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**Official Report
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(Hansard)**

Wednesday 6 May 2015

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

Mercredi 6 mai 2015

**Standing Committee on
the Legislative Assembly**

Petitions

**Comité permanent de
l'Assemblée législative**

Pétitions

Chair: Toby Barrett
Clerk: Trevor Day

Président : Toby Barrett
Greffier : Trevor Day

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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 6 May 2015

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The committee met at 1304 in committee room 1.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Welcome, everyone, this afternoon to our regularly scheduled meeting of the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly, May 6. Before we commence with our agenda and deputations, I'd ask the Clerk—I know we have a motion.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): A quick explanation: Before the members there's a package. At our last meeting the week before last, a budget was circulated to the members of the committee with the understanding that we would look at it at the following meeting. We didn't have a meeting following that. In the subsequent time, the Board of Internal Economy was meeting this Monday, so the subcommittee was asked to approve the budget so that it could be submitted to the board for its approval. The subcommittee did that. The board has approved our budget; however, the budget hasn't been formally approved by the members of this committee, so we're asking if that can be done right off the top here as a housekeeping matter.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Yes. Mr. Balkissoon?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I move that the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly approve the budget for travel to the 2015 annual conference of the National Conference of State Legislatures in Seattle, Washington, in the amount of \$41,839.50—jeez, Trevor, you're right on the penny, eh?—as recommended by the subcommittee on committee business, and as approved by the Board of Internal Economy on May 4, 2015.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you. Any discussion? Yes, Mr. Hillier.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Just one quick question, because when this was brought forward at the last committee it was moved off to the subcommittee. I just wanted to understand: Is it also including staff members to go, too, or is that Legislative Assembly—

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): The staff members mentioned would be the Clerk and the research officer.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Any further discussion? Does this motion meet with approval? Is this motion carried? Carried.

PETITIONS

MR. NELSON WISEMAN

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Our next order of business: We do wish to welcome Dr. Nelson Wiseman to the witness table. You have up to 20 minutes, sir, if you wish to address the committee.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Thank you Mr. Chair. There's no need to call me "Doctor"; nobody takes my prescriptions, in any event.

I want to thank you for inviting me. It's an honour to contribute to public affairs. In any event, don't hesitate to contact me in the future on issues related to public affairs and public policy.

I'm grateful to Jonathan Brickwood, the procedural services assistant for committees, for forwarding some background material on the subject of electronic petitions. When I was first asked to appear as a witness, my reflex reaction was to come down on the proposal. After reading the materials I was sent by Jonathan, I changed my mind. But after doing a bit of my own online research, I've changed my mind again.

I have some cautionary observations to share. E-petitions, I should say, are not cost-free, but the main point I want to make—

Interjection.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: I'm sorry?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): No, please continue.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: —is that there are going to be a lot of unintended consequences. My advice is, beware.

My first thought, before I saw any of the background material I was sent or read, was what Rick Mercer did when Stockwell Day led the Canadian Alliance party. They had proposed the use of the initiative and referendum. The initiative is a petition which leads to a referendum that, if passed, has the force of legislation. It is used in many American states. Mercer took up Stockwell Day's idea and put a question to his TV audience: "Should Stockwell Day change his first name to Doris?" I don't need to tell you what the overwhelming result was.

This is an example of a joke framed in a form similar to a petition. You should expect this may occur with elec-

tronic petitions. You should expect e-petitions that attempt to embarrass, shame and seek to undo legislation and elected politicians.

When an e-petition process was established in the United States in 2011, it was not anticipated that citizens in every one of the 50 states would launch petitions seeking secession of their state from the union. Nor did anyone in Barack Obama's government expect an e-petition that would question Obama's eligibility for office and seek records of his birth, college and university records.

In 2011, more than 12,000 people signed an e-petition asking the Obama administration to acknowledge an extraterrestrial presence here on Earth and if the US government had contact with aliens. The White House was compelled to respond, and you can read its response on the White House website.

In the United Kingdom, issues that arose with e-petitions included ownership and responsibility, heightened public expectations and the weak relationship between the petitioner and the MP. In the UK's first three years of the e-petition system, over 53,000 petitions were received, of which over 28,000 were deemed admissible. Of these, 145 received a response from the relevant government department, and parliamentary debates were held on 25 petitions.

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Some highly embarrassing e-petition campaigns occurred during the years in which the Labour Party, which introduced the e-petition system, was in power. One petition, backed by nearly 100,000, demanded that the Prime Minister step down. Another e-petition attracted 1.8 million e-petitioners opposed to toll roads. Yet another petition, with over a quarter-million e-petitioners, required that anyone convicted of a criminal act during London's riots be deemed ineligible for any government benefits, such as unemployment insurance and social services. Another British petition with over 100,000 signatures required curbing immigration so that Britain's population not exceed 70 million.

