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**Official Report
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(Hansard)**

Wednesday 7 October 2015

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

Mercredi 7 octobre 2015

**Standing Committee on
the Legislative Assembly**

Petitions

**Comité permanent de
l'Assemblée législative**

Pétitions

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

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

Wednesday 7 October 2015

Mercredi 7 octobre 2015

The committee met at 1300 in committee room 1.

SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): We'll call the meeting to order. Welcome to the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly. On our agenda today, we have the report of the subcommittee on committee business. Do I have a mover? Soo?

Ms. Soo Wong: I'm going to move the committee report.

Your subcommittee on committee business met on Wednesday, September 30, 2015, to consider the business of the committee, and recommends the following:

(1) That the Chair of the Committee invite the following witnesses to make a presentation on e-petitions and that they be scheduled to present no later than October 28, 2015:

(a) Mr. Brian Beamish, Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario or designate;

(b) Mr. John Roberts, Chief Privacy Officer and Archivist of Ontario or designate.

(2) That each witness be offered up to 30 minutes for their presentation followed by up to 30 minutes for questions from the committee.

(3) That the table research officer provide an update on the current procedures for e-petitions at the Canadian House of Commons and the United Kingdom House of Commons and establish an appropriate contact in both Houses for further inquiries.

(4) That the committee begin in camera report writing on November 4, 2015.

(5) That the committee agree to vote on a final report no later than December 9, 2015.

(6) That the Clerk of the Committee, in consultation with the Chair, be authorized, prior to the passage of the report of the subcommittee, to commence making any preliminary arrangements necessary to facilitate the committee's proceedings.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Any discussion of the motion? Are the members ready to vote? Shall the report carry? Carried.

PETITIONS

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Next, everyone has in front of them a progress report on implementing e-petitions in the Canadian and UK Houses of

Commons. Joanne McNair has a presentation. I thought what we would do is as Joanne is going through the presentation, if the members would identify for me if you have questions, we'll ask questions throughout the report.

I'll turn it over to Joanne.

Ms. Joanne McNair: I hope you had a chance to at least scan through the paper. I'm not going to go through the paper itself, as such; I thought what we would do is look at what we have from the House of Commons and then at the UK sites. I'll probably end up mentioning pretty much everything that's in the report and maybe a few additional details, but as Mr. McNaughton said, if you have any questions at any point, please just stop me and we'll talk about it.

We'll start with the attachments we got from the presentation that was done for the procedure and House affairs committee. I apologize for the quality of them; they're just PDF attachments so they didn't photocopy very well. That's why I wanted to bring them up on the screen. Those are the attachments that are at the end of your report.

The first screen: As I said in the report, this might not be exactly what the final site looks like. There might be some few final tweaks and changes here and there, but it will be pretty close to what we can expect on their website once it goes live.

You've all visited the Parliament of Canada website at some point in time? They said that when you come on the landing page, the home page, there will be something very clear and obvious that will say e-petitions or whatever that you'll be able to click to find the site.

This would be the home page for the e-petitions website itself. As you can see, it's very straightforward and very clear. You have the option—if you just want to look at what petitions are there and maybe sign one; if you want to create a petition; if you want to look at the responses that the government has made to the petitions; or just learn more about petitions in general, those are the options that would be on the main page.

If you want to create a petition, you will have to create an account on the site. You see at the top of the page here, there's the sponsor option or the sign-in option. This sponsor option is for MPs; that will not show up to members of the general public. When they go on the site, you won't see the sponsor option. That will detect an MP IP address or account or something and it will show up for them but not for members of the general public.

You'll see the sign-in, so that's where you would create an account.

The second page of that handout is simply the same information, but this is how it will look on a mobile device. They've ensured that the site is 100% responsive, so whether you're looking at it on a 24-inch monitor, your smart phone or a tablet, it will look and display properly and function properly on all devices.

The next page is if you want to create a petition. One of the things that struck me is that they've maintained—well, you see very clearly that they have the option for a practical guide. They made it quite clear in the briefing that there would be links everywhere on how to do a petition and how to complete the forms. They also have these little information buttons next to all the main fields, which you've probably seen on other websites. Normally when you click on them, a little pop-up box appears that has information, like what to put in this field and how to complete it.

They maintained the traditional language for petitions. So you have the petition "To the House of Commons" with your grievances: "Whereas blah, blah, blah;" "Whereas blah, blah, blah;"—you can add as many whereases as you like. There's a button there to add more whereases, and then finally you get down to the prayer part. However, they put a 250-word limit on this, which struck me as a bit strange because if you've got a lot of whereases, you're going to use up your 250 words really quickly.

