

Question Time

The following question was submitted by an *About the House* reader.

Question

Can petitions to the House of Representatives be sent in electronically?

Answer

No – the current rules for making a petition to the House of Representatives do not allow for petitions to be sent in electronically.

The rules of the House (the standing orders) require that petitions must:

- be on paper;
- be legible;
- be in the English language or accompanied by a translation certified to be correct. The person certifying the translation must place his or her name and address on the translation;
- not contain any alterations in the text;
- not have any letters, affidavits or other documents attached to it;
- use respectful, courteous and moderate language and not contain irrelevant statements; and
- not contain any indication that it has been sponsored or distributed by a Member of the House of Representatives, except that, for the purpose of facilitating the lodgment of the petition, the name and address of a Member may be shown as an address to which the petition may be sent for presentation to the House.

In addition, to be presented to the House, a petition must:

- be addressed to the House of Representatives;
- refer to a matter which is within the power of the House of Representatives to address, that is, a Commonwealth legislative or administrative matter;

- state the facts which the petitioners wish to bring to the notice of the House; and
- contain a request for the House or the Parliament to take one or more specified actions.

There are also rules governing signatures on petitions. Every petition must contain the signature and address of at least one person on the page on which the terms of the petition are written. The following requirements must also be met:

- every signature must be written on a page bearing the terms of the petition, or the action requested by the petition. Signatures must not be copied, pasted or transferred on to the petition nor should they be placed on a blank page on the reverse of a sheet containing the terms of the petition; and
- each signature must be made by the person signing in his or her own handwriting. A petitioner who is not able to sign must make a mark in the presence of a witness. The witness must sign the petition as witness and write his or her address, and the name and address of the petitioner.

The issue of lodging submissions electronically was considered by the House of Representatives Procedure Committee as part of its 1999 investigation into community involvement in the procedures and practices of the House and its committees. The Procedure Committee did not support electronic lodgment of petitions because of perceived difficulties in verifying the



The beer excise petition is one of the largest ever received by the House. Photo: AUSPIC

authenticity of signatories, the ability to alter text after someone had signed a petition, and the loss of face to face 'traditional' contact when gathering community support for an issue. (See the Procedure Committee's *It's Your House* report available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/proc/reports/cominv/report.htm or call: (02) 6277 4685 for more information.)

For more information regarding petitions, including a suggested format for petitions, read House of Representatives Factsheet No. 11 – Petitions, available at www.aph.gov.au/house/info/factsht/fs11.htm or by calling (02) 6277 4685 or emailing: chamber.research.reps@aph.gov.au

100 years of petitioning the House

In the first 100 years of the House of Representatives, nearly 48,000 petitions have been presented to the House.

Among the early notable petitions to the House was a 1917 petition from some 1,500 petitioners asking that the House, under the War Precautions Act, proclaim 'shouting' of alcoholic drinks illegal during the currency of the war and for 12 months after peace was signed.

The use of petitions declined from the second decade after Federation, but they have enjoyed a resurgence since the 1970s.

Among the most famous petitions received by the House are those from the Yirrkala people who petitioned the House in 1963 and 1968 on indigenous land rights issues. The petitions were written in the language of the Yirrkala people and, together with a

translation, were attached to sheets of bark decorated in the traditional manner of the Yirrkala people. These unique petitions are on permanent public display in Parliament House, Canberra.

In 1986, a record 5,528 petitions were presented to the House. And in 2000, one of the largest single petitions ever was received. Close to 800,000 people petitioned the House on beer excise.