'll make sure Randy forgives you for that "uninteresting" comment on his petitions.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Michael. Yes, Chris?

Mr. Chris Ballard: Welcome, and thank you for your interesting input. I guess what I'm interested in, and have been from the beginning, is: How do we use the modern electronic age to bring people into greater involvement with democracy, with government, with creating policy and legislation? E-petitions, other types of electronic—Internet, ICT, are all good steps.

I'm trying to wrap my mind around: If there were to be an e-petitions system, is it one that is set up for

individual members? Is it one that is set up by the House? Is it one that is set up by government? Those are some of the bigger issues that I'm dealing with, and I'm dealing with them because of what weight we give petitions. That, to me, is crucial: What weight do we give a petition?

From a technical perspective, not to get into debate, I'm concerned about how you can slam a petition even if you're pinging the mail server. We know that there are a million ways around it.

Mr. Chris Chapin: Absolutely.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Personally, I probably have 20 or 30 domains that I own. That means I could go on and, almost, in an infinite number, if I wanted to take the time, sign Randy's petition or not. So there are ways around it.

Mr. Chris Chapin: Absolutely.

Mr. Chris Ballard: It speaks to, in my mind—and what I'm looking for and what I'm concerned about is: If petitions in future, whether they be e-petitions or paper, are to influence the development of legislation, I'm concerned that just people residing in Ontario have access to them, if we're to give them some greater weight in future. That's kind of where I'm coming from.

You talked about one of MPP Hillier's petitions. People come in and they sign it. They read the preamble and then they read the petition. What would you think, going forward, would be submitted to the House?

Mr. Chris Chapin: You mean in an electronic form?

Mr. Chris Ballard: In e-format.

Mr. Chris Chapin: There are various ways you could do it. I think something as simple—it's something that's simple to format; it's just printing off, whether it be a spreadsheet with the preamble and exactly what they signed on to. In most cases, most members' petitions that I've seen essentially are formatted like a spreadsheet anyway. You have a grid with a column for your name and a column for your address. I think, simply put, formatting and submitting it wouldn't be that much of a challenge. Most databases will spit out the data itself in a spreadsheet for you. So whether you just add the text and the preamble in a row or two above it or whether it's presented in a PDF—I think there are probably endless different possibilities on how an electronic petition could be submitted to the Legislature, whether it's provided in a data format itself and transmitted electronically, or that the requirement still remains the same, that you print off those electronic signatures and table them in the House, the same as you otherwise would with a paper copy.

1340

It's something I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about. I think in implementation it wouldn't be very challenging. You'd just include the text similar to how you already do and present the petition. I guess it would be up ultimately to the members to decide whether they thought they would transmit it electronically to the Clerk or continue to table it in a paper copy that they print off on their own choosing.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Yes. I guess the concern I have with the process we've been through, and I've made this

comment a few times, is that we're getting into the weeds, into the technical and into how exactly you set an e-petition system up. I'm more interested in, right at this point, the higher level: the impact on representative democracy versus direct democracy, we'll say, and using ICT in the future to increase engagement.

Whether or not individual members set these up or government sets it up remains to be seen. To me, that will be answered, I think, when I'm comfortable at the higher level on the impact of electronics on engaging people.

Just to be clear, too, you made reference to the government's—you gave us your suggestions for the budget etc. poll that we had. But I don't think, in reading a couple of Mr. Hillier's online petitions—it's not my sense that they were partisan. There is a difference between what the government has done and what individual members—

Mr. Chris Chapin: No; in that sense I was just speaking to the technical nature.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Ah, okay, just to the tech? Exactly, okay. I just wanted to make that clear.

I think I'll leave it there. I have some concerns about privacy. I have real concerns still about signatory identification. I've looked at models around the world that do it slightly differently and I know some of the problems they run into, but by and large my bigger question is at that 60,000-foot level, and that's about the use of ICT in terms of citizen engagement. So we'll leave it there.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Chris. I'll go to Randy and then Soo.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Do you want to finish off their time?

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): You want to finish up? I'm sorry. Go ahead, then.