But we contacted them to clarify that, and you can ignore that completely. Since 1985, they don't require that paper petitions to the House of Commons use the traditional petition format. You can just send one in that says, "The government should stop doing XYZ." Here you go. People will have the option to ignore all that whereas stuff and just fill in the prayer section—

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Clark?

Mr. Steve Clark: Have we done any research—what's the average word length of a petition that we would present in the Ontario Legislature? Would you know?

Ms. Joanne McNair: I don't know. I could ask journals to see if they have—

Mr. Steve Clark: It would be interesting to ask them what the length is. I was surprised when you said that there was a word-count maximum because I would think many of our petitions are far longer than 250 words.

Interjection: Pages.

Mr. Steve Clark: Yes, absolutely. Okay. Thanks.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Most e-petition sites from other Legislatures all have a word limit for the prayer section, the requesting section, and 250 is one of the shortest ones I've seen. They tend to be about 1,000 or 900—I forget who, but I think somebody's had about 2,000 words. But 250 is definitely, I think, the shortest that I've seen on any site.

So you fill in all your petition part and then when you get down to the sponsor—because you will need a member of Parliament to sponsor your petition. They assure

me that there will be a drop-down menu, because my concern was that a lot of people won't know who their own MP is, never mind who else they should approach for this. There will supposedly be drop-down menus, and people will have to put in the name of a member they want to approach to sponsor the petition.

You also have to supply the names and email addresses of at least five people you think will support this petition because it will not be able to go live unless it has six supporters, the petitioner being one of them—so the petitioner plus five supporters before the petition can even appear on the site.

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The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Clark?

Mr. Steve Clark: If I was creating a petition on this House of Commons site, and I picked an MP, would there be some notification sent to the MP? Because later on in your report, the background says that if you ask five and all five decline, you end it.

Ms. Joanne McNair: We'll get to that, if you don't mind. We'll take a—

Mr. Steve Clark: Yes, sure. It just seems very strange when I read that.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. There are some things about their site that I'm not crazy about.

Ms. Soo Wong: I had the same question.

Mr. Steve Clark: Okay, I'll listen. I'll stop talking.

Ms. Joanne McNair: You need at least five other people right from the get-go to support your petition. There's a little "add a supporter" here. You can list up to 10 people, so you can keep clicking that and add 10. They will send out emails to all of the people that you list, saying, "You've been asked to support this petition." Once five have replied, it will proceed to the next step. They won't wait. If you've given 10 names, they won't need all 10. It's just in case people make a mistake, like sometimes you make a typo.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Sorry. Mr. Balkissoon?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: The five people who are signing the petition—how much detail do they request from those people to, say, verify identification and that it's a real person rather than somebody just—

Ms. Joanne McNair: We'll get to that, but basically their name and email.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: No address?

Ms. Joanne McNair: No.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Ms. Wong?

Ms. Soo Wong: My question is with regard to sponsors. I'm just visually looking through the process. What we know, as MPPs, is that if, let's say—I'm just going to use our party first. So they approach me and I say no. Then this same person will go to my colleague Ms. McGarry. Will she know that this petitioner was trying to get to me and I said—

Ms. Joanne McNair: No.

Ms. Soo Wong: They do not know. Interesting. Because they could play each one of us. Right? Am I correct? Within your own party?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. You can add up to 10 potential supporters and hope that at least five of them support you on this. Then of course there's the verification—"I'm not a robot." I don't think you have to tick the box, "I am a Canadian citizen or permanent resident" down here at the bottom. You do have to tick "agree to the terms of use."

The Canadian citizenship thing is because it will block IP addresses that are outside the country. But if, say, you're a Canadian student doing a year abroad and there's an issue that comes up at home that you're really concerned about and you want to start a petition about it, you can still do that from abroad as long as the box is ticked. There's no sure way. It's impossible to completely prohibit people who aren't Canadians from getting involved in this. It's the same with paper petitions. We don't phone up every single person who signs a paper petition to make sure they're actually—

Ms. Soo Wong: We don't ask if they're Canadians on our petitions. That's just not right.

Ms. Joanne McNair: The next slide is for people who want to sign or just look at the petitions. There are several ways to do that. You'll be able to search for them by putting in a keyword to see what petitions may have been started on that. They list all the petitions that will be open for signatures. You'll be able to scroll down and look at them randomly. There's the option on the side here to refine your search, where you can search by member of Parliament, which members have sponsored which petitions, if you want to see what your MP or MPP is sponsoring.

One feature they have that I quite like and I've not seen anywhere else is these keywords. They assign keywords to each petition, so you can just search by keyword. If you're, say, really anti-pipeline, you'll click "pipeline" and you'll see all the petitions that come up that have something to do with pipelines.