Although Parliament's procedure and House affairs committee in Ottawa last year heard from a number of British officials about their e-petition system, none of them mentioned any of the petitions I've just referred to. If e-petitions are adopted in Ontario, I think you can anticipate similar experiences to those of the UK and the United States.

According to Britain's Daily Mail, some senior MPs felt they had created a monster with their e-petition scheme. It had spiralled out of control. Because the British system requires that any e-petition garnering 100,000 e-petitioners leads to a debate in the House, some MPs warned that the government's plans would allow the Commons to be hijacked by campaigners. It would mean MPs spending Parliament's time debating proposals that have little or no chance of becoming law.

In theory, a petition is used to draw attention to an issue of public interest or concern and to request that an action be taken. It's a direct means for people to communicate with Parliament. E-petitions are certainly

growing in popularity and in their ability to achieve political impact, but how will a government respond when, let us say, 30,000 northern Ontarians petition to have Queen's Park relocated to Sault Ste. Marie, or 5,000 residents of the Kenora region petition to be annexed by Manitoba, of which Kenora was once a part?

Having said all of this, I wish to make some general points about petitions and their role in the parliamentary system. You might know what I'm talking about here, from your background.

The right to petition the monarch dates back to 13th-century Britain. Early bills were little more than petitions to which the monarch had agreed. Petitions in their current form date from the 17th century and the growth of a more democratic order, as elected parliamentarians steadily gained power and the king lost it.

Currently, petitions, in my opinion, are largely ornamental features of the parliamentary system. In large part this is because MPPs act, first and foremost, as party members. MPPs, you spend much time on constituency work and meeting with constituents, but representing the views of your constituents is very much a secondary role to what you do here, which is, you were elected as a party member on a party platform, and you're expected to vote that way. Nor do MPPs act as trustees who exercise their independent judgment on proposed pieces of legislation.

This isn't to say that all petitions have no effect. Recently, a petition calling on Parliament to commit to a long-term funding strategy for the remaining thalidomide survivors led to a positive vote in the House of Commons. It did so, however, because of a motion of an MP. The issue became a cause célèbre in the media. I don't believe that any media outlet reported that Parliament's action was the result of a petition. I'm not sure when that petition was launched; I think it was maybe 20 years ago.

I was aware of the existence of parliamentary petitions from having attended and seen broadcasts of legislative sessions, but I do not recall ever seeing reports or hearing of petitions to Canadian Legislatures in the media in all my years of following politics. Because of this, I have no knowledge of the Ontario government's response to specific petitions, something it's required to do within 24 days.

I've been informed that neither the wording of petitions nor the responses to them are posted on the government's website. If I'm wrong, correct me. This doesn't speak well for transparency by a government which says it wants more public engagement.

E-petitioning is innovative. It's an innovative method of public involvement, but it may be an innovation, I'm suggesting, that we can do without. Many NGOs now use e-petitions, but others shun them because they have found little evidence that they have had much impact. The impact of e-petitions tends to be on the behaviour of corporations rather than governments. Corporations, such as airlines, worry about alienating customers. Governments have a captive market.

Parliament began the study of e-petitions after the 2004 election. However, it has yet to implement an e-petition regime, despite its direction to its procedure and House affairs committee to recommend changes to the standing orders. The committee has now made a recommendation—describing e-petitions as feasible and desirable—that they ought to be put in place, but nothing has yet come of the recommendation.

One challenge to e-petitions is validating online identities and preventing frivolous, offensive, defamatory or libellous petitions from proceeding. It's important that the same guidelines, standards and rules that apply to paper petitions are maintained before an e-petition is certified, so that impertinent, improper, silly petitions or those in bad taste are excluded. How many civil servants and how much time do you want to tie up in vetting e-petitions?

A petition should state a grievance to be remedied. It should specify the action the petitioners wish to see taken. Measures are needed to ensure that the names aren't being added to an e-petition on an automated basis. In the UK, IP addresses are monitored by technical staff for unusual signing patterns. I can say that no abuses of the e-petition system there have yet been found.

It's also critical that the integrity of the e-petition process be monitored and verified, so that it's not compromised with inauthentic identities. Measures must also be put in place to avoid duplicate or very similar e-petitions and to ensure that they don't contain false information and allegations.

You may wish to exclude consideration of any petition with less than a fixed number of e-petitioners—let's say, 500 or 1,000. You may also give the government an option, as is the case in Queensland, Australia, and in Manitoba, of whether or not it has to respond to a petition.

