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Wednesday 22 April 2015

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des débats
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Mercredi 22 avril 2015

**Standing Committee on
the Legislative Assembly**

Petitions

**Comité permanent de
l'Assemblée législative**

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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 22 April 2015

Mercredi 22 avril 2015

The committee met at 1303 in committee room 1.

PETITIONS

SAMARA

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Welcome, committee, and welcome to our deputants to the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly.

We continue with standing order 108(g): petition procedures. We have two people at the witness table. You have 20 minutes for your presentation, and then we'll go around the committee. We've allocated 40 minutes for any questions or comments.

We'd like to ask you to commence just by introducing yourselves, please.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Absolutely. Good afternoon. My name is Jane Hilderman. I'm Samara Canada's research director and an acting director at the organization.

Ms. Laura Anthony: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Laura Anthony and I'm the research analyst at Samara Canada.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Please—

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Continue?

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Come forward, yes.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Excellent. Thank you so much for having us here this afternoon. Samara had the opportunity to speak to our federal Parliament's committee on procedures and House affairs in late 2014 regarding e-petitions as well, where we delivered a message similar to the one we'll be sharing with you today: mainly, e-petitions, we think, offer a very important improvement to our parliamentary institutions for the 21st century.

Before we delve into some of the specifics around e-petitions, I just wanted to spend a little bit more time at the outset explaining where Samara, the organization that we both work for, comes from and how we approach our work as a charity.

Samara Canada was established in 2009 with the mission to increase civic and political engagement in Canada. As a charity we are non-partisan in our approach, an approach that focuses on innovative research and education. We are supported by a number of foundations, a network of donors across the country, as well as some contract work we've undertaken for Elections Canada.

Samara's research explores how Canada's democracy works—or isn't working, you could say—in a way that's

rigorous, but engaging for a Canadian audience. Through our research, we are working to deepen Canadians' understanding of politics to elevate a national conversation about Canada's democratic health and to discuss how improvements could be made to build a more vibrant democracy in our country.

Samara, for example, has conducted the first-ever series of exit interviews with former members of Parliament from across the political spectrum and the country. This research was shared in a series of reports, as well as a book called *Tragedy in the Commons*, which was published last spring. For example, one of the surprising observations was that when we asked former MPs to describe their role, they often had different, sometimes conflicting views as to their purpose as members of Parliament in terms of what they were elected to accomplish.

Samara's research is also focused on how MPs communicate online and how Canadians participate beyond the ballot box. All of our research is publicly available through Samara's democracy reports online.

Most recently, last March—well, this past month—we released Samara's *Democracy 360*, which is a report card on how Canadians communicate, participate and lead in politics. The report found that despite Canada's strong standings as a democracy on the international stage, something I think many Canadians take great pride in, at home there are cracks actually beginning to emerge in our democratic foundation. Canadians don't believe that their elected officials do a very good job on their behalf, Canadians are not participating in politics as much as they could, and few see how the decisions made in places like the Ontario Legislature affect their day-to-day lives.

This disconnect between citizens and day-to-day democracy is a really big challenge for our country, but looking around this room today, we're here to remind you that you have tools, such as e-petitions, that can help signal to Ontarians that politics doesn't have to be that way. Citizens' voices can be better heard and MPPs in this Legislature can be more responsive to citizens' concerns. The fact that our federal Parliament, one provincial Legislature in Quebec and one territorial Legislature in the Northwest Territories have all recently introduced e-petitions is further evidence that the petitions process is a really timely issue for this standing committee to be studying.

For the remainder of our time, we'd like to outline why, in Samara's view, there is potential for e-petitions

to enhance political participation of Ontarians. My colleague Laura will also outline how the e-petition process can be better designed to be a tool useful for MPs as well. Finally, we'll close by sharing some of Samara's recommendations for the committee to consider while you're thinking about designing an e-petition process.

By introducing e-petitions into the Ontario Legislature, I think there's a really important opportunity here to actually increase the number of Ontarians starting petitions and signing petitions that are eligible to be considered by the Ontario Legislature.

Let's talk about signing petitions. In our most recent Samara Democracy 360 report that I just mentioned, we asked Canadians how many have signed a petition in the last year. I would ask you to guess, but perhaps there's not a usual flow between witnesses and committee members.

Interjection.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Ten per cent?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Less than five.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Less than five?

Mr. Randy Hillier: Sorry, what was the question?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: How many Canadians say that they signed a petition in the last year?

Mr. Randy Hillier: Do I think?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Yes.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Probably very few.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Very few?

Mr. Randy Hillier: Yes, less than five per cent.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Actually, 64% of Canadians said they'd signed a petition, which is quite extraordinary. It was the second-most-popular form of political participation, after charitable giving. Importantly, that rate of participation is just as high among Canadians aged 18 to 34; 71% of them said that they had signed a petition in the last year. We are a nation of petition signers.

Our research does not tell us how many of these Canadians are signing petitions on paper versus online. However, we suspect that with the popularity of sites like Change.org and Avaaz.ca, it's likely that many are using online petitions. I think the important thing to take away from this statistic is that there's a really strong appetite to sign petitions among Canadians, and I think that is a wonderful thing that could be better taken advantage of to connect citizens' willingness to participate through that forum and the Ontario legislative petitioning process.