Ms. Soo Wong: So there's a subject area?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. I thought that was a nice idea.

You will also be able to subscribe to any petition you're interested in through an RSS subscription, to get notified of it as it moves through different stages—what's happening with it.

That's for the signing.

Okay, so now you're the MPP who gets—no, this is the signing. Once you've clicked on one that you want to sign, this is what it looks like. This is the information that they ask from you. I'm sorry, I did miss that one piece of information; they do ask for a phone number. So first name, last name, email, phone. For address, they just ask if you're in Canada or elsewhere and what province you're from. They do ask for a postal code as well.

I have to say none of the information about the signatures, the people who sign, none of that appears anywhere on the website—not their names, not anything. All the data provided by people who sign the petitions will be completely destroyed after a given amount of time. They haven't completely decided on what that amount of

time will be, but they are leaning towards at dissolution. So at dissolution, at the end of a Parliament, all data collected regarding people who have signed a petition will be completely destroyed. It will not be archived. The petition will be archived, but not the details from anyone who signed it.

The only personal information that will appear on this petition is the person who started the petition, and it will just be their name. The example they gave here was John Doe from Montreal. That's it. That's the only identifying information that will be publicly viewable. I know security has been a main concern of yours, but that's how they're planning to proceed at the moment.

Again, you fill in your details, you click that you're not a robot, that you're a Canadian citizen and that you agree to their terms. You have the option of being emailed regarding the progress of the petition, if you're interested.

Ms. Soo Wong: Can I ask a question about Canadian citizenship? I want to go back to your comment on if they were international students or they were taking a co-op year out of the country. Why is listing whether you're Canadian an important tick-off box?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Because the software that they're using blocks foreign IPs. So if you're using a computer in the United States, you wouldn't be able to do any of this; it would be blocked because your IP address would be from outside Canada. By ticking the box, it will somehow override that. I'm not sure of all the technical details.

Ms. Soo Wong: Because that could inadvertently prevent Canadians. No other provinces or other countries—I know you're going to talk to us shortly about the UK—ask the individual who is doing the petition your status or citizenship.

Ms. Joanne McNair: The UK site does ask, you have to tick "I am a UK resident."

Ms. Soo Wong: Interesting.

Ms. Joanne McNair: We will look at the UK site after this.

Ms. Soo Wong: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Once you've signed the petition, you've submitted that signature, you get the standard email. I think anybody who has signed up for anything online, you've received emails like this where they ask you to validate: "You've recently created an account here. Please validate." That's what you get in the mail from them to validate the fact that yes, indeed, I did sign. It's the same with the sponsors at the start for the petition. The five additional email addresses that you provide, they get an email like this saying, "You've been asked to support this petition. Please validate, yes or no."

Now, this is what the MPs see. They have a members' portal. I don't know if we have anything like that for MPPs here, but there's a special section of the website where MPs can log in. You'll log in to your portal and you will see this. This is MP Johnny Appleseed. You'll see the number of pending requests; he's got three requests pending for petitions that people want him to

sponsor. They'll have the list of the petitions that he has already sponsored and the ones that he has declined. He'll log in, he'll see this list of petitions, and then he clicks on the first one to see what that's all about, this petitions E8. It's a petition to create a national day celebrating apples because apples are wonderful. Mr. Appleseed will now have the option of accepting sponsoring this or to decline sponsoring this petition.

He also has the option of saying a few words. If he wants to explain why he doesn't want to sponsor this petition, he can write in a little blurb saying, "I'm sorry, but I really hate apples. They're evil. I prefer oranges, so I'm not going to sponsor your petition." Or if you want to say, "This is a really great initiative. We should have thought of this sooner"—whatever. There's that option to say a few words about the petition and to accept or decline.

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If you accept to sponsor the petition, you cannot rescind that decision. Once you say, "Yes, I'm sponsoring this," you're stuck with it.

Mr. Chris Ballard: So read it carefully.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes, read it carefully.

You'll notice at the side there's a deadline to respond. Each petition sponsorship request, the MP has 30 days to decide if they want to sponsor this or not. They will get two notifications to remind them, one after 10 days and one after about 20 days, saying, "You still haven't decided what you're doing about this." When you think about it, this could take a really long time before somebody's petition appears because you contact one MP, they take 30 days and decide, "No, I'm not going to sponsor that." So then you have to go back to the start and pick another MP and send that off. They have another 30 days where they can decide if they're going to—

Ms. Soo Wong: It could be six months.

Ms. Joanne McNair: It could be six months before your petition gets anywhere, and you have only five goes at this.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Ballard.