I notice that none of the e-petition models presented by the table research office require an actual signature, not even an electronic signature. What are required of an e-petitioner are an email address and a postal code that can be verified. My sense is that most people are much more free and easy with offering their email addresses than with signing their names to a piece of paper. Ironically, the only person who will be required to sign his name will be the MPP who introduces the petition in the Legislature. An e-petition regime that does not require an actual signature could require a phone number, a driver's licence or a passport number. That may help weed out some less-than-serious petitioners.

Security is another challenge to e-petitions. We don't want the identification of e-petitioners tapped by commercial interests or by political parties, who may use the information for their own purposes. We saw how information from a Conservative database was used to mislead voters or wake them up in the middle of the night here in Toronto, in the robocall scandal that marred the last election.

If the Legislature does decide to introduce e-petitions, it ought to provide for a review of the experience in two

or three years to judge its efficacy and its utility, and to review the provisions and application.

There is also the matter of cost. The estimate to establish a federal e-petition system is an initial investment of \$100,000 to \$200,000. It has been approximated that an additional 20% should be added for ongoing technical costs. Now, this is exclusive of any costs associated with potentially having to hire new staff. The UK spent £80,000 to create its e-petition system, and the operating costs there are approximately £40,000 annually. This does not include staff costs, technical staff costs or costs to individual government departments.

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The Quebec Legislature developed its own software for e-petitions. There, staff spent six months completing it.

The technology used for the Northwest Territories e-petition website was purchased from a UK firm for \$8,000. The website is hosted and maintained by a firm in the UK for just over \$800 a year. But the Northwest Territories has relatively few people. We have about twice as many students at the University of Toronto as there are residents of the Northwest Territories.

In the UK, 100,000 signatures on a petition triggers a debate in Parliament. Roughly 3.5 million people per year sign e-petitions in the UK. About 15,000 e-petitions are submitted each year, with approximately 30% of approved petitions having no more than two e-petitioners. About half the e-petitioners use social media apps to petition, not the homepage of the petition.

In Quebec, about 200 petitions are tabled yearly in the assembly, with e-petitions currently accounting for about 35% of them.

If the Legislature adopts e-petitions but is concerned that the number of e-petitions becomes too numerous, you could assign one of your committees the task of handling the petitions. The committee could be charged with deciding what the appropriate response or action regarding any petition ought to be. The committee, for example, could place a time limit on how long an e-petition is open and which one goes forward.

Certification of an e-petition could be done by such a committee, the Clerk of the House or a designated Clerk of petitions. Currently, a petition must be introduced to the House by an MPP and petitioners must find an MPP who's willing to do so.

There is a belief that e-petitions will increase public interest and engagement in public policy matters. Some believe e-petitions will contribute to shaping parliamentary debates and the priorities of political parties. If this occurs, it will detract from the traditional policy development role of political parties.

I suspect e-petitions will heighten attention to passing concerns and issues and detract from longer-term planning and policy development. On balance, I do not see much advantage to introducing e-petitions. Their introduction will be a form of pandering, I believe, and it will certainly allow politicians to boast how open to more public engagement and input they are, but I don't think

they're going to contribute to the quality of public policy, and I think that should be the primary concern of elected legislators.

Thank you for your attention. Again, I'm grateful to—I'm sure the table research clerk and others who may have read some of these reports can see that I've taken some information out of them because I was totally unfamiliar with the subject. I can also relate to you that I'm technologically retarded. I don't even have a cellphone, so that my first reflex is not to go electronically.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you for the work that you've done and thank you for that presentation.

I would ask the committee if they have any questions. We'll start with the opposition. Mr. Hillier.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Thank you for being here. I was a little bit surprised that you're unfamiliar with the subject. I thought you would have had a wealth of knowledge—and first-hand knowledge—other than what the research table has done. But I do want to make a few comments and then get into a few questions.

As we know, one of the things you mentioned was that e-petitions can be used to shame politicians and also reverse public policy. Paper petitions do that as well. I've seen many paper petitions that have called for a minister's resignation and, by and large, most of the petitions that I have seen are either a reversal of an existing public policy or a request to create a public policy. That really is an essential purpose of a petition: to ventilate a grievance. Heaven knows the public at large don't have very many avenues to ventilate their grievances or their expectations to the government.

You referenced the UK and the White House, the American experience. Those experiences were the result of an electronic petition process that was initiated and hosted by the executive level, where we're looking at potentially—I think all the discussion so far has been that the petition process be hosted at the legislative branch and not the executive branch and that we would have learned from those experiences. The executive branch hosting the e-petition site is not really sensible or practical, and it leads itself to even further inappropriate or less invaluable actions.