1310
Right now, in the current system, the paper-based process is somewhat cumbersome for an increasingly online citizenry. If you are curious to understand how many Ontarians have actually signed petitions tabled in the Ontario Legislature, that information is difficult to find. If you want to ascertain what issues are petitioned on a more frequent basis, this is also quite difficult to find. These are lost opportunities for a Legislature and for MPPs to understand what issues citizens say they care about and are most salient in terms of their concern.

As you consider the design of an e-petition system for the Ontario Legislature, an important metric of success

should be increasing the number of citizens starting and signing petitions. Having reviewed some of the transcripts from this committee in terms of past meetings on e-petitions, I'm aware that there have been concerns that perhaps there might be too much participation in the form of frivolous petitions, too many petitions started or thousands upon thousands of signatures. This may sound strange, but I would say that those are very good problems to have. In our view, it would mean more that people want to engage with you. As you design an e-petition system, I think it is better to create a system that makes it easier, rather than more difficult, for Ontarians to be a part of the petitions process.

Ms. Laura Anthony: The final way that e-petitions can invite more participation is giving greater impact to the petition process. The advancement of e-petitions has also encouraged a discussion on petitions' impact, as well as the nature and timeliness of a government's response. Samara encourages the assembly to reflect on its goals for the petitions process. Samara is confident that the introduction of an e-petition system would be an important democratic reform that could increase citizens' interest with, and engagement in, the political process.

The assembly's adoption of e-petitions could lead to two outcomes. First is a system that incorporates e-petitions into the paper-based system. This looks pretty much like what we have now, with the addition of online signatures. The other option is a more transformative option. It seeks to renew the petition process with political engagement and public interest at the forefront.

If the assembly proceeds with this second option, this updated approach could go one of two ways, if we look at other jurisdictions as examples. On one hand, there's the option to create a dedicated petitions committee. This is what we see in Scotland and Wales and, most recently, the UK. The second option is to refer petitions to an existing standing committee, and this is what we've seen Quebec do.

Either of these options would signal to Ontarians that the Legislative Assembly is considering how to improve the petition process and potentially consider the contents of petitions in a more substantive way.

The future of a petition, given these two approaches, is decided in the appropriate committee, potentially giving more weight to the democratic voices expressed in the petition process.

In addition to increasing participation, another way that e-petitions have the potential to modernize democracy is by increasing the relevance of the Legislative Assembly. The petition process presents a unique opportunity for citizens to engage directly with their parliamentary institutions, and this is a rare opportunity for many.

Citizens' disengagement from the political process, as Samara's research shows, is also widely documented. Samara found earlier this year that only 31% of Canadians think that political decisions affect them every day, and 7% said they are never affected by political decisions.

Although an enhanced petition process will not resolve the disconnect between Canadians and these parliamentary institutions on its own, a well-designed e-petition system can facilitate a feedback loop between petitioners, MPPs and the legislative process.

A petition process can increase the relevance of the assembly in Ontarians' lives by giving greater access to Parliament's petitioning process while helping MPPs and their staff better understand what issues are of concern to Ontarians.

Reviews of the e-petition system in other jurisdictions have considered how to strengthen the connection of citizens to the process. For example, in the UK, it was recommended that signatories to e-petitions be given the option of alerting their local MP that they could have their name added to an e-petition. This is an option Samara will later recommend that this committee explore.

An e-petition system could also allow for the petitioners to opt in to be contacted about each step of petition, allowing them to follow the petition process in the assembly. This is a benefit not currently afforded to paper-based petitions.

A website could also increase the transparency of the petition process for Ontarians. Visitors to the site could be able to review all current petitions and read the appropriate government response to petitions that have been closed.

Now that Jane and I have outlined the potential for e-petitions to modernize democracy, I'll outline four of Samara's recommendations for this committee to consider in your review of e-petitions.

Our first recommendation is to ensure that openness, participation, responsiveness and consistency are core principles that drive your decision-making for e-petitions. This may sound simple, but it's worth emphasizing how important it is to put yourselves in the shoes of citizens who will interact with such a system and the rules and processes. In practice, for example, this means the steps required to sign a petition should be simplified since we know from research that the first 10 hours of a petition are the most important and critical for gaining public momentum.

The second recommendation is to consider a role for a committee or committees to consider petitions. Samara encourages the standing committee to consider how Ontario's petition process may be modernized to encourage citizen participation by considering the various output options. Among Legislatures that have introduced e-petitions in the last decade, including the UK, Scotland, Wales and Quebec, they have created designated petition committees. It's important for this committee to consider the advantages and disadvantages of these petition committees, as well as the advantages with staying with the status quo, when determining which approach to take with e-petitions.

The third recommendation is to clearly communicate how e-petitions will be used and use this as an opportunity to remind Ontarians of the ways they can further express their ideas to the members of provincial Parlia-

ment. It's important to minimize risk of public disillusionment when most petitions, electronic or otherwise, will not have an immediate or significant impact on legislation. This means helping to set an appropriate level of public expectation where e-petitions are concerned and avoiding reward thresholds—if you garner 100,000 signatures, this will trigger a debate in the assembly.

Our final recommendation is to consider how e-petitions can be used as a tool for MPPs to understand their constituents' concerns. A challenge frequently cited by former parliamentarians who were interviewed as part of Samara's MP exit interviews is figuring out what matters to their constituents. They're often left to rely on correspondence with their office or by word of mouth at local events. Allowing petitioners to opt in to notifying their MPP that they care about the petition issue may help MPPs track issues of local concern, and this is an option worth exploring.