Mr. Chris Ballard: A quick question about the support for the e-petition: For example, I would assume that the way theirs is set up is that if an MP doesn't agree to support it after the 30 days, is it deemed that they're not supporting it or is it just neutral?

Ms. Joanne McNair: I don't know. I assume if they don't respond—they didn't cover that. I assume that they assume people are going to respond one way or the other.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Some people may be just neutral and don't want to say yes or no.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Well, I would hope they would say yes or no one way or the other. The only people who will know what you've decided are the person who started the petition and the five original sponsors. They will get an email alerting them to, "Yes. Mr. Appleseed agreed to sponsor your petition," or, "No, he did not." No one else will know.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mrs. McGarry.

Mrs. Kathryn McGarry: Question: After the 30 days, does it just drop off and nothing more is to be done and then the petitioner would get the notification that it's not sponsored?

Ms. Joanne McNair: I'm not entirely sure. I can follow up with them on that, if they've thought that through or not. But I don't know exactly what happens if an MP does not respond after 30 days.

Mrs. Kathryn McGarry: Thank you.

Ms. Joanne McNair: So that's what we have from the House of Commons.

There are a couple of things. Before a petition can be certified and tabled in the House, an e-petition will have to get 500 signatures. Paper petitions require only 25 signatures to be certified. I think the 500 is a bit of a mistake. I think they're thinking everything is going to get a bazillion signatures because it's online and really easy to sign. Experience from the UK has shown that almost half of the petitions die off, don't even get five signatures. That's why they set the bar at six signatures just for it to go live.

On most petitions, the number of signatures they're going to get, they'll get within the first 24 to 48 hours. After that, it's literally dead. We can see that on the UK site. When you start scrolling down the petitions they have—the site only went live in July but by the time you get down to the ones that were started right when it went live, they have a handful of signatures and they're just basically dead in the water. They're not going to go anywhere.

The 500, to have that double standard for e-petitions and paper petitions I think is a bit—I sort of understand where they were coming from but I don't really agree with it.

One thing that I did find interesting was they have a policy in Ottawa where if a petition has been certified but not yet tabled in the House, at dissolution, if it still hasn't been tabled, the petition carries over to the next Parliament. But they haven't discussed that in terms of what they're going to do with e-petitions. Will the same policy apply or not?

The people who did the briefing suggest that the committee reconsider that: What are we going to do with e-petitions if one of them has reached over 500 signatures? Do we carry it over? They'll close down the site; they won't allow people to create new petitions or sign any during a dissolution period. But what do we do with the ones that have reached the target? Do we just kill them, or will we be able to carry them over like we would with paper petitions?

Are there any other questions?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Balkissoon.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Now that it meets all the criteria, what are the next steps? How does it get presented to the House, or what happens after they've done everything online and it meets it?

Ms. Joanne McNair: It follows the same path as their paper petition process. It's integrated—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: So one of us will have to get up and read it?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: It will be the sponsoring person. But what happens if you have more than one sponsoring person?

Ms. Joanne McNair: You only get one sponsoring person.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mrs. McGarry, question?

Mrs. Kathryn McGarry: Thank you. Has the House of Commons faced any roadblocks or setbacks yet in the process, and do they have any lessons learned that they could share with us?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Given that this hasn't gone live yet, it's a bit early to say. It did cost a little bit more than they expected. The first estimate was \$200,000 and it ended up costing \$250,000 because of the technical requirements that the committee wanted. Also, they wanted—

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Sorry, Ms. Wong?

Ms. Soo Wong: That's exactly what I was going to ask, Mr. Chair, through you to the staff.

Although it's \$200,000 on paper and now it's gone up to \$250,000, the maintenance of these IT services, how compatible is that IT compared to ours? I know on our subcommittee, we did talk about possibly having this particular staffer from the House of Commons come in to talk to us, because I think we—I certainly have a lot of questions. Cost is always a big issue, I'm sure our colleagues opposite would agree with me, but the ongoing maintenance of this—because you couldn't answer our question about if we didn't respond on time, what does that mean?

I don't know about you. I don't go to everything. Unless that sponsor option, it feeds to my BlackBerry, then I will go in there and check. For me to go in there every week to look for a petition—you know what I'm getting at, right? Because we have busy lives and you have to go to the portal—I'm just looking at the logistics.