You talked a lot about what, in essence, were much stronger safeguards being a necessity, in your view, over the safeguards that we have on paper petitions, as far as the veracity of the information, the integrity or the accuracy of the names. I'm not sure why we would need to have greater safeguards on the electronic petitions as compared to the paper petitions.

But where I do want to really get into the question is, have you evaluated the petition outcome process in various jurisdictions? You made a reference that in the UK, a petition with 100,000 people requires and initiates a debate. Have you looked at other jurisdictions? You mentioned that you are familiar with the outcome of a petition here at the Legislative Assembly. It requires a written response from the government; it doesn't require any further action. If a petition is put and tabled in this

House, all that is required is, essentially, a recognition that the petition was tabled, and that the government has provided a response.

That's one of the questions that has been vexing this committee: Should we look at altering the outcome of a petition that is tabled? Should we be looking at a committee process? Should we be looking at initiating a debate or whatever else?

My question to you is, have you evaluated or studied these other outcome orientations of petitions in various jurisdictions? And, if so, what's your thought on the best or effective outcome of a paper or electronic petition tabled to an assembly?

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Thank you. You raised a number of points, and I hope I don't distort them or misrepresent them. The four that I got were that—you said that citizens don't have many opportunities to ventilate, and this would increase. I think they have every opportunity now, because they can still sign petitions. It's not as if e-petitions make it less possible for them to sign; it's just an easier way to ventilate.

This relates to another thing you're saying. I believe that an actual signature—people take that more seriously. That counts. Whether it's an e-petition or a regular petition, as you pointed out, under the rules right now, the government has to respond anyway. I think an e-petition process will be misused and abused, the way it has been in Britain and the United States, incidentally against the governments that introduced those petitions.

A second point: You made a distinction between the executive and legislative levels. That's a very important distinction, and I think that in the United States it's a very valid distinction in a different way. In Canada, I don't believe that. I believe that, as members of parties here, unlike members of parties there, you essentially act as a caucus. In the United States—although it's lessening there now, too—I see all kinds of votes across party lines. I don't notice them here. Occasionally, one or two people are offside. It just doesn't happen.

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The reality in our system is that the executive is going to be driving the process, as the party leadership, whether the petition goes to the Legislature or whether it goes to the executive. I don't think it's going to make much difference. I think there's going to be a party line on the petition. There might very well already be party lines on what you want to do with e-petitions and we're just going through the process, which is okay. I'm enjoying myself; I'm sorry you have to come to the meeting, but I learn things about it.

Also, I'm sharing my biases, because I rely more on the written word. Yes, I have a computer, but I use it for word processing primarily, and I surf for things that I want to learn about. The research I dug up about what happened in Britain and in the United States didn't come from the reports you brought, because you were just essentially looking at how to implement it. What are the mechanics, verification? I want to know: What are the

consequences that will have? None of that was in the reports that I got as background.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Well, that's what I'm getting at: What have you found in that evaluation of the outcomes?

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: My evaluation is that it hasn't contributed to public policy, that the focus becomes on passing concerns and wild things, like demanding Obama's birth certificate, not accepting the fact that he was born in the United States.

Also, I'll give you another example I didn't cite that I ran into yesterday in Britain. It can be an indirect vehicle for a lot of values I don't think should be expressed. Two years ago in the UK, a petition came in, and it attracted 5,000 signatures a day, that the government should immediately stop immigration from Romania and Bulgaria. Well, you know—

Mr. Randy Hillier: Are you suggesting that we should be a—

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: I'm suggesting that that decision should be made by people who are elected; I don't think you should be turning over public policy decisions to the whim of the impulse of public opinion at any one moment.

Mr. Randy Hillier: I don't think anybody's suggesting that we turn over the authority. It's a mechanism to hear the grievance, or hear the expectation.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Well, some of these grievances I don't think you should be spending your time on; I just don't. Now, there are ways of ferreting that out. What I learned about the British system is, they get 53,000, but only 28,000 are certified, and then only 145 required responses from departments, and only—I don't know—25 or something led to debates in Parliament.

Look, I think we're going to end up getting e-petitions, because the culture is moving that way. Younger people don't sign. They don't subscribe to newspapers. We're of mixed generations here.

Mr. Randy Hillier: It's changing.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: But my primary concern as a citizen—I'm not speaking as a political scientist—is the quality, the efficacy of public policy. My own orientation, and I respect that different people have different orientations, is that when we elect people—I like the trustee idea, where I would like to leave it to the person to use their judgment.