One thing that this committee should explore is whether or not MPPs would be given the opportunity to follow up with a constituent who's signed a petition in their riding. This would require the exchange of personal information from the petition process to the MPP.

Alternatively, could MPPs receive an automated report once or twice a month that advises on the number of constituents who had signed a petition in their constituency, and on what issues?

Jane and I have only discussed some of the issues put forward to this committee to consider. Samara is happy to serve as a resource for all members of provincial Parliament from all parties. We hope our oral presentation and this brief that we have provided to you in a written document have provided valuable ideas for the members of the standing committee as they deliberate on e-petitions. Thank you for your time today.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Garfield Dunlop): Thank you very much, ladies, for your deputation and your presentation. We have some questions. I believe there's up to 20 minutes for each caucus?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): It's 40 minutes total.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Garfield Dunlop): Forty minutes total—so you have about 13 minutes. Mr. Hillier.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Listen, thank you very much for being here today. My congratulations for the good work that Samara does. I have read some of your publications, and Tragedy in the Commons was an excellent one for all members to read.

You're promoting the idea of having a more substantial output from the petition process as well. In your notes, you talk about the dedicated petition committees in other jurisdictions. The makeup of those committees: Are they the same as the makeup of other committees, or are they done in an unbiased or equal fashion of members from different parties? As I'm sure you're aware, here and in most Westminster systems, the committee makeup is a reflection of the House, so in a majority government—just if you could speak to that. Is the petition committee done any differently?

1320

Ms. Jane Hilderman: My understanding is the petition committee becomes like a standing committee of the Legislature in that it's comprised of a mix from the different parties. But specifically, I think this is something your research clerk may be able to dig deeper into if you're really interested in the makeup of those committees.

Mr. Randy Hillier: It would have a big effect if it was structured more like a select committee where there's a less partisan bias to it. I could see it being a much more useful function than if it's made up in regular standing committee format, because any petition that would be, say, contrary to the government's views would certainly not get a very substantial hearing.

I was just wondering if you had any insights on how the functionality of those committees has been operating.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Certainly. Only that we've seen in, I think, the Quebec instance where petitions have been dealt through different means, whether they've been referred to another committee for further study—and then in Wales that petitions committee can call witnesses to discuss that petition in front of them in terms of deepening their understanding. They can also refer it back to the House for a debate or for a government response.

By creating a committee, I think it maximizes the flexibility on the part of the Legislature and MPPs to figure out what to do with it.

Mr. Randy Hillier: The other point that you've got here in the consistency, which I would agree with completely, is that there not be two different systems. There ought to be one system, the same system, for both electronic and paper petitions. Is there any evidence where there are two systems or different systems coexisting within a Legislature?

Ms. Laura Anthony: No, not currently. We couldn't find any evidence of that. The UK did have a different system between Parliament and their government but they've recently merged them.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Yes, that was proved to be not quite as beneficial.

Ms. Laura Anthony: Exactly.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Okay. I really think that we need to understand what we want to achieve—if we want to have a different output or if we want to leave it as the same output as we have today—before we can determine what process we're going to do to achieve it.

I would like to see us at some time down the road put more weight on petitions, that they actually do trigger a different process or a different outcome whether it be a debate in the House or further testimony and evidence in the standing committee. I don't think we're anywhere near that agreement yet, but it may come down the road.

Have you seen any problems, difficulties or unintended consequences from any Legislature or assembly that has introduced e-petitions to run concurrently with paper petitions?

Ms. Laura Anthony: One of the biggest problems that I read—caveat with it being a problem again of too

much participation—was in the UK where they set the reward thresholds. That's why we want to avoid it. We don't recommend—

Mr. Randy Hillier: And that was the government-sponsored petition process, not the assembly or the Parliament initiates this.

Ms. Laura Anthony: Yes.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Thank you very much.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Just to expand on that, it seemed that for one, citizens were led to believe that reaching that 100-signature threshold would result in a debate in the chamber of the House, but in some cases that debate actually happened in a secondary chamber they have created that few citizens know about called Westminster Hall. It's sort of a committee hearing, so it didn't quite meet the expectations that citizens had imagined in terms of having a fulsome debate inside their House of Commons. There was some confusion, I think, on MPs' part because they hadn't bought into the government petitioning process.

That's probably not going to be the case here because you are all part of the Legislature and this is a legislative process, so that you'll all come to agreement that way.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I share that. I would like to have that problem of too many people being involved in our democratic institutions and our processes.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: I believe the Northwest Territories took the approach that they would pilot their e-petition system and see how it worked and then stop and evaluate, which is also an approach that is available and perhaps not always how Legislatures approach change—that change once made can't be undone. But it built in a process of evaluation and revisiting and tweaking the system.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I think a sunset provision is a good idea whenever you're embarking on a new and substantially different process, and one undertaken previously. Thanks.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Randy. Any further comments?

Mr. Randy Hillier: No.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Third party? Michael, any comments or questions?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Thank you for joining us here today. Both of you are one of the biggest reasons why, personally, I'm supportive of e-petitions. I see two bright young faces, individuals that I want to reach out to greater, individuals that feel—not personally yourselves, but younger individuals throughout this province, throughout this country, feel a disengagement with our political system right now. I speak of that because that's what I hear when I'm sitting with them at the coffee shops or talking to them on the street: "It doesn't matter what I say. You guys are going to do whatever the hell you want to do, and you're not going to listen to me." That's what I hear all the time.