I think I would love to see—and this is a question for the Clerks later on, Mr. Chair, just on the table. I'd like to see how compatible this particular system is and what's the status—because I know we have put the witness's name for the House of Commons as part of the witnesses to come before this committee, whether in person or by phone—because I think these questions need to be asked for us to even consider or entertain this particular system.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): So you'd like to know what the ongoing costs will be—

Ms. Soo Wong: Yes. Have they projected that?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Yes, we can certainly ask on that, because they'll have an estimate, I'm assuming—

Ms. Soo Wong: And Mr. Chair, the software that they use and how compatible it is to our current system. I don't know. Do you guys know?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Ballard, do you have a question?

Mr. Chris Ballard: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I was going to go down that same path, and I just wondered about the ongoing operational costs. Maybe it's a little premature, but it would be nice to know if we could buy the code off of them and skin it ourselves to make it look like an Ontario site and save the money from doing it ourselves.

Ms. Joanne McNair: The software that the UK built in-house, that is open-source. It's available to anyone and it can be easily modified.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Easily modified, yes.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. The software that the White House developed in-house, that's also open-source—

Mr. Chris Ballard: All PHP stuff.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Actually, our iDivision session, I emailed them the links to both of them and they said that they'd maybe set that up and just start playing around with stuff to see what it was like.

I know the White House one is Drupal-based. I'm not sure about the UK House of Commons, what they use, but there's no need for us to build something from scratch if we end up going this way.

Mr. Chris Ballard: If I can just follow up, then, I think that what is important to us is: Do you know where their server is located, that hosts this software?

Ms. Joanne McNair: No.

Mr. Chris Ballard: So who owns it? It's owned by the government—

Ms. Joanne McNair: The Parliament, I would assume.

Mr. Chris Ballard: We can get into that later.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Clark.

Mr. Steve Clark: I think Joanne has done a great report, and I hope that members will take the time to look at the UK site when she goes through it.

I just want to remind the committee that it was Mr. Hillier and I on this committee who suggested that—many of us, in fact, many members of this committee have e-petitions on their websites right now. It wasn't an excessive cost. But what didn't happen was any consensus on legitimizing what many of us are doing right now. I want to put that on the record again.

1330

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): We'll certainly have to deal with that.

Continue.

Ms. Joanne McNair: There's just one other issue that they haven't quite worked out, and that's regarding integrating the responses received to paper petitions onto the website. I'm not clear exactly what—part of the issue is translation because, if I'm understanding them correctly, any petition that appears on the e-petition site will be translated. Regardless of what language you submit it in,

it will be translated and appear in both languages on the site.

Paper petitions are not translated, so I'm guessing that means the government responses to them are in the language that the petition was in and not automatically translated. So there's a question of translation and also just a question of how we are going to get those paper petition responses integrated into the site because they want the responses to all petitions to be publicly available.

They haven't launched the site yet; they have it ready to go whenever the new Parliament starts. Obviously, we don't know when that will be, depending on what the outcome of the election is, but they say within a few days of the new Parliament starting, the Speaker will make a statement announcing that the system is ready to go and it will launch.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Ms. Wong?

Ms. Soo Wong: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I know I've asked this question in the past: the accessibility issue. We have a very diverse community. Forget about diverse community for a minute, we have an aging seniors population. I know a number of our petitions are signed by our aging seniors population. I mean, that navigation—you've got to be pretty on the ball.

I want to hear from the folks from the House of Commons and through your research work, Mr. Chair, for the staff. Have they looked into the challenges for those who have language barriers, seniors and those without computer access? Better yet, those who have computer networks that don't hook up, because we know that some remote areas of Canada don't have Internet. How are they going to be able to communicate and participate in e-petitions?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): They'll have to continue—

Ms. Soo Wong: It's something to be considered for the future.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): It's a good question on accessibility, for sure.

Ms. Joanne McNair: They're not getting rid of paper petitions.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): No. It's a dual system

Ms. Soo Wong: So it's a hybrid.

Ms. Joanne McNair: No Parliament that has e-petitions has gotten rid of paper petitions.

Ms. Soo Wong: An additional opportunity.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): We'll continue with the UK petitions now.

Ms. Joanne McNair: So now we'll go visit the House of Commons. One thing I will say is the UK House of Commons has a great petition site, but it's not easy to find. There's no obvious link to it.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Maybe it was done on purpose.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Maybe so. Your main landing page when you first go to the UK House of Commons site is this and there is nothing about e-petitions anywhere. I knew where to find it. It's actually under the "get involved" tab, and even there it's not that obvious.

It's down—"have your say." Down here, down here to "petition Parliament." There we go, and even there, you're still not on the petitions website. You're just on how to petition. They have information about e-petitions, paper petitions, which are what they call public petitions and private bill petitions, and over here, finally, we get to the e-petitions website.

This is what their e-petitions website looks like. It's fairly different from the proposed Canadian model. It's very clear, very open. Right at the start you see—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Oh, I like the first petition.