On the other hand, the reality is, we are now in a system, and you've reinforced it through legislation in Ontario, which puts the party's name on the ballot, that many of you are not getting elected because of your skills. You'd like to think that. But many people now go to vote, and even before the names of the parties were on the ballot, they've decided they're going to vote NDP or Conservative or Liberal—whatever. They don't recognize the name, but they know who's running for that party, and they put their name on it.

Mr. Randy Hillier: You mentioned as well that you never saw that the petition process was beneficial to the public policy development, that you've seen motions

being adopted that were introduced by an individual. That's somewhat different than my experience.

There's one in front of the House right at the moment, the petition on Lyme disease. It's been instrumental in shaping and developing and having a bill introduced in the House, and many of the Lyme petitions were electronic petitions; there were also paper ones. But they are indeed helping to shape and define public policy.

We also saw that with the G20 protests, a significant number of petitioners who were upset with the G20 regulation and how it was put forward, so—

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): We just have a minute, Randy.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Maybe you could take a moment. I see the petitions—although not being the one that gets royal assent—as being instrumental in helping to guide and helping the debate on public policy.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: I respect that, and I think that you gave two very good examples on Lyme and on—and what happens, I think, in these cases is that if the government in power thinks that it is an issue that should be addressed, it adopts it as its own. But that happens right now. I mean, the petitions you're referring to didn't happen because they were electronic, did they?

Mr. Randy Hillier: No, it was just that many have been both. Of course, the electronic ones are more convenient for a great number of people in today's society.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: They're also more convenient for jokesters. That's what my concern is, that if—

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Sorry; I'll have to jump in now. We go to the third party, if there are any questions or comments.

Mr. Michael Mantha: You're right in regard to the jokesters; I'll let you finish that. But just on paper petitions, some that I've had—I've had Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley sign them quite a bit. It just happens.

Ms. Soo Wong: At least you didn't get Joe Blow.

Mr. Michael Mantha: You know what? It happens. In both formats you're going to get that abuse.

We had a group that was here—I believe it was a couple of weeks ago—Samara. One of the issues that I brought up with them was: If you grab that pen and put it to the paper, there seems to be a greater commitment: I'm engaging myself, I'm putting my thoughts behind this because I've taken the time to read it and I'm looking at it.

Whereas what I was thinking was putting it up on the Internet: “Oh, a petition.” “On what?” “I don't know. ATVs.” Click, sign, boom, it's done. Have you really looked at what the petition was? I don't know; some people might, but in a way, today's younger generation—my boys don't want to see paper. They don't deal with paper. They're just: “Give it to me electronically.”

As you and I would probably take the time to read that petition or read that article in order to form an opinion, others do the same thing. They do their own research on the Internet. So I think it goes either way in regard to your level of commitment, what you understand as your engagement towards a petition.

Anyway, I wanted to give you the opportunity to finish off what you were saying earlier.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: No, I want to follow up on your point. Thank you.

You referred to your children and how they just do everything electronically. Did they get their credit cards electronically? I think they signed their names. Is a bank going to give you money on the basis of you clicking a button?

One middle road here between not allowing e-petitions and sticking to the current system is: Introduce e-petitions and why not require electronic signatures? Because e-petition regimes I've seen don't even require that. I think people will take an electronic signature more seriously. I don't even know how to set one up, but I know my staff, the admin person, because when I'm out of town—and I'm sure you have electronic signatures. But I would take that more seriously than—I agree with you—clicking a button.

I have clicked buttons for petitions and then two, three days later, when I learned more about it, I thought about it. I know, had that paper been put to me, I would have taken more time before I signed.

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So I want to suggest again that even people who we claim are only doing things on computers—well, I want to know how they got their cellphone. Did they never sign anything? I doubt it.

Mr. Michael Mantha: You talked a little earlier in regard to the quality of the actual petition and what might come. You started with a comment about—“beware” is what you talked about. I don't think you went far enough. I want to really understand what you mean by that. You made a really firm statement in regard to, “If you're going down this path, beware.”

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Yes, because I think what will happen, from what I can make out that happened in Britain and the UK, is that the media are going to love e-petitions, because the wilder the petition is—and of course, it's unlikely that you're going to get any action on it—they're going to run with that. It's great news. You know, 50,000 people signed this petition demanding that the Premier step down, let's say—whatever it is. They'll love that: “Hey, why isn't something happening?”

I come back to Mr. Hillier and the impact of petitions. Okay, if they have such an impact, how come, in all my years of following politics—the only reason I know petitions even exist is because I've seen broadcasts or sat in a House. It has been pro forma. When you start, you hear about petitions, but I've never seen a media report on them.