I'm very familiar with the Samara group. It's fabulous, the work that you're doing. It's encouraging to see that. Two individuals that came out of my office were actual-

ly—one was a finalist last year, and the year before that, one was the one that received the award. So, they've briefed me quite well in regard to the goals and objectives of what Samara does, and I applaud you and the work that you're doing.

It's evident from the work that you've done through your appendix 1—and I would encourage all the committee members to look at the appendix. If you highlight some of the questions that you've put out, I believe, through your survey, the highest marks as far as percentage are all the ones that are politically motivated, are geared towards politics. So you have: "Have you discussed politics or political issues face to face or over the phone?" You get a return of 52% of people that have actually discussed. "Have you circulated, re(posted) or commented on political information?"—35%. "Have you attended a political meeting or speech?" Under "Formal Engagement," 29%. "Have you signed a petition?"—64%. "Have you worked with others to solve a problem in your community?"—40%.

It's amazing. If we need a reason for e-petitions, it's exactly that: to have greater engagement, so that individuals across the province and across this country have a sense of, "I'm participating in the day-to-day decisions of my everyday life. I have an impact. I have a voice. I can participate." This is exciting stuff. I really like this.

My question to you is a very simple one: Is there anything that you didn't cover which you would really want to highlight as to the benefits of e-petition, in regard to how it reaches out, how it actually brings people under the questions, the challenges, and everything that we're facing—through services, through our society, through the election process and through involvement? Please, tool us up.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: All right. Well, one thing we do at Samara annually is review all member of Parliament websites. Our focus, as you may have discerned from our presentation, is more generally on the federal level. It's sort of a capacity decision because there's only seven of us on our team. This is the research staff at Samara right here. But we visit all 308 MPs' websites, with the exception of the leaders and the Speaker—no, we do do the Speaker.

We have a checklist of items that we look for, and one of them is: Is there any information on how to petition Parliament or MPs that maybe have links to other petitions that they want to let their constituents know about? We found 27% of MPs actually had some information about the petitions process. So, again, it's sort of a missed opportunity, where more could be sharing that information with Canadians and making it just easier to know about how to be involved. We also looked at, do you have information on how to volunteer? Do you have information on how to contact your MP? Some basic stuff. The contact information is largely all there, which is a great thing, but we're starting to miss some other things.

1330

With the petitions process, if you do end up making a change and introducing e-petitions, I think there's prob-

ably some awareness-building that will need to happen in order for people to actually realize that there has been a change made. Some people are very surprised, I think, to know that they can petition a Legislature. It's just not necessarily really well-known information. I think organizations like Change and Avaaz are great at collecting hundreds of thousands of signatures, but they don't tell you that those signatures can't be presented and tabled in Parliament, whereas if you create an e-petition system through the Legislature, it can. I think that's powerful. So it might be worth some consideration of the committee to allocate and encourage the Legislature to do some public awareness-raising around that issue and encourage other MPPs to share that information with their constituents, so that it's actually a change that people learned about that's happened.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Do you find the traditional petitions that go out with signatures that are posted up versus an e-petition—again, I'm trying to focus on the 18 to 34. Which one is the most popular with them? And when you're looking at that paper petition, you're reading, you're engaging yourself and you're putting your signature to that paper. To me, I'm committing myself. In the eyes of an 18-to-34-year-old, what is the difference between putting my pen to paper and putting my finger to the screen? What is the difference as far as my commitment? Is there greater commitment? Is there greater engagement? Is it lesser? Do I fully understand what's on it?

Ms. Laura Anthony: When it actually comes to the differences between petitions, our research just asked about petitions broadly. So something that I recommend that this committee look further into is how people experience that difference. If we really dug into that 64%, I think we would find that the majority are signing petitions online. If we were to count the number of actual petition signatures federally or provincially, we would probably be around that 5% to 10% threshold that many in this room thought.

When it comes to a behavioural standpoint of political participation and engagement, petition signing is actually very low. It doesn't require that much time, that much effort or that much skill. So when you consider joining a political party or contacting your MPP, petition signing is something that's relatively low on the bar. So we're not sure of the exact differences between youths' ability to sign their physical signature versus online, but the majority of us in this room know that Canadians' lives are experienced online.

Mr. Michael Mantha: It might be a good topic for Samara to chat on one of these chat afternoons that we have. I know you have many chat engagement afternoons. I know I've participated in a couple of them or attended some of them. I really enjoy the amount of questions that go out there. This might be a tool that you might want to explore.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Well, I think that's a great point, which is that we know, statistically, young people don't go to the ballot box as much, but I think it might be

the wrong message to tell young people that they don't vote. They vote every day by their liking, their re-tweeting and their signing of petitions. You may feel that this is clicktivism, but it is still expressing an opinion and it's these online tools that have helped facilitate that expression. I don't think you should dismiss it because it's easier to do.

Young people—this is more speaking from my experience—I think they do weigh exactly what they are re-tweeting, liking and following. So lowering the bar in terms of making it easier is not undermining the quality of engagement.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Okay. And you just brought up a point: that by having that individual participate on an e-petition, for me, that's engagement. It just pulls that individual to, "If I'm asking for this change through a petition, it will give me that incentive to go out to the ballot box and actually solidify that choice that I wanted to make. It'll give me that opportunity to say, 'This is the choice that I made on this petition, on that petition and on that petition. I'm looking at my choices that I have.'"