Ms. Soo Wong: Okay; thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I just have a couple of questions. I think my colleague Mr. Ballard talked about the concern about safety. When you worked in Mr. Hillier's office to begin this e-petition stuff, did you consult the privacy commissioner in establishing the e-petition or to get her opinion—of the new acting privacy commissioner—in terms of making sure the information from your website is safe?

Mr. Chris Chapin: I don't know if I can speak to that truthfully, just because we initially had electronic petitions on the website before I started at Mr. Hillier's office. So I couldn't say with any certainty whether—we changed up the system, the way it was formatted, slightly once I joined Mr. Hillier's office, but I wasn't in the office as a staff member when it was first initially set up.

Ms. Soo Wong: Okay, good. So from the time you were in Mr. Hillier's office, did you ever experience any kind of hacking or compromised situation to that website that would require your office or Mr. Hillier's office to report that incident?

Mr. Chris Chapin: None whatsoever.

Ms. Soo Wong: Never?

Mr. Chris Chapin: No. They're hosted on secure servers—the databases. We would be notified if there

was any suspicious activity. To date—over four years—it has never come up once.

Ms. Soo Wong: Never come up once; okay.

The other thing I was kind of curious about is: Can you share with the committee, for the record's purposes, your credentials to make you an expert on the issue of e-petitions?

Mr. Chris Chapin: Sure. Like I said, I also operate privately with multiple different small businesses. I've done work for some of the larger law firms in the country and various not-for-profits, focusing solely on online activism. I'm a Web developer as well. There is one of the largest online platforms that focuses on political and not-for-profit advocacy online. It's a company called NationBuilder. It's widely considered the leading activist tool online, and I'm a certified expert with NationBuilder. I've worked at a digital level on all three levels of political campaigns. When it comes to the use of online petitions specifically here in Ontario, I don't think anybody has created more, developed more, than myself. We were one of the first to use it from a political standpoint, and that's something both with Mr. Hillier and privately for others I've continued to work extensively on.

Ms. Soo Wong: So how do you address when some of our constituents in our communities don't have a computer? In order to do an e-petition, someone has to have access to a computer. How do you address that issue? There are frail seniors in our communities who wouldn't know how to even use a bank card; right?

Mr. Chris Chapin: Yes.

Ms. Soo Wong: How do you address this issue? Because if you're saying that as an e-expert on this particular initiative—how do we ensure that every Ontarian, the 13-million-plus Ontarians really have access? You're probably in the generation that we call "digital natives," right? We have a significant portion of aging seniors—a significant portion of a community don't have access to a computer and the techie stuff. If we're going to move in the direction of e-petitions, are you not shutting down those who are not technically able and have the resources to do an online petition? How do you access them if we move in that direction?

Mr. Chris Chapin: I'll speak to it from our experience. Like I said, essentially we offer petitions in three different ways. Each individual petition is identical in nature, whether it's a printed copy that we have available in all of our offices—whether it's our office here at Queen's Park or our constituency office, we offer that same paper copy in an online form on our website that you can download, share and print and sign, and then we also offer the online equivalent of it, where it's the text, the same as the printed version, as well as the form with the same contact fields.

I can't speak to everybody's access. I'm sure there are people right now who don't access or can't access the printed versions that all of you, I'm sure, feature in your constituency offices. I can't pretend for a second that I think everybody in this province has access to all of our printed online petitions.

I think in our sense, in the way we implement it, we offer it the same, whether you're signing an online or an offline petition. I can't think for a million—I would not speculate, but we don't offer solely online petitions that we don't offer in an offline format. I think that's how we've safeguarded that. I know that Mr. Hillier's community has a great number of seniors who certainly don't have access to the Internet or would not know how to.

That said, I know from just the analytics and the demographics of online users, whether it's platforms like Facebook or just overall new email accounts, that that trend is starting to significantly shift the other way, where we're seeing the elderly become amongst the most active users online as they're starting to play catch-up, whether it's keeping in contact with their kids or their grandkids.