Ms. Soo Wong: I like that one, Diwali.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: We'll have 50 holidays. We'll never work.

Ms. Joanne McNair: So you see how many have received a response from government. They get a response from government once they hit 10,000 signatures.

Mr. Steve Clark: I like that other column: "one petition was debated in the House of Commons."

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes.

Mr. Steve Clark: I like that.

Ms. Joanne McNair: It gets debated once it hits—well, potentially debated once it hits 100,000 signatures. "Popular petitions" doesn't mean they had the most signatures. It means the ones that are currently the most active in terms of garnering signatures. Then you can scroll down to the ones that got to 10,000 signatures and the ones that have 100,000 or more signatures.

You can also search. If you want to see what people in your area are signing, you can put in a UK postal code, which I happen to have handy. It shows who the MP is who represents that part of the country and what petitions are the most popular among people who live in that part of the country.

Mr. Chris Ballard: They need 500 signatures?

Ms. Joanne McNair: For?

Mr. Chris Ballard: In order to have their petition move ahead. Sorry, Mr. Chair, I should have gone through you.

Ms. Joanne McNair: All petitions, regardless of the number of signatures, will be looked at by the petitions committee.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Oh, it's Canada that's 500.

Ms. Joanne McNair: To get a response from government, they need 10,000. To get it potentially debated, they get—

Mr. Chris Ballard: You need 100,000.

Ms. Joanne McNair: —100,000.

If we wanted to start a petition in the UK—see, they don't deal with this "whereas" and whatnot; it's "What do you want us to do?"

Ms. Soo Wong: Go right to the nut.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. You just type in whatever you want.

Ms. Soo Wong: Are there word limits there, too?

Ms. Joanne McNair: I think there were, but I forget what it was.

Mr. Steve Clark: Their petitions appear to be very short. They're very short petitions.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Theirs are very short—very short and to the point. It's almost a Twitter petition.

The examples that they give—for example, “Introduce black history to the primary curriculum.” “Lower the voting age to 16.” Bad examples: “Russia problem on US ruling.” Good petitions say clearly what they want government or Parliament to do.

I'll just randomly type something in. That's my petition to the UK. Then I hit “Continue.” They check to see if there are any petitions like that already up there. No, I came up with an original one, so go, me!

If I wanted to give more background on why I think this is something that the UK should do, that's where I could put it in. Or you could put in URLs to research reports that demonstrate that what Portugal has done is a really good thing. I think the “300” here is that you have a word limit there, 300 words down here, because it's blank; I haven't put anything in. Down here, it's 500 words.

No, I don't want any additional preview. This looks good. Okay.

See, here, you have to be a UK citizen.

Ms. Soo Wong: So if you don't click that box, it doesn't go anywhere.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Right. Then they ask for your name, email address, location and your postal code. Obviously, I'm not going to fill this in because I don't want to lie to them.

Mr. Steve Clark: The one thing I noticed is their petitions say who created them. They list the person's name on the website.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. So will the Canadian one.

Mr. Steve Clark: Yes, which I was surprised at.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Just their name, though. The Canadian one puts the name and city.

That's their petition creation process. You don't need any supporting emails or anything—no, you do. I'm sorry. You will be asked to put in five supporting email addresses, same as the Canadian one.

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We'll just randomly look at a petition. This is the one that was actually debated, vote of no confidence on the health minister. It's still open for signing. They're open for six months; it's still open.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: So many people have signed that.

Mr. Steve Clark: There are some on here that have 400,000 signatures.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. This one was debated—they didn't actually debate a non-confidence motion for the health minister. What they debated was what was upsetting people about what the health minister had done, which was impose new contract conditions on young doctors.

Before it got to that stage, when it hit the 10,000-signature mark, it got a government response which, as you can see, is quite lengthy and detailed. I've seen some of the government responses to petitions here. The government gave a very complex, fairly significant reply to

it. As I've said, this one was debated, so you have the link to go watch the actual debate if you want, or to read the transcript of the debate if you have lots of time on your hands.

This is a newer petition that just started. It's only got 4,000 signatures so far. It has no government reply. Here you see the name of the person who started it, Michael Kenworthy. They give the deadline of when the petition will close, based on when it was opened.

Mr. Chris Ballard: So it's up to Michael Kenworthy to get out there and get those 10,000 signatures.

Ms. Joanne McNair: It's up to him. He can share this petition by email, Twitter and Facebook. Obviously, he doesn't have enough friends out there yet.