I see it as a tool that would encourage and incentivize that person to actually go out to the ballot box, go out and get engaged: to be a community activist, to start speaking up, to sign a petition, to get involved. That's the tool that I see. Is that some of the results that you've had from the organization?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Whenever you're looking at improving engagement, it's important to make it meaningful. That meaningful point comes back to that feedback loop. I think the stronger you can make the connection between someone putting energy into the system and it reacting to their effort—it can be as simple as literally letting them know that the petition has been received and is acknowledged. It can be more advanced, in terms of "Here's the government response, if you care to read it. And here are your other options, if you want to follow up on that."

What we want to do is create a ladder of engagement, so that step one is easy, but then it opens the door to a second step, a third step, a fourth step. That's where having a very good feedback loop—so that people see the responsiveness and they're rewarded for that responsiveness, just by recognizing that their voice got heard—is very powerful. It is the basis of a lot of research on how to do engagement.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes. There's a young gentleman that was recognized I think it was last year. He summed it up; he said, "I'm not a political activist; I'm a community activist." He's just looking, first of all, at what's going on on his street and within his community. He's basing his decisions on that and the needs.

Again, hats off to Samara. You're a wonderful organization. I'm looking forward to building my relationship with all of you, because it is amazing, the amount of work and effort that you're putting into getting a lot more people involved into the decision-making processes, not only in Ontario but across this country. So kudos. Thank you.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Michael. I would ask if any government members would like to comment?

Ms. Soo Wong: Do you want me to start?

Interjection.

Ms. Soo Wong: I've got lots of questions.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Yes, Soo.

Ms. Soo Wong: Thank you for coming to today's committee meeting. Let me begin by asking, given that you're a national organization, when you were doing work with the federal MPs, did you check with the Privacy Commissioner in Ottawa as to what their views are on the e-petitions?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: We haven't spoken with the Privacy Commissioner. From what I recall in terms of the House of Commons committee, they were concerned about privacy, but felt, I believe, that with the support of the IT department from the House of Commons—they indicated that there was a way to ensure privacy would be handled appropriately. There was some concern over sharing of information between an online legislative process and the political side of parties having access to that information as well. I think that, ultimately, the House of Commons committee decided that it would only be information that would be housed by the House of Commons and not something that MPs would be able to have access to and subsequently pass along to other parties, by accident or by intention.

If you're interested in the privacy question, I'm sure the Privacy Commissioner probably has guidelines for how to ensure privacy is maintained.

Ms. Soo Wong: I also want to check in with you, because we live in a very diverse community: the province of Ontario. I know my riding is very diverse. How do you deal with constituents who come from very state-run countries? They're very sensitive to disclosing any information, let alone put their signatures, their addresses—because when you do a petition, any type of petition, you are required to disclose your personal information. Has your organization dealt with these kinds of concerns in dealing with diverse communities?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: We do work with diverse communities in some of our outreach programming, specifically a program we have called Democracy Talks, which is about encouraging political conversation in communities where politics is not always—or is more of a taboo subject sometimes. That can be because of where they've come from, that politics just wasn't something you engaged in, or, if you did, you were at risk from government.

Our experience is, if you set the norms and make clear the norms at the outset, that this is actually a Canadian value to participate, and you offer a constructive, somewhat non-partisan way to engage initially, a lot of communities are very open to their involvement. There may still be language barriers, which is an interesting question. That's something, perhaps, for this committee to consider, whether you would be able to offer, for ex-

ample, petitions available in different languages, as needed.

1340

But I think the point here is, if you invite participation and you make clear that this is something that is done in Canada and that it's safe and encouraged, the barrier to overcoming that hesitancy, reticence to get involved is actually not as high as you might think.

The funny thing is, often when we have spoken to new Canadians, they're very attuned to culture, because they've come from somewhere else and they can see differences very quickly. Many of them have said, "Canadians don't really care about politics." I can see that from my interactions with them. I read this in our citizenship guide. It tells me how to vote, but it also tells me all about the beaver. I think there's as much information on the beaver as there is on how to vote. How does this equal out in terms of the signals we send to newcomers in terms of what does it mean to be a citizen in this country? I think we can do a better job of creating a culture of engagement, and that helps normalize it very quickly in terms of being involved in politics or in public life.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thanks. Bas Balkissoon.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I've just got a couple of questions. I listened carefully and I made a note here. One of your comments while you were presenting was greater impact, and you mentioned the ladder of engagement, feedback and other options as part of the process. Obviously, I think you have in your minds some kind of a framework of how the system may work from input to output and expectations. If you could just give me a small picture of what you see as a wholesome system, I would really appreciate it.

Ms. Laura Anthony: Okay. I guess our ideal petition system would have an online template. This would look something like change.org, but it would be hosted by the assembly on the assembly website. But it would be easy to share on petition or social media accounts.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: So when you say the assembly, the neutral body of the Clerk?

Ms. Laura Anthony: Yes.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Thank you.

Ms. Laura Anthony: And this would be something that's based on people's current digital realities, something that's very intuitive. The federal government, and I think we both—Samara is a fan of this approach. The information that they ask for, in terms of privacy concerns and safety, is the name, the petitioner's address, and then they have to sign—

Ms. Jane Hilderman: The mailing address.

Ms. Laura Anthony: The mailing address, yes, as well as the email address. Then, the verification loop is, "I declare that I am a resident or a citizen of Canada." Then they are sent a confirmation to that email address. That kind of handles all those concerns from the outset.

The length that the petition is live on the site is up for this committee to study. Our federal counterpart is keeping the petition on the site for 120 days.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay, but who do you see as the crafter or the creator of the petition: the general public or members of the assembly?