But now that we have e-petitions, I'm seeing widely just a few. I didn't spend that much time researching this; I'm sure there are a lot more. That's what concerns me. It takes away from the dignity of the House, and it doesn't contribute to the quality of public policy. I'm coming back to that. Lyme disease is an important issue. But

because we don't have e-petitions, we would never have heard about it?

I think you can use your website to let people know, “Hey, you can submit a petition.” Is it that onerous for them to sign a piece of paper? Obviously, it's important to them. I think they'll do it. But, hey, let's have an e-petition—I don't know—to shut down all the roads around Queen's Park or to barricade the place—“Yeah, I'm going to click on that”—or to change Stockwell Day's name to Doris. You knew what the result was going to be. I thought it was quite funny.

Mr. Michael Mantha: That leads in—
Interjection.

Mr. Michael Mantha: It's my turn. Wait your turn.

That's actually a good lead-in to the next question, which is filters.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Which is what?

Mr. Michael Mantha: Filters.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Filters, yes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Yes, filters, first as introduction to petitions but also the outcome. Presently, the outcome—anybody can put in a petition right now, and the only outcome is to get a response.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Right.

Mr. Michael Mantha: If that was to continue through e-petitions—where somebody wants to raise an issue, a petition goes out, a response comes in; and there's no change to the outcome, other than getting a response to your petition—the filter will more than likely be the MPPs who would present this petition and say, “Wait a second. ‘Randy’ is not going to be changed to ‘Carol’”—his name is not going to be changed—“or Michael is not going to be prevented from”—that's the filter.

The outcome: If the outcome doesn't change, and people still participate with either e-petitions or signed petitions—the thing that I really enjoyed, what you touched on earlier, is to increase engagement, increase awareness, increase participation and actually increase interest. If that continues to be the protests, both written and e-petitions can be very beneficial. They still need to be introduced—you're right—but that filter, I would think, is amongst the MPPs who are here.

It's an ethical question. You're not going to be presenting something that really has no relevance whatsoever on policy or on the issues that are here. I think that would be something to consider.

If there is no demanded outcome other than a response or acknowledgement of it, either written or e-petitions can work.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Okay. I'm not sure I caught it all, but let me try—I was speaking to Mr. Ballard before the formal session. He has gotten some petitions which he doesn't agree with or doesn't care for, but they come from one of his constituents, so he feels obliged, representing him, to present it. You could dissociate those. The filters you speak of, Mr. Mantha, we could—what I picked up from the research is that you could have a committee that filters them. Don't leave it up to the MPP. You could have a Clerk of petitions, because obviously

in Britain, most of them—maybe about half—are discounted right away. That would, I think, handle the jokester part, possibly. But then you can get arguments over that.

In fact, even if you turn it down the media will still pick up on it because it's a great headline. You know, "Hey, government turned down a petition about this and that." That's the danger. I'm a contrarian on public engagement, incidentally, but that's another subject. I'm a supporter of Samara, although I don't agree with a lot of the—but, well, that's irrelevant.

The major forum of public engagement that I care about, and I think people here do as well—and, in fact, a few MPPs have spoken to me about it before this session—is the election. A party gets a mandate and individual MPPs get a mandate. We talked about the Alberta election. So you can have filters.

Look, I think that, inevitably, we're going to get e-petitions. I'm just saying that I think people will try to abuse it. So your point is good; we will try to limit that, but that takes time and resources. You want to hire people to go through 5,000 petitions this year? Okay, we can do it. We're going to throw out 4,000 of them, and then we'll figure that maybe 500 should get a response.

Incidentally, you can just change your rule. Why don't you adopt Manitoba's rule? I sat in the Manitoba Legislature as an observer—I'm from Winnipeg. I noticed the petitions were read, and I never, ever heard a response. Then I learned yesterday that, yes, no response is required under the Manitoba standing orders. So if it's an important issue like Lyme or whatever and a media person hears about it, it will get the story, whether there's a response from the government or not, because they'll say, "Hey, this was introduced, a lot of people signed it and the government hasn't done anything."

So if you're worried about having to respond, you could eliminate that component. In Queensland, Australia, there is no requirement for response from anybody, but the public gets to have their petition read in the House, if it's certified.

I don't know if I've been helpful or not.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I just want to go back to the filter question. If there is no outcome change, the filter or the committee is going to be required—if there's a questionable petition that is found which is motivated by partisanship, we'll say, and if we're changing the outcome, then you need to make sure that the filter is addressed properly so that an appropriate outcome can come out of it.