I don't think we have an ultimate answer to that, but that's what we do.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Chris. I think the government has used up the time now. I'll go to the opposition.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Michael mentioned a few things that maybe you can expand on about how one of his concerns was being bombarded with additional emails. How is that dealt with? There is federal legislation that I know all the websites have to respond to—

Mr. Chris Chapin: Yes. The federal government had passed—I believe it's the CAN-SPAM legislation that applies to everybody online, and that essentially requires you to request that you receive email updates. It's now against the law to—if you were to respond back to them, if you were to bombard them per se, as you mentioned, sir, you have to have their explicit permission to do so. I think that's addressed by law at this point, that you can't bombard them and that you need to provide that consent to receive email updates in the first place. We had to slightly reformat our website, when they passed the legislation federally, to prevent that kind of bombardment from happening.

1350

Mr. Randy Hillier: I just want to go back to Chris's comments about the fake email or fake identifier. Of course, we heard from the Clerk that at the present time, there's no way that we can determine with certainty that there aren't fake signatures on paper petitions that are introduced to the House, and that there are ways—Chris could have 20 different domains and email—

Mr. Chris Ballard: And nothing to do for an evening.

Mr. Randy Hillier: —and nothing to do for an evening, and go on and do all my petitions with his 20 different signatures. I'll have to go back and see if he has done that.

I think that speaks to one of the earlier motions that I put in front of this committee, and that is that in order for us to fully comprehend and come up with a good decision on what the electronic petition will look like and how it will be constructed, we first have to know what the outcome is. That speaks to Chris—if there's a change in the outcome with a petition, if the House is contem-

plating giving petitions greater weight, triggering a different action, like triggering a debate in the House or triggering a committee hearing with a threshold—if that was to happen, then, in my view, we would have to put far more consideration into preventing Chris from sending me 20 emails from his 20 different servers tonight.

That's what I think is important for this committee: Do we want to alter the outcomes of what a petition does in the House, first and foremost? I'm of the view that we ought to leave petitions the way they are, as far as outcomes: that there is an obligation by the government to respond, with a written response. Again, with my system, we can then share that directly with the people who signed the e-petition. We can't do that, or it's much more cumbersome to do it, with a paper petition, for us to go through, because a lot of those paper signatures are just about illegible after a period of time.

I'd like to have the committee contemplate that first: Do we want to see any changes? Do we want to trigger the government into an obligation to do something with e-petitions other than making a response, as it is today?

Once we answer that question, then the balance of your question, Chris, has much greater clarity.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Sorry, I shouldn't engage in debate—

Interjections.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Anyway, we know that we can fake signatures today on a paper copy. We know that if somebody is really interested, they can fake a bunch of different names on an e-petition. It really becomes moot. If there's no other outcome that's going to be triggered, whether you sign my petitions 20 times tonight, it doesn't have any difference in the outcome.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Randy. We've run out of time for the opposition.

Michael, any further comments?

Mr. Michael Mantha: It's not particularly a question. I enjoyed the conversation that went around today.

I just want to be on the record to say that with the paper petitions that have gone out, on numerous occasions Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash have signed my petitions, so that happens.

Mr. Chris Chapin: They're still alive.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes, they're alive.

Interjection: Elvis was at an event in my riding.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Oh, was he? Okay.

Mr. Chris Ballard: I ran against Elvis in my riding.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I really enjoyed the point that Randy just brought up, which is the actual outcome. I think the other part that we need to look at is, when an individual puts their name electronically or signs it, that is their tool to express their view. By expressing their view, there's an expectation that I'm going to get an answer to that. So if anticipating an outcome is that, I think that before we change anything on the outcome, that has to remain.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I agree.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes, because individuals certainly participate in the signing of petitions in order to

get an outcome or a response to show either positive, negative, constructive or various views in regard to a particular issue. I think that's a larger discussion if we're going to have a discussion on the outcome. I think there's an expectation from the individual who is signing the petition that, "I'm engaging in the process," and we actually should find a way to encourage that, getting a lot more people, because there are a lot of disenfranchised individuals out there who are very frustrated with our political system right now. So this may be a tool or an opportunity for us.