Ms. Laura Anthony: I think that an MPP should endorse or have to sign on to a petition. I think that that's what is happening at our federal level. Petitioners come up with the e-petition themselves, and then they propose the petition to an MPP.

At the federal, they have five options. They can go to five different MPs to get someone to support their petition, after which, if they don't find support, the petition committee re-evaluates the life of the petition, and the petitioner is aware of that decision. But I do think it's important for an MPP to have to endorse or support.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: But you will face the reality that, if the petitioner lives in a particular member's riding, and the petition is something the member doesn't support, then you run into the first roadblock, which I think the UK dealt with. They don't need the endorsement of an MPP anymore. The general public can get it uploaded onto the site, as long as they get a small number of supporters at the front end, which makes it more neutral.

I'd like to hear your opinion on which one you support.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: On the point on local MPPs sometimes not necessarily endorsing the content of a petition, in some ways it can become a personal choice. I know of MPs in the House of Commons who will support a petition and present a petition that they don't agree with, but they believe that it's important that their constituents have access to that process of petitioning. They will say, "This is not something I agree with, but I think it's important that these hundreds of people who signed this get a government response." So that's a personal choice that you can make clear to your constituents, whether it's your policy to support any petition that comes through or only ones that you agree with. If you don't agree with it, and you're not willing to present that petition or be a sponsor of the petition, you can advise them that they're going to have to seek support from a different MPP.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: But if you remove that barrier for the petitioner, I think it's a plus because they'll be able to get it up on the central website—no involvement of a particular MP. I mean, an MP can still sign on if they like the idea, whether it's in their area or someone's else area, but for the petitioner's sake, you make it less cumbersome, and it's more practical.

I think this is why the UK went with the model—because you're also saying that you support the model of a petition committee to vet the petition. This way, it makes the vetting process neutral and unbiased in every way possible, because we're in a party system here, which is probably different than the Northwest Territories. I was going to raise that with you. The Northwest Territories don't have a party system

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Sure.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: What do you see as the outcome now, after the petition committee deals with it? You have a government that is in power; they ran on a particular

platform and mandate, and they see themselves being here to accomplish that as a first priority, but you're now introducing a different stream of information or requests. How do you see the government dealing with the outcome or the assembly dealing with at least giving an outcome to that particular petition?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Well, right now, there is some outcome and I think this is why the MP endorsement—if you kind of just modify the system so that you accept online signatures, you still need an MPP to stand up and table the petition. The petition can't be tabled on its own. It needs someone inside the Legislature—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: In the UK, it's going to go to the committee.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Exactly, so you need it either way. If you go with the committee approach, then you probably don't need a sponsorship because it's going to get reviewed by a body. If you don't have a committee, you're going to need someone to sponsor it. So that there's some way to get into the Legislature—that's the point.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Right.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: An interesting question, I think, for your committee is to consider—right now, if you get a government response after 20-odd days—

Ms. Laura Anthony: Twenty-four.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: —twenty-four-odd days, are those responses substantive enough? I don't know if this committee has reviewed in terms of what those responses are comprised of. At the federal level, I would say that sometimes they're not very satisfactory in terms of meaningfulness—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: And that's why you want a different outcome?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: That's why having flexibility to determine different outcomes—sometimes you may get an issue that you think, "Actually, this is really important. This could deserve some debate." It could deserve a study. It could deserve a reference to government for a review, all sorts of things. So that allows you some flexibility to sort of weigh the content of the petition.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay. One issue that's been raised to me—and I don't know if you've thought about it, and if you haven't, I'd like you to and get back to us later on. In a diverse community like Ontario, rural Ontario may have a thousand people in one town and 10,000 in another, and then guys like us who live in the GTA can reach all our people in a hurry. A petition in the Toronto area can be easily signed and supported with a broad community with a lot of signatures, but a petition in my friend Mr. Mantha's riding might only have a small amount of signatures, but it's an issue that is very important and is relevant and might need government action quickly. How do you see that being vetted and dealt with fairly?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Right. Well, this is one reason why I think the thresholds—we are hesitant to endorse thresholds because if you have a 10,000-signature

threshold, it can make it easier for some issues that have that urban constituency behind it to easily reach that limit, whereas with some other issues that have merit it may be harder.

1350

Again, this is not an exact science. That's why a petitions committee would have to weigh—this petition has 30,000 signatures and this has five, but this issue is not something that has been discussed or studied by a committee in the last five, 10 years. So it is putting the onus on MPPs to be legislators and to consider how these things should be weighed.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay. Thanks very much, and thank you for being here.

Ms. Laura Anthony: Sorry. One thing I wanted to add to that—

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Very briefly.

Ms. Laura Anthony: I think an important part of that discussion is that that's not a consideration with paper-based petitions at the time. So this whole discussion and renewing of the petition process could allow for that thought.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: That's what I'm saying. If you want to improve it, you've really got to go all the way.

Ms. Laura Anthony: Yes.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Bas. Over to Randy.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Hopefully we can get into two more functions or two more subjects here. The first one is the MPP sponsoring. I think this is important for the members on the government side to listen to as well. At the moment, we can table any petition that we find, whether we agree with it or not. We have unfettered access to table a petition. And I think you also stated that the system should be consistent, the same for electronic or paper. I think that's a must.