But if you're not changing that, if you're just looking at bringing in the issues for greater engagement, where the appropriate filters are there from the beginning, from the MPP or from whoever the organization is that approaches an MPP about an issue that is dear to them, and the outcome is to have it heard in order to get a response—the same process that we have right now—the committee structure really wouldn't be required.

If the engagement process is to create greater engagement, however we obtain that, whether we think it's

positive or not—with all the disengagement that has been happening within our political system right now, that's something that we should go out and reach, and utilize those tools.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you, Michael. That pretty well wraps up the time. We now wish to go to the government members of this committee.

1350

Mr. Chris Ballard: Thank you very much for your presentation. It was refreshing. It was a bit of cold water on an idea, but I appreciate that sober second thought that you've delivered. It's giving me an opportunity to sort of step back.

My interest in e-petitions is that they are potentially one tool in the toolbox, to use that phrase, of Internet technology, or ITC, Internet technology communications, things like online polls, surveys, video streaming, video conferencing—all of those kinds of things.

What I'm looking at, and what I'm hearing, are some answers to the question: How do we more fully engage citizens just outside of that electoral period? How do we raise the view? How do we lower the pessimism? How do we raise the opinion that too many citizens have of our democratic process in general—not politicians, but the democratic process in general?

I'm worried. When I look at younger people, I remember when I was in school, and there was a lot of pessimism as well, but we seemed to be more engaged than kids today. Maybe that's true, and maybe that's not.

I was going to ask you a different question, but let me reverse it: From your reading, from your research, from your experience—and I know you get to work day in and day out with a lot of young people who are engaged—what would your advice be to us to increase that participation?

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Okay. Because both you and Mr. Mantha have raised this issue of participation—in a way, it frames this whole conversation. I'm a contrarian by nature. I was in student politics in the 1960s, and now I teach students who are my age. My observation is this: Human nature hasn't changed significantly since the 1960s or since the 15th century or the 15th century BC. Some of us, the people in this room, have a political gene. Some acquired it over time. Many people don't have an interest in politics. So 40 years ago, or 50 years ago, when there was one TV channel and a party was selecting a party leader, that was the only thing you could watch on TV. Today, "Oh, a party's selecting a leader. Well, I want to watch the Food Channel or golf or 50 other things." It hasn't changed. There was more of a captive crowd then. What has changed is that people don't feel the same obligation to go out and vote.

One of the ironies, I find, I think, oddly, is a product of my profession. The more educated people are, the more of a critical and analytical disposition they have. I mean, the House of Commons just started to be broadcast in 1977. Boy, has it changed since then.

Before the House was broadcast, in fact, when I was a first-year student, I subscribed to Hansard. I'd get it in

my mail every day. I couldn't read it all, but I had this impression that yes, the talk was serious. I couldn't follow it all. It took all this time to read. I couldn't read it all. But these were serious people debating, and you could read about it in the paper.

Once TV got introduced, it demystified a lot of it. A lot of people look at it and say, "Hey, that guy isn't answering the question," or, "She sounds like an idiot; I could have done that," or something like that. That lowers the estimation for what goes on in politics. A lot of it is, "Hey, the emperor actually has no clothes." Before, you couldn't see that. Now you can see what's going on.

Is there increased cynicism? I think people were no less cynical then, but there was a greater sense that you should go out and vote.

A couple of you brought up Alberta, so I want to relate this to engagement. There were two elections in Canada this week. One was in Alberta and one was in PEI. Do you know what the turnout was in those jurisdictions?

In Alberta, which historically has the lowest voter turnout in Canada—it was 40% in 2004 and 45% in 2008. It was 54% in 2012. It went up to 58%. Well, hey, that's higher than your percentage.

In Prince Edward Island, the turnout was 86%. Why is that? Well, there are different kinds of reasons. In Prince Edward Island, people know who their neighbours are. You live here in a condominium for 10 years; you have no idea who's down the hall. People get up in the morning and say, "Are you going to vote? Can I give you a ride?" It's part of the culture. It's also a more traditional, more conservative society.

In Alberta, "Hey, I just got here six months ago. Yes, I'm eligible to vote. I have no idea," and so on. There are all kinds of different factors.

I'm not as down on so-called lack of citizen engagement as Samara is. I respect people who are busy. They've got kids they've got to feed; they've got to get to their job. Incidentally, when the current Liberal government ran for office in 2003, do you know what one of the promises was? That if you elect the Liberals, we'll increase voter turnout by 10%. I thought to myself, how are you going to deliver? Guess what? Voter turnout has gone down in every election. I haven't seen any mention of that in the media, that that was a promise.