Mr. Michael Mantha: So just looking at the petition—it's very weak, as far as giving a directive to the government about what they want to do, just looking at that one.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. It's—

Mr. Michael Mantha: The directive or the ask, is it not scrutinized before it goes up? Or is it just—

Ms. Joanne McNair: It is. You'll see they have—it is scrutinized by a Clerk to make sure it's in order and whatnot.

Mr. Michael Mantha: So it goes up, and it's up because it met the criteria, but after it's up, until it gets those initial signatures, is it being reviewed by someone to say, “This has content” or “This is just”—

Ms. Joanne McNair: If they judge that it's something that the government could technically act on, it will go up.

I'll show you some of the rejected ones, because they do list all the rejected petitions.

Mr. Steve Clark: They're quite interesting.

Ms. Joanne McNair: They're fascinating.

Mr. Steve Clark: You should read the rejected ones.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes, they're great.

The Canadian House of Commons: I did ask them about that, and they do not plan to make rejected petitions publically available at all. They will not appear anywhere. I think that's a big mistake, because this is brilliant.

Mr. Steve Clark: Did you see that one? “Bring Rayman into Super Smash Bros.”

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. “Do MPs deserve”—

Interjections.

Ms. Joanne McNair: They say, “Why was this petition rejected?”

“It's about something that the UK government or Parliament is not responsible for.

“The government and Parliament don't have the power to set MPs' pay. That power was given by Parliament to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority ... in 2010, so that after 2012 MPs no longer had” any “control over their own pay.”

Most of them are rejected because they are duplicates. “Stop the Incinerator.” This is something that is the responsibility of the government of Scotland, so the UK

Parliament can't do anything about it. Again, they rejected it.

"Remove cannabis from schedule 1 ... drugs:" Why was this rejected? There's already a petition about it. What they do then is they provide you with the link to the existing petition.

Some of them are so funny because there are petitions to remove David Cameron as Prime Minister, that he should be placed on benefits and sent to Syria and things like that. So they reject them. But there's another petition on a similar topic. There are other petitions that were approved, calling for non-confidence in the Prime Minister, so they link the petitioner to that.

Mr. Michael Mantha: But in their process they don't have the requirement for a sponsor.

Ms. Joanne McNair: No.

Mr. Michael Mantha: So if they would, a lot of those could be eliminated through that process of sponsorship.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Because no sitting member would—well, I don't want to pass judgment on anybody but there are a few—

Ms. Joanne McNair: You'd be surprised. I've seen stranger things.

Mr. Steve Clark: No, but what it does is, it gets in our mind as a committee how you want the process to be led. Do you want it to be led by the people so that they can put up whatever petition they want, which is really what the UK system has, and then they have a petitions committee and they have a framework to deal with them afterwards versus what we saw with the proposed House of Commons system where it's very formal and it's very regimented. You have to get so many signatures and you have to get so many MPs involved.

It's something for the committee to think about. Do you want something that's citizen-led or do you want something that has more stops to make it more difficult? I think we've seen in both cases—neither of them is accessible from the front splash page. So I would question the intent of making them accessible to the public. You should have them top of mind. You should have them out front when somebody goes to that site.

It's something for us to think about over the next few weeks. What type of system do we want to recommend as a committee: One that's free of—to use a word that Mr. Hillier's used at this committee—"frustration" or do you want to have drop-down menus and 30-day wait periods? Again, I think the committee should put their mind at some point to what type of system they want to recommend.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes, I concur wholeheartedly that is the main question. The security and privacy issues are key, but those are sort of secondary to the decision: Are we going to move ahead with this? What is the point of engaging in this? Are you trying to build citizen engagement—not talking voter turnout, just engaging with citizens in a more direct manner? Are we happy with the current petitions procedure? Obviously petitions are very public. In theory, paper petitions are public, but it's very

obscure. It's very hard to track them. There's the little moment where you present them in the House, but after that, try and find out what happens to them.

Government responses aren't made publicly available in any way, shape or form. Would the government want its responses to be made public? If you're putting them out there, the whole process has to be open and transparent. People have to know what's happening. They're going to expect that.

You might wonder, "Why would you put all the rejected petitions out there as well?" There was an incident that happened in Scotland this summer where, through a freedom-of-information request—because Scotland does not put the rejected petitions up, and what they discovered was that only a quarter of the petitions being submitted on their e-petitions site were actually going to the petitions committee. Seventy-five per cent of them were being blocked by the Clerks who scrutinized them. They weren't even getting—and the committee itself did not know that was happening. It was only through a freedom-of-information request that this information became public. So that kind of blew up in their faces; a bit of a mini scandal in Scotland over the summer. It's better to put everything out there, I think, and say, "Yes, there are a lot of silly petitions, but this is why they're silly petitions."

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Ms. Wong?