Ms. Soo Wong: And it's not exclusive.

Mr. Michael Mantha: No, it's not. But it may be a tool to gather a lot more interest from Ontarians, which is something I think everybody around this table wants.

I've enjoyed your comments here today. I don't have any more questions for you.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Okay. That wraps up the time for the third party. Thank you, Michael and Chris. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your testimony. You're not hard to find in the building. I'm sure you would entertain any further inquiries from any—

Mr. Randy Hillier: I'll put a petition up on my website.

Mr. Chris Chapin: So I'll publish it.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): If any other MPPs wanted any information—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Sorry?

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): I said, if any other MPPs wanted—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I just have a comment, Mr. Chair, in response to Mr. Hillier and Mr. Mantha, because I think Mr. Mantha provided some good points. Mr. Hillier is saying that the outcome is still going to be the same, so if we're interested, as a committee, to change the outcome, then he can understand why we're looking for something more elaborate.

I also say that the input is very important because if you're going to take that input and hand it to government as a whole, it's going to have some weight. The current written petition, because somebody took the time to sign it—it has a weighting factor.

If I can go on a website and easily sign it and spread the word to sign it and that person doesn't have to get engaged a whole lot to sign it, you're going to have to apply a different weighting factor.

The worst thing governments do, and I think I know where Mr. Hillier is coming from, but I'll reserve that as my own, is give people hope—if you make the process of signing something such that they hope that there's an intent to do something, it does create what I would call a conflict or a confrontation or whatever you might want to call it at a later date. That's my biggest fear.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): We can continue this discussion—

Mr. Randy Hillier: I just would have thought, Bas, that you would have been all in favour of a change.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: If it has validity. But I have a different opinion on where you're going.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I think the worst thing that you can ever have in a democracy is an attitude or a sentiment within your population that is forlorn and that is without hope. I think that is why people go out to vote when they do: They're hoping for an outcome and hoping for something. If we can—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: You have a lot more faith than I do.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I know that if there was no hope to effect change, I don't think anybody would go out to a ballot box every four years. I think the most important thing we can do is to demonstrate to people that their interests are our interests and that their interests will be heard. They may not be acted upon in the fashion that they want them to be acted upon, but their interests are important and will be heard.

What I find with petitions—I know, and everybody around this committee knows, that somebody who is disappointed or disaffected and who is seeking some redress from government knows that they can't phone up the Premier and get a direct audience. Their avenue to express themselves—and even at our level, as members, having 120,000 people in my riding, it is inconceivable that each and every one of those people would have an opportunity to sit down directly with me, let alone the Premier. So the petition is that historical avenue to demonstrate to people that democracy does function, that they do have an avenue to vocalize or to express their interests directly, whether it be to the Premier, a minister, an MPP or whoever.

1400

My experience has been that they have been a very effective tool, and I think it's a tool that would benefit every member in this House. I'm sharing my experience not so that I'm the only one, or that there are fewer people doing this. I'm sharing it because I do think it will be valuable for all members.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Michael had a comment and then Bas.

Mr. Michael Mantha: With all due respect, taking away any hope or faith out of individuals who put their name to a petition, whether they type it or not—I don't think that's either your or my judgment call to make. You just deflated me completely when you made that comment earlier. That's not what he meant. I'm sure that's not what he meant. I'll have a chat with him afterwards when we leave this room, but I'm sure that's not what he meant.

You know what? For individuals, that is their way of participating in democracy, is by putting their name down. Exactly when they're putting that name down, taking that step or writing their name is their voice. When they put their X at the ballot box, when they put their name on a petition, when they come out to an event in order to—we had 3,000 people out on the lawn yesterday. That is their hope and their faith in the system, that they can actually mobilize and change something.

I know that's not what you meant earlier, but damn, did it ever come across in a really rough way for me to swallow, my friend. I know that's not what you meant.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I wasn't commenting to you. It was to—

Mr. Michael Mantha: I know, but hearing those words coming out—and I choose to believe things are different. We're 107 elected members here at the province, and I choose to believe that once we all get here, the flags and the colours go out, and we're all here trying to do our best in order to help constituents back home.

