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Chair

Mr. Joe Preston

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• (1130)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): Good morning, all. This is meeting number 57 of the procedure and House affairs committee.

We're here on Motion M-428 by Mr. Stewart on electronic petitions.

We have some great guests with us this morning.

We have taken a little bit of time off this committee meeting today. If you're all right with the chair saying so, we're going to try to go 45 minutes and 45 minutes with our two groups of witnesses. Try to keep your questions short and try to get in as much as you can.

Monsieur Gagnon, you're here today to help us with this. You have an opening statement. Please, if you would, let's get started.

[Translation]

Mr. André Gagnon (Acting Deputy Clerk, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will keep my remarks relatively brief.

I am pleased to be here as part of your study on electronic petitions, emanating from Mr. Stewart's motion, M-428, which instructs the committee to "recommend changes to the Standing Orders and other conventions governing petitions so as to establish an electronic petitioning system".

Thank you for the invitation. I am joined today by Soufiane Ben Moussa, Chief Technology Officer of Information Services at the House of Commons.

I will begin with a very brief overview of the evolution of the issue of e-petitions at the House of Commons, and then outline the themes and questions the committee may wish to consider with respect to this proposal. And, of course, I would then be happy to take questions.

Electronic petitioning was first discussed during meetings of the Special Committee on the Modernization and Improvement of the Procedures of the House of Commons in 2003, as part of its general mandate. In its fourth report, it recommended "the development of a system for electronic petitions in consultation with the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs". After the special committee ceased its work with the prorogation of November 2003, your committee continued this work on e-petitions.

[English]

On February 3, 2005, along with then-clerk, Mr. Bill Corbett, and then-deputy clerk, Ms. Audrey O'Brien, I appeared before this committee to discuss electronic notices and petitions.

At that time members of the committee raised important questions, many of which remain relevant in the current context, including how to validate an online signature, how to prevent frivolous or libellous petitions, and the role of members in the e-petition process. As a result, the committee concluded that the proposal required further consideration.

In addition, the key themes outlined by Audrey O'Brien in 2005, the uniformity of rules and practices with paper petitions, the authenticity of signatures, the level of interactivity, the culture of petitions, and the cost and infrastructure of an e-petition system, are still very relevant.

Today we will focus on the proposal at hand; that is, an e-petition system with a possibility of a take-note debate when a petition gathers more than 100,000 signatures and is sponsored by at least 10 members of Parliament.

[Translation]

We will try to address very briefly various related issues that could be of interest to the committee. The first one relates to changes to the rules.

As it stands, the proposal would require moderate changes to the Standing Orders. For the purpose of simplicity, the e-petition system should mirror, to the extent possible, the current procedures and practices in place for paper petitions.

[English]

For example, members should retain the role they have with respect to paper petitions for e-petitions. They could present such e-petitions in the House or with the Clerk on behalf of their constituents without being involved in initiating or in endorsing them. That being said, they could do it, as well.

The committee should consider what would be required for an individual to initiate an e-petition. For instance, what information should be collected from or about this individual and what level of responsibility will they assume for the content of the petition? The committee may also wish to consider whether multiple petitions on a similar topic can be published on an e-petitions website at the same time, and if not, what constitutes a substantial difference between two proposed e-petitions.

The idea of holding a debate, for instance a four-hour take-note debate—it could be less than four hours—was also raised. If the committee were to decide to include such a proposal, it would definitely require changes to the Standing Orders. As our Standing Orders are currently drafted, only ministers of the crown may propose motions of this kind. The committee should also give consideration to a mechanism to schedule these debates.

[*Translation*]

The timeliness for an e-petition is also important to consider. The proposal refers to a 90-day period for public petitioning on the Web site. This is certainly in keeping with the general approach followed elsewhere. Obviously, this period can be shorter or longer.

As well, the committee may reflect on what, if any, effect a prorogation or a dissolution might have. One could argue that the process should continue when Parliament is prorogued, but be suspended while Parliament is dissolved. That would be for the simple reason that you would not want to have a parliamentary petition system potentially used for electoral purposes. Also, procedurally speaking, the membership of the House has to be reconstituted.

[*English*]

The proposal at hand indicates that e-petitions be presented in the House of Commons only once a certain threshold of signatures has been reached. The committee may want to reflect on what would happen to e-petitions that do not garner the required number of signatures, or for which there is no member who agrees to present it. Perhaps they could be deemed withdrawn after a certain amount of time.

The procedure for presenting an e-petition in the House could also require consideration. For instance the committee could consider having only the certificate presented along with the text of the petition and the number of signatures rather than the entire list of names. This would also be in continuity with the paperless exercise. We can imagine with 100,000 signatures how many pages that would represent.

Now let us turn our attention to the issue of the authenticity of signatures. The current requirements for a signature and address may or may not suffice for e-petitions. While not offering the highest level of authentication, it appears that the basic e-mail confirmation system alluded to at your last meeting has proven to be a good, cost-effective measure.