Ms. Soo Wong: I notice in your report here that the UK also has a petitions committee.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes.

Interjection.

Ms. Soo Wong: Yes, you and your petitions committee.

How often do they meet and the frequency of the meetings?

Ms. Joanne McNair: They meet every Tuesday when the House is sitting. They've had two meetings to date.

Ms. Soo Wong: Okay. And it's similarly like that in the House of Commons as well. The petitions committee—so they vet all those e-petitions along with the paper petitions?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes.

Ms. Soo Wong: The other question is—I asked similarly—I don't see the cost with this particular system. Do you have an idea what it costs?

Ms. Joanne McNair: I don't know if I've seen an actual number because essentially they built it on the existing UK government e-petitions site, which doesn't exist anymore. They've just rebranded that one. It's petitions to either government or Parliament, but it's housed and administered by the House of Commons now. The UK government e-petition site was built in-house.

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It wasn't that expensive. I think the number at the time was about £80,000 to build it from scratch, something like that. It's open-source software, so it's available for any Legislature to download, play with and customize as they see fit. Their main costs were in the hiring of staff because they had to create a whole new committee for it, so there were committee Clerks and whatnot.

Ms. Soo Wong: Who is now responsible for maintenance of the site? Is it the Clerks' department or the IT department?

Ms. Joanne McNair: The technical aspect is probably their IT department. The Clerks wouldn't be fiddling around with the software and that.

Ms. Soo Wong: Okay.

Ms. Joanne McNair: They would just scrutinize the petitions.

Ms. Soo Wong: They just look at the content, not the IT stuff?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes.

Ms. Soo Wong: How about the security issue, how are they ensuring—I mean, you said that they had posted the names. The privacy commissioner is okay to list the names?

Ms. Joanne McNair: They only post the name of the person who's writing—if you saw, you don't see anywhere who has signed this petition. There's only the name of the person who started it.

Ms. Soo Wong: But that could still be a challenge if someone had the same name.

In terms of the compatibility of that software to ours, do you have any knowledge about that piece?

Ms. Joanne McNair: It's open-source software. You'd have to talk to our iDivision, Rob Lundeen, I think. I had spoken to him about that and he said he would take a look at it, but it should work on any—I don't know what system they use, but it's just something—

Ms. Soo Wong: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Clark?

Mr. Steve Clark: Yes. I just want to put on the record—you look at Ms. McNair's report and it was back in February of this year that the Procedure Committee in the UK had their report. The report was E-petitions: A Collaborative System.

You have to think: It was also in February this year that we started talking about e-petitions, and they're at a point where they're ready to implement. I think it's very important, what Ms. McNair is saying, that you need to have something that is readily available and that doesn't have to cost a lot of money.

But I would put you toward one of the recommendations from that procedure committee's report, and I'll quote from page 3 of Ms. McNair's report. It says, "That the committee be able to consider petitions submitted by either means"—meaning either electronically or on paper—"and as appropriate, and at its discretion:

—"correspond with petitioners on their petition;

—"call petitioners for oral evidence;

—"refer a petition to the relevant select committee;

—"seek further information from the government, orally or in writing, on the subject of a petition; and

—"put forward petitions for debate."

This is an extremely robust report that ultimately is leading to House of Commons debates, table debates, referring to standing committees. But again, it goes back to something I said earlier: It's empowering those citizens. How many times have we had a citizen sign a petition that we've entered into the record, and how many times have we actually mailed to them the government's response? This is a very powerful system that does communicate back to the constituent and even goes so far as to have the constituent solicited for further evidence.

Again, I just want to reiterate to the committee that this report in the UK was very substantive and did engage the public in a way that I suggest we've never moved our minds towards.

I like the fact that the table reported in February and we're already seeing petitions online. I can just hope, since we first started talking about this in February, that we could move forward and get something done sooner rather than later.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Thank you, Mr. Clark. Are there any other questions for Ms. McNair? Any other questions?

Thank you very much. That was a great presentation today. Thanks.

For the committee's information, we'll be meeting on October 21, 2015, with our two witnesses, Mr. Brian Beamish and Mr. John Roberts, coming forward.

Mr. Steve Clark: Chair, can I also just ask that with anything that we decide, I understand that there would have to be standing order changes. So at some point before we start report writing, it would be nice to have at least an oral indication from the government lead about their government House leader's willingness to make some standing order changes to, even on a provisional basis, be able to do e-petitions.

It doesn't have to be dealt with today but I would hope before we start report writing that we would get that indication from the government on, are they prepared to make the changes to implement e-petitions?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Great. Thank you for those comments.

Any other business?

This committee is adjourned. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 1355.

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