That was really hard to hear you say that, and I know that's not what you meant. Taking away that hope and that faith in our system pushes people away from what we are doing here. I think we should be looking at a way of getting more people in through e-petitions, however we determine to validate those signatures that are going to go on it, and however we determine what the process is going to be, what is going to be put up. I think that's another way of engaging a lot more people, especially the youth who are out there who are very much within the media picture. I just wanted to make that comment.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thanks, Michael. Yes, Bas and then Granville.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Yes, Mr. Chair. I hear what Mr. Hillier is saying, but I'm looking at it from his perspective today. I looked at his website. He's the generator of the petitions. The petitions I'm familiar with have been generated by special interest groups in my riding.

I reach my riding by holding town hall meetings and giving people that face-to-face opportunity to express their views. In fact, my colleague and I just did one recently. It may have probably showed up in the media as negative, but, to be honest with you, it turned out very positive for the two of us. We've done this more than once. We've done it on the budgets; we've done it on issues in our ridings. The people in our ridings thank us for having those town hall meetings, where you can speak to them face to face.

My colleague has done the phone-call, robocall-type town hall meetings also, and I've sat in on it. They find that worthwhile, because they can speak to us, because they've elected us to be that representative of their views and their concerns to the government.

What is happening here is to try and change that and put it in a different sphere, and that's where my concern comes in. If you're going to put it in that different sphere, you're going to have to have a weighting factor, you're going to have to have a quality factor, and you're going to have to have a security factor. I'm not convinced we're there yet.

If it's just to replace the paper petition and it allows somebody to sign, so I don't have to appear at the door, as you said before, then I think we'll weaken the system; we're not strengthening it. That's just my personal view. I've done petitions, as a citizen, before I got elected. At least 50% of the people signed it to just get me out of their door. It is how you engage the people, whether you will get a valid response or not, and how you weight it.

If you want e-petitions, and they just go online and they say, "Here's my name, address and my email," I think you have to set the criteria at a different bar as to the quality of that petition, whereas if I went around and had them sign it, or a special interest group went around and had them sign it, I would put a different weight. It's the same thing—if somebody took the time to write a letter to me personally with their own feelings and thoughts, and put a signature at the bottom, I give that a hell of a lot more weight than a petition. In fact, I may even go visit them. That's what I was trying to make reference to. I see the e-petition route that Mr. Hillier wants to go to as problematic, because there's no weighting factor.

Now, if I wanted a petition website, like Mr. Hillier, I think I could use it so that people could tell me when there is something developing in my riding that's going to become a hot potato. That keeps me informed, but it doesn't keep the government informed. That's up to me to bring it here. But in creating what Mr. Hillier wants us to do, it automatically transfers it here. That's what I disagree with.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): I'll go to Granville and then Randy.

Mr. Granville Anderson: I'm just going to expound a little bit on what my colleague said. I meant to ask—I looked at your website too, and I see the questions, whether it's Bill 45 or whatever; it's all on there. That doesn't give the public a say into what their issues are. They are responding to what you are asking. I don't know if Mr. Mantha does the same thing.

In my office, if somebody wants a petition, they get it. I don't tell them what the topic is. They go out, they get their signatures and they come to me and say, "Okay, I would like to present this." Whether it's HST off for certain items, whether it's HST off hydro etc., it's their issue. I'm listening to their concerns, versus me putting in a list of things that I believe in and then saying, "Okay, sign this." These are my views. I want to hear their views. That's where I'm coming from.

If that's what we're going to set up, that you put your ideas on and people just fill in, then how is that going to enhance democracy? I don't understand that. So I'll give you a chance to—maybe I misunderstood something. So that's my point.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Granville. Back to Randy.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Listen, I don't want to conflate different subjects, okay? This is about e-petitions. I still have town halls. I still have forms on my website so that people can contact me and express their views. I still have telephones in my office for people to phone me and tell me their views.

Doing electronic petitions does not prevent me from doing all my historical and accepted practices. Maybe I should say it in this fashion: It's not my purpose and not my intention to make it more difficult for people to contact me. Quite the contrary: I want it to be the most convenient and accessible for them to contact me with their concerns.