During the last meeting as well, members also considered the monitoring of IP or Internet protocol addresses. Simply put, would a safeguard that detects the IP address of petitioners be effective at preventing a single person from submitting numerous signatures? It is to be noted that an IP address is a series of four numbers that identifies initiating devices and various Internet destinations making two-way communication possible. These days it is very common for a single organization to have a router with an IP address that corresponds to a number of computers on a local area network, as is the case at the House of Commons. Therefore, blocking multiple signatories from the same IP address may prevent legitimate signatures on e-petitions from people accessing the Internet from within the same organization, such as a public library or Internet

café. That said, we could monitor the IP addresses, for instance, if IP addresses come from outside the country.

In conjunction with determining what information will be required from signatories to an e-petition, the committee will also need to consider in detail the key issues of security and privacy for petitioners. For instance, what level of detail should be displayed on the public website? Some systems display the name and the location of each signatory. For instance, it could be the name of the individual and the province. Others display only the name of the person who initiated the petition and the total number of signatories, so no names of each petitioner.

● (1135)

[*Translation*]

Also, how long should data regarding petitions and their signatories be stored on the site and in our systems? That is another question that will need to be answered.

Our unique culture and context will surely continue to shape this committee's discussions and decisions. For instance, all information posted on the parliamentary Web site is in both official languages. This should probably hold true for e-petitions.

That said, as is the case for individuals submitting briefs to parliamentary committees, it would be the House administration that could assume responsibility for translating the prayer of e-petitions. That way, they would be available in both official languages.

[*English*]

Finally, I would like to conclude with some information regarding the implementation and costs associated with an e-petition system. As you can imagine, they are highly dependent on the determined features and requirements, such as: the level of workflow complexity related to the initiation of an e-petition; the level of integration with our internal system—and I think you alluded to that at the last meeting; the extent to which we want to develop a mobile-friendly application—for instance, today close to 50% of the people who go on our website do it through a mobile application; the level of assurance of the signatory's identity; and the volume of e-petition participation. As of yesterday morning, before we proceeded with the petitions in the afternoon, during routine proceedings we had 3,797 petitions that were tabled in the House this year. Many more were certified, but close to 4,000 petitions were tabled in the House. We have a very high volume of petitions here at the House of Commons.

That said, we have some preliminary information for the committee, which is based on our evaluation of a solution that would offer generally the same features as the model used in the United Kingdom, which you alluded to at the last meeting as well. A high-level estimate would lead us to believe that an initial investment of \$100,000 to \$200,000 would be required. To this, you would probably need to add around 20% for ongoing technical costs. Furthermore, this does not take into account the extra staff that potentially—and we say potentially; we'll have to evaluate that—could be needed to manage the system.

In our estimation the development and implementation phases could take from three to six months. That would be three to six months after the approval of a business case, as you can imagine, by the Board of Internal Economy.

Observers will tell you that the e-petition system is not perfect. In fact, it simply reproduces, some would say even multiplies, the qualities and challenges of the system for traditional paper petitions. In that perspective, if it wishes to support the idea of e-petitions, the committee's task is to mitigate the difficulties enumerated and build on its possibilities. The administration of the House would be there to help the procedure and House affairs committee and the House of Commons to meet that objective.

We look forward to assisting the committee as it considers these important issues and will be happy to answer any questions.

Merci.

The Chair: Let's get to those.

Mr. Lukiwski, you're up first. It's a seven-minute round.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Thank you very much, Monsieur Gagnon, for being here.

Thank you for your opening statement. I think you raised a lot of questions, perhaps more questions than we had anticipated when we first started discussing this with Mr. Stewart. I'm starting to get a sense of why, when this was raised last, I think 10 years ago, it was deferred. We're getting back to it now.

However, one of the first questions I raised when Mr. Stewart was here and I think it was generally accepted and agreed upon by the committee was the concern that we have as a committee about privacy. I think it was generally accepted that we all believed the information contained on e-petitions should not be allowed to be data mined by political parties particularly, and perhaps others in general, and that information, personal information and addresses of the signatories, should be kept private.

What assurances could you give us or have you any advice for us as to how we might be able to achieve that goal by allowing valid signatories to be presented in an e-format, yet at the same time preventing others from using that information for political purposes?

● (1140)

Mr. André Gagnon: In fact, what's interesting with the system presented so far is that we would need a lot of information at the beginning. For instance, what I understood is that there would be follow up after a petition is being answered. We would send back to the individual who has signed the petition the government's response to the petition that the individual has signed. We need that information.

The first question is, do we need that information? Yes, we need it. We need it as well to authenticate the signature. That said, already in a significant portion of the work that the House does a lot of personal information is gathered. For instance, a lot of individuals appear before committee and they provide us with a lot of information that could be useful. A lot of people send a lot of information regarding their opinions on different issues. The Standing Committee on Finance has received over 800 briefs or statements. The information that was relayed to members of Parliament, that was relayed on the

website, is done in a way which is very respectful of privacy. That said, we have that information with us and it was kept confidential. We think with the system we've established so far we would be in a position to do so. That said, we could certainly get some advice from this committee in terms of after the information has been sent to the individuals. Let's say the government response has been made, there was a debate in the House, and the individuals who signed have been advised that there was a debate in the House. We could at that time most probably erase that information totally.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Yes, I guess that's what I'm getting at here. I don't know if this is a suggestion or just a consideration, but once we have the relevant information and all the back and forth between the signatories and the House administration has occurred, are you suggesting that you would have the ability to completely erase and strike from the record any information that might otherwise be abused?