If we go with the committee style, where, as the member from Scarborough–Rouge River mentioned, in the UK you just upload to some body and then a standing committee vets those petitions, and if the standing committee is based on numbers that represent the House, contrary petitions are very possible or subject to being vetted out of this system before they get anywhere.

I'll just give you an example. Last Tuesday, I put up a petition about vaporizers, e-cigarettes, which is a bill in front of the Legislature, and I tabled it this week. Now, I couldn't table the 3,000 signatures that I had received online, but I could table the petition and mention in my address that I had received 2,738 signatures in that week. In the UK model, it's very likely that that petition would not be able to be tabled in the House at all if it was contrary to government policy, and it certainly wouldn't be able to be tabled in that sort of timely process. I'm not sure; whenever you have a system like the UK or where there's a body doing deliberations, there has got to be a long process involved.

I want to ask you this—maybe I'll finish off. That may not affect the government members today, but the government members who are in opposition, hopefully

sometime in the future, would want to be able to represent their constituents unfettered.

The way we're doing it right now, that all parties in this Legislature or members from all parties in this Legislature are doing—like I just stated, I put up a petition, I collect the signatures, but I introduce a paper version in the House. Are you aware of any other assembly or commons or Parliament anywhere that has prescribed that process or has tried that process, where individual members do the petitions and introduce them into the House?

Ms. Laura Anthony: Sorry, I'm not sure—

Mr. Randy Hillier: Where I, as a member—I don't have to go through any other committee. Nobody else has to—

Ms. Laura Anthony: But with an e-petition process.

Mr. Randy Hillier:—seek approval; they just need to find an MPP willing to do it.

Ms. Laura Anthony: Yes. The federal legislation that just passed is that system. They keep the regular paper petition process as well as add this e-petition sign. As a petitioner, I go on the future website—because it's not developed yet—and I click on “menu,” then “MP,” and I have to find an MP that will support my petition. Then that MP will present or table the petition in the House.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Right. But you mentioned that they only have five kicks at the can?

Ms. Laura Anthony: Yes. But that's the current—

Mr. Randy Hillier: That's the current. So you want to make sure—I guess there is some vetting there. If you select five, and they're no go, then your petition is then—is that petition, then, squashed forever? Or is there a period of time that has to lapse before you can try another five MPs?

Ms. Laura Anthony: I'm not too sure of the exact details. I know if a petition doesn't reach the 500 threshold, it dies, and then it's dead for a year before they can try again. But I'm not exactly sure if they don't receive the five MPs.

Mr. Randy Hillier: One last—I'll just see if I can get this. At the moment, as we're doing it here unofficially, or unrecognized, the way we're doing it here—it's not recognized in the standing orders. But Laura comes to me and says, “I want to have a petition about vaporizers. Will you put it up on your website and collect an online petition?” and I say yes and I do it. Is there any other assembly that has recognized that sort of process, or who has tried that process, where it's just the constituent and the member and no other body to interfere with that process or vet that process?

Ms. Laura Anthony: Not that I'm aware of.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Not been tried, not in practice anywhere, as far as you know.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Most cases of e-petitions, it's being housed by the Legislature, by the Parliament.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Right. I understand that there are some that are not housed by the Legislature but housed by individuals or, where we've also seen it, housed by another branch of government, like 10 Downing or the

White House. But I understood that there were some that did not require—I believe it was the senate in Australia that doesn't have a pre-set or a pre-formed assembly petitions site.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Australia has a few different systems, because they have their national Legislature and then they have the state Legislatures. In our view, I think there's a case to be made that it's important to try to involve the Legislature, because the Legislature is also the sort of permanent interface between citizens and the democracy. So by having it housed—

Mr. Randy Hillier: I certainly agree. Compared to things like change.org and whatnot, we see those are getting substantial petitions, but not in any way that we can actually—

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Use them.

Mr. Randy Hillier:—use them and utilize them. I think there has to be a process of where we—maybe at some point we might also be able to recognize a change.org petition and have it introduced into the House.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: True. Today—

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): I'm sorry. That pretty well wraps up the time for the opposition. Actually, this does conclude the time that the—

Mr. Michael Mantha: I think I have a minute.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): You have one minute?

Mr. Michael Mantha: I think I have a minute, a minute and a half.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Sure. I'm sorry. Go ahead, Michael.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I thought he had two.

Mr. Michael Mantha: You thought I had two?

Mr. Randy Hillier: Yes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Okay. I agree. I'll take the two.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): I've got him down for one.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I've got the one.

I just want to first thank you again for coming out.

My friend Mr. Balkissoon, I completely agree with you that there should be greater weight in petitions that come particularly from Algoma-Manitoulin and northern Ontario. I agree. If that's something that we can put a motion on right now, I'm willing to put that motion forward.

However, I do want to thank you for coming out. In the last 30 or 45 seconds that I have, I want to leave it up to you. Is there anything that you wanted to touch on that, again, you didn't feel like you touched on in your notes today to encourage individuals to look at e-petitions seriously?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: I would only just iterate that I think this is between—when you're designing a system and there may be some risks involved with not getting it immediately right or maybe worrying about too many people signing or people who you're not sure if they're truly Ontario residents—it's a petition; it's not law yet. I

think there's some room for flexibility in terms of your design. The motivation should be to improve the relationship between citizens and your work as legislators and the Legislature itself—so increase the number of signatures, increase the number of petitions and help improve that feedback loop between citizens and the political process. If those are the guiding principles, I think you'll come up with a great system.