1410

To put this in context as well for Granville and for Bas and for others: You've got a fairly large riding, Granville, geographically. It pales in comparison to the geography of my riding.

The largest community in my riding is 10,000 people. It's over 10,000 square kilometres in size. It would encompass about 50 GTA ridings in geography. It is not possible or practical for all those people—and I do the best I can; I have two constituency offices, but still, for people in the Napanee area, it's a minimum two-hour drive to get to the closest constituency office and then two hours back. It's the same as if they are in the Denbigh area or White Lake area. Electronic petitions create more opportunity and more accessibility. I still go up to Denbigh. I still go to Napanee. I still go to White Lake. And they still have the telephone and all those other aspects.

But I'll go back again: If the committee is thinking that it's more important to change the weighting or the outcome of a petition, then that is the first important consideration to address. If not, if we're going to leave the outcome of petitions to be exactly the same as it is today, then that opens up a whole different field of convenience and negates many of the concerns that have been raised. I think it negates all those concerns.

If somebody writes me a letter or if they make a phone call to me or if they send me an email, my interest in their concern is the same. It doesn't matter how they contact me; they've expressed themselves to me. That's the way I do things. Whether I meet them at the Legion for a beer on a Friday afternoon or whether they make a phone call to me or they write me a letter, there's no difference in their importance. That's the way I do it with e-petitions as well. There's no greater or lesser weight to an individual in how they contact me.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Randy. Yes, Michael?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Since we're touting our ridings, mine happens to be 86,000 square kilometres with 37 municipalities, 24 First Nations, 15 unorganized areas and a variety of local services boards and roads boards. So this, for me, is a tool.

Some of the petitions, just for the committee's information, that are on my website have my heading on it. However, they are issues that have been brought to me from constituents. All of them, actually, have come up. The ones that I've personalized are in discussions I've had with stakeholders, particularly the one in regard to developing a Lyme strategy. All of them are issues that have come forward from constituents.

And it is from calls, it is from sitting down at a coffee shop, it is from meeting them, it is from knocking at their door. That happens immediately and that's how you engage. That's what we want. You want to be engaged with your constituents, either by phone, by Internet or by town hall. We all do that.

I think, again, if we're not looking at changing the outcome, if we're looking at this as being another vehicle

in order to engage individuals to bring their concerns forward, I think we should welcome it and really challenge ourselves in regard to how we can do it so that it can carry the weight.

I agree with you; even myself, at times—I was thinking about this before I came onto the committee. I said, "You know what? E-petitions are there. How do you validate that signature?" We have ways of doing it where we can actually identify, although the name isn't written by pen to paper—and that's what I was asking Chris earlier. I am aware that the committee had discussions in regard to how we can validate each one of those signatures. Do we want to have everybody from across the country or specifically in Ontario that are signing those petitions?

Right now, like I said earlier, I've had Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley sign many of my petitions, and they went in. But the issue where, even if it's one person that signed that petition, it validates the issue: I think that's what we, as legislators, need to bring in to the House in order to get a response. There are different ways we can do it. We can do it through petitions. I can do it through a direct ask to the minister during question period or, in the halls here, you can have an off-the-record. You can put a letter out in order to do it. I think this just creates an additional vehicle and it facilitates people from your constituency to get involved. We should embrace that.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you. Does this wrap up discussion?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I'm finished because I sit in the front and I have to be clean.

Mr. Chris Ballard: I have one more comment.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Chris, yes?

Mr. Chris Ballard: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just sort of a wrap-up comment, because from what I'm hearing—and I absolutely agree—it's really about: How do we engage our citizens? The use of Internet communication technology—a petition software is just one of many. I've used a number of different online tools to engage citizens directly, things like opinion and survey trees, where people come in and work their way through, and I get a good understanding of what the concerns and the issues are, rather than me saying, "This is the issue; sign here." That may lead to a paper-based petition.