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes. I can also add as well that the information.... When there's a petition tabled in the House, it's given to the government for a response, as you can imagine. The information that would be provided to the government would not have the information we are talking about as well. It would never get out of our systems and could be erased as immediately as possible.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you for that.

With paper petitions, is there any opportunity for abuse under the current system where the names of the individuals are all listed in written form? They are presented to the table when petitions are tabled. Where are they stored, and is there any opportunity for anyone to get their hands on that information currently?

Mr. André Gagnon: First of all we need to see what type of information is on the paper petitions. Most of the time you would not get very much detailed information on the individual. People can be identified through a general address, which would not be exactly useful for electoral purposes, if that's the concern you have.

Once a paper petition is tabled in the House, it's provided to the government. The government would respond to it. They would keep essentially the first page or two of it after counting the.... You may be in a position to have more information than I do on that one. The rest of the petition is not kept.

● (1145)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Let's turn for a brief moment to the ability you have to actually validate the authenticity of the signatories. You spoke of it in your written submission. Could you give me again a bit of an overview of how you would plan to authenticate that the signatures that were e-filed were actually those of real Canadian citizens instead of bogus names?

Mr. André Gagnon: The process would be the following: an individual goes on the website, sees a petition that he or she would like to sign, and pushes the button “I would like to sign the petition”. After that you would get a form that you would need to fill out with your name, your phone number, and your address, and you would have to have your e-mail address as well so we could provide you with more information afterwards. Then you would have to check a box that says, “I am a Canadian citizen and I understand I’m signing a petition”, all those things. Afterwards at the bottom you check “I want to sign this petition.”

Sorry, I forgot to say that you would also have to fill in the box where there is a random number so that you would not be able to multiply the signature with a robot. You would have to fill in that box.

This is the first part of it. You push the button, and this sends you to our system. An e-mail would go to the individual saying, “You have signed a petition and, if you confirm that you want to sign the petition, please push this button—click here”. That would be the way to authenticate it.

That is probably the most cost-effective way to authenticate a signature.

Again, as I mentioned at the end, the e-petition system has challenges, some of the challenges that paper petitions have. As you can imagine, today the authentication of paper petitions is not even that thorough.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you for being here today, gentlemen.

I have a couple of observations and questions sort of from a 30,000-foot perspective, although I want to get on the record because you never know when there's going to be an election.

This is one of the funniest things I ever heard. Every time I say 30,000 feet, it reminds me of Laurie Hawn when we were debating something. Laurie Hawn jumped in after I had made this great argument about what happens when you see things from 30,000 feet. He said, “I’m a former jet fighter pilot. You know what you see from 30,000 feet? Nothing.” Anyway it was one of the greatest comebacks, and I want to give him his due on that one.

Having said that, taking a sort of overall perspective of things, when we have these great ideas as politicians, as parliamentarians, that we think are just fantastic ideas and are going to make democracy hit the sweet spot, we meet with folks like you who actually have to turn these things into reality. Often we get a bit of a shock that you, the administration, are not always as enthused as we are about these brilliant ideas we get.

I have to say my sense in this case, though, is I’m not hearing a lot of pushback. I’m not hearing you saying, “Members, be very careful. There are very serious things here.” You’re pointing out some issues that we need to come to grips with and questions that need to be answered, but my sense is that you’re not sounding the alarm that we’re heading down a road we may regret, but that this is doable if we answer the right questions and do this properly. It sounds like your thinking is that this is doable.

Now, those are all my words. Please respond in whatever way best reflects your thinking, sir.

Mr. André Gagnon: Our role as the administration would be to provide assistance and advice on the different projects that a committee and the House choose to support.

The House adopted the motion recommending that this committee look at this issue. Clearly there was a decision of the House on that specific issue. It was a very tight decision, but it was a decision of the House. This committee has decided to look at it very seriously.

It seems that what we have decided to do from our perspective is to look at the issue and how it can be implemented. I’ve seen that the committee has studied that very rigorously. A lot of the questions that were raised were the ones that we would have raised anyway. That said, they were raised in this forum and it was well handled. That’s where I would leave it.

• (1150)

Mr. David Christopherson: Very good. Thank you. I appreciate that.

So far in our deliberations, any differences of opinion are more a matter of seeing challenges. We’ve been working cooperatively so far on this issue and I have reason to believe that it’s going to continue that way.

Assuming we could get our ducks in order and answer all these questions, what kind of timeframe would it take for us to put this in place? By that I am also asking about the Standing Orders. Just for the sake of argument let’s say we decide to make this a priority because we thought we could have a meeting of the minds, that it was a good move, and we’re going to try to make it happen. If we did that and did it as quickly as we could in a political context, what kind of