1400

M. Michael Mantha: Merci, Jane. Merci, Laura.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): On behalf of the committee, thank you for coming before the standing committee. This does conclude the time that the committee allocated for this. Unless there's any change to the committee's wishes, we've wrapped up this part of the agenda.

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Does the committee want to reconsider the time? Do you want to add on to the—

Interjection.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I would move, Mr. Chair, because we don't have another deputant, that we each be given two minutes.

Mr. Granville Anderson: I just wondered, I see—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: No, no. Wait. He has to deal with it.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Granville Anderson: Okay. I won't even take a minute. I just wondered. You had 64% participation, but the question was worded just, "Have you signed a petition?" So it could be a petition for anything, right? It could be to a Legislature. It could be to another private body for something that somebody wants or is lobbying for. Correct?

Ms. Laura Anthony: Yes.

Mr. Granville Anderson: Okay. I just wanted to clarify that it wasn't to a Legislature or to a Parliament.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: What is interesting, though, is even when you look at what International Survey did on petitioning, Canada is still higher than most other democracies in terms of reported petitioning. We just have a culture that likes to petition more.

Mr. Granville Anderson: Okay, thank you. That's all I wanted.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Yes. I'll go to Eleanor.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Thank you. This is great—very interesting. Why do you think we're such a culture of petitioners?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Good question.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Does it have anything to do with our high Internet usage and our high online capacity? I'm just curious. I find that really interesting.

Ms. Laura Anthony: I was pulling some numbers yesterday, and in the 2012 Statistics Canada, 82% of Canadians are online. But from our behaviour data, we don't know if petition signing is online. So I wouldn't say that there is an exact correlation.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Well, there's a correlation; there's not causation.

Ms. Laura Anthony: Causation, yes.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: But it's a strong hypothesis that could potentially be tested further. In my mind, it seems to be a common thing.

Another hypothesis of why there might be more petition signing is that we're a pretty geographically dispersed country, and petitions are something that you can kind of connect with, across, whether it's within a community or across communities—

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: In Algoma–Manitoulin, for example—just saying.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: In Algoma–Manitoulin.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Or in the member opposite's riding.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I would have thought it was probably because people are so happy with government policy, they're petitioning to keep doing what they're doing.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: That's entirely possible.

Interjections.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: One more, Mr. Chair, if I may; I'll be quick. You were talking about—it's just a point of clarification for me. I guess this is a federal thing. They have committees that look after petitions. What do they do? How does that work? Do you know?

Ms. Laura Anthony: The federal system just implemented e-petitions, but they don't have petition committees. In Canada, there are petition committees in Quebec.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: In the UK or in Quebec. Can you tell us how they work?

Ms. Laura Anthony: I don't know the exact work of the committee. I know that the petition committees, say, if a petition is of particular salience, can push it to another standing committee that's already in existence. Then they can decide to review.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: So if it's a social policy issue, they can ask that it be forwarded to the committee on social policy for their consideration—as an issue; not the petition itself or the issue it espouses.

Ms. Laura Anthony: It's up to the petitions committee to decide.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Okay, because one is looking at the process of committee and the other is the actual issue. That was the clarification I'm looking for. You're not sure about that—or both?

Mr. Randy Hillier: It's in the Clerk's report that we've got, each one.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Oh, it's in the Clerk's report. Clearly, I should have read it.

Thank you. It's helpful to know that. I wasn't sure. Thank you, colleague.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Eleanor. Anything further from the other two parties? Seeing none, again, thank you for coming before our committee. Thank you very much.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Thank you. It was our pleasure.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Committee, there is one other order of business. I'll ask the Clerk to give us a bit of a rundown on a piece of paper that was distributed to all of us.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): Okay. So last week, the committee agreed to accept the invitation to NCSL. We've put together a budget based on airfares, rooms and the registration fee. We've used the early bird registration fee; it was originally in US dollars, but we have converted it.

The budget you have before you is the budget for the full committee and two staff members to attend, and would require a vote of this committee to move it forward to the Board of Internal Economy. We're not asking for extra money. It's already within the committee's budget, but, as per our practice, the board has to approve extracurricular expenditure.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): There is additional information on the back, as well.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: What's the early bird deadline for registration?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): It was May 15.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: May 15. We also asked the House leader—you were going to write the House leaders.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): It's already been done.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Did they have a chance to deal with it?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): Nothing has happened in the House as of yet, but it has been delivered. They do have our request.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Can we at least give them until next week, so we hear from them, and then we do everything together?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): That is fine. We can hear from them, but this is going to have to go—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I would move that motion, then.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): This is going to have to go before the board before we can—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Yes. I realize that, but I think if it goes before the board with the House leaders' support, we would have more strength. Okay?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): The other thing is: As of this moment, we have no one scheduled for next week. We are waiting to hear back from some, but there is a chance that we will not be meeting next week if we cannot fill those. We have been moving down the list, but as of right now, there is nobody scheduled.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I haven't read all the material I got from research, I'll admit. Did we have much on the Quebec model that they spoke about?

Ms. Joanne McNair: There is some in the first report you got.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: The very first report? Okay. It speaks to the question that was asked? Okay. If not, I was going to say, can we get that updated?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Their website is very, very complete. If you want, you can just go to their website.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay. All right, thanks.

Ms. Joanne McNair: It's all in English, too.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Anything further from the committee? Committee is adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1407.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 22 April 2015

Petitions	M-103
Samara.....	M-103
Ms. Jane Hilderman	
Ms. Laura Anthony	
Committee business.....	M-113

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