But I hear you—especially with such a vast geographical area you have to cover, anything that reaches out to people and gives them a sense that they're communicating with you. As MPP Balkissoon said, my concerns are fairly simple. What do we want these things to do? How do we have the security? If we were to move on e-petitions, how do we make sure that there's not outside influence? If there's a big issue going in front of government and it's a government e-petition, how do we make sure that a foreign power doesn't hack the system and put 500,000 "yes" signatures in or "no" signatures in or whatever? Those are the things that really interest me.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Regardless if you have one signature or 500,000, you're addressing the issue that was raised, where that's the outcome—

Mr. Chris Ballard: And the concern I have when we talk about privacy: Where do those signatures come from? But again, we're getting into the weeds. I think there's a lot of discussion, a lot of things that individual MPPs can and should be doing to use electronics to better communicate with their constituents. I'll leave it there.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Fine; thank you. Seeing no more further discussion, I'll just draw to the members of the committee that we did receive a research paper titled E-petitions: Usage Vs Paper Petitions, and Privacy and Security Provisions. We thank Joanne for that. Any comments, Joanne? I know that part of this was in response to some requests.

Ms. Joanne McNair: It was Ms. Wong and Mr. Ballard who had asked a couple of questions.

Mr. Chris Ballard: I actually read it. Thank you very much. It's good information.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Eleanor?

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Chair, just a quick question. Thanks, Joanne. I apologize; I haven't read it yet. I look forward to it. I thank you for this.

Is there anything in here about Australia, because I know Australia has undertaken e-petitions, or I believe they have?

Ms. Joanne McNair: There is a section on Queensland.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Is there?

Ms. Joanne McNair: It's really the two states, Queensland and Tasmania, who do e-petitions.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Oh, forgive me. Here it is. Thank you.

Ms. Joanne McNair: The Australian Senate does accept them, but they don't do it as an institution themselves. They just will accept e-petitions.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you for that paper.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Thanks very much. I haven't read it yet either, but I will before the next meeting.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): The National Conference of State Legislatures: I'll ask—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Make a request, as we always do, and then we'll deal with it later. The Chair has to write the House leaders to get permission to travel.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): What's in front of you is, we have received an invitation from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This committee has gone, historically, in the past. What is required for us to go are two things: (1) we need a motion asking the Chair to write to the House leaders that

authorizes us to go; (2) the Clerk prepares a budget. That gets sent to the Board of Internal Economy. We're not asking for any further funds; we're just directing that we're going to spend some of our funds in this manner. This is meant as a "Have a look, see if you're interested, and we can discuss it next week." It's really just a primer piece to let you know what's going on.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Take a look at the back as well; both sides.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Chair, we shouldn't wait to discuss it. We've always gone—I've sat on this committee—

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): I'll work on a letter—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Mr. Clark was on the committee, and so was Ms. MacLeod.

Interjections.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I'm happy to move this.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I just wanted to add in, I've been to that conference on a number of occasions, not with the committee but individually. I think it's a great conference, and it's not limited to just—you can make arrangements with that state Legislatures conference for anybody to go, and it is an effective one. They had it here in Toronto a couple of years ago as well. The Midwest state—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: The Midwest guys.

Mr. Randy Hillier: The Midwest state Legislatures conference.

Mr. Michael Mantha: That was a couple of years ago.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Yeah, a couple of years back.

Mr. Michael Mantha: And it was in Puerto Rico a couple of years ago.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Anyway, it's an effective conference, in my view.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Go ahead.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I have a motion to move. I move that the Chair write a letter to the House leaders expressing the committee's willingness to accept the invitation to attend the 2015 annual meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures in Seattle, Washington, from August 2 to August 6, 2015, and request that the motion be presented to the House that the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly be authorized to attend the 2015 annual meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures in Seattle, Washington.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Any further discussion on that motion? All in favour? Okay. That will occur. I'll work on that letter tonight. Carried.

The committee adjourned at 1422.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 15 April 2015

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| Appointment of subcommittee | M-91 |
| Petitions | M-91 |
| Mr. Chris Chapin | |
| Committee business | M-102 |

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Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes

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Mr. Trevor Day

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