I thought it was a ridiculous promise. If you really want to increase voter turnout, introduce compulsory voting. We have it in countries like Australia. Or, if you don't want to fine people, give them a tax credit. Say, "Okay, if you vote, you'll get an acknowledgement and you'll get \$20 or \$50 off your income tax." After all, it's costing us—do you know how much it cost to register voters in the last federal election? It's \$12 a voter. For every person who voted, it comes out to \$17 a person. I thought, maybe if you give the person \$17, they'll vote. I don't know. I'm being a joker in part here.

But I'm not as concerned about engagement. Many people care about classical music; they don't follow politics. I've had students—graduates—my computer assist-

ant five or six years ago came to me in the midst of a federal election, as did my assistant superintendent during the Ontario election most recently, and said, "Okay. You know about politics. Who should I vote for?" I said, "Look, I'm not going to tell you who to vote for." He said, "But I don't know anything about"—you know, "I'm not interested. I don't know what the issues are. I don't know what the leaders are. I don't know anything." My line was, "Well, look, you don't have to vote."

I don't see that there's any great advantage to us compelling people who are totally ignorant to go in and cast their ballot just so we can say "higher citizen engagement." I care about the quality of debate we're going to have. Just because more people click a button, is that going to give us a better outcome? Why do we have higher turnouts in some events and not others? Why is it lower in, let's say, Ontario elections? Maybe it's because a lot of people perceive it won't make that much difference. That could be another factor.

Do you want a high turnout? Do you know what the turnout was in Quebec's referendum of 1995? Ninety-four per cent. Are Quebecers cheering citizen engagement? No. They're saying, "We don't want another referendum." The emotional heat was too high because people who were in the same family were having fights they'd never had. People at work: All of a sudden there were these great divisions. "Hey, we don't want to get into that."

So maybe it's a good sign you got lower voter turnout.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Customer satisfaction.

That was my question.

Ms. Soo Wong: Do we have time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Yes, go ahead.

Ms. Soo Wong: Thank you very much, Dr. Wiseman, for being here. I sense from your presentation this afternoon to the committee that you're not in favour of e-petitions, but, more importantly I want to hear your opinion in terms of your research work on this particular topic. How do we deal with a diverse community like Toronto or a diverse province like Ontario, should this e-petition become reality? There seems to be a push for electronic technology to improve engagement. How do we get diverse communities to be engaged?

1400

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: You're referring to different cultural groups in the society?

Ms. Soo Wong: Yes.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: All of these cultural groups have fraternal associations. Many of them have competing associations. There are a number that claim to represent this group or that group, and the people in those associations are not naive about politics. In fact, what strikes me is how in some constituencies you almost have to be of a certain ethnic background to have a nomination—the possibility in the parties. So they mobilize effectively.

There are great differences among different cultures. One of the things I learned is that voter—let's look at Asians. Voter turnout among Indo-Canadians is way

higher than it is among other ethnic groups and native-born Canadians. Voter turnout among Chinese Canadians is way lower. A lot of that has to do with the cultures they come from and the traditions.

Okay, so let's go to societies where many of the established societies come from. I was born in Europe too, incidentally, but I came here. Let's go to Western Europe. I notice that the voter turnout among Italian Canadians is way higher than it is among Portuguese Canadians. Why is that the case? In Italy, they used to have mandatory voting; they didn't have a choice. In Portugal, voting didn't matter. You had a fascist regime in power; Salazar was there for 40 or 50 years. Those have an impact. So when we talk about citizen engagement and diverse community, look, people aren't all cut from the same cultural background or orientation.

Another thing I learned from one of my colleagues who is teaching Indian politics in our department—let me throw out a few things, if you're interested. Last year we had the Fair Elections Act and there was all this attack against the act because, oh, this was going to disenfranchise all kinds of people like the poor and students and seniors and aboriginals and the elderly and

so on because of the greater identification requirements. Well, what happens in Canada is that we've adopted the discourse of the United States, and the experience may not be the same. I was stunned to find out a few months ago that, according to the OECD, the turnout difference between the better-off and the less well-off—I guess it's the median—was only 2% in Canada. In the US it's a lot higher, because you have to go out and actively register. But we often adopt the same language; we just assume, because we get all this American coverage, that the same thing is going on. It's not going on.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): We will have to wrap up. Compelling testimony.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: Sorry. I've gone on too long.

Ms. Soo Wong: That's great. Thank you.

Mr. Nelson Wiseman: It's been very stimulating and I want to thank you for inviting me.

The Chair (Mr. Toby Barrett): Thank you very much on behalf of the committee. Thank you, sir.

I'll let the committee know there are just a couple of housekeeping items if people could stay after I bang the gavel.

The committee continued in closed session at 1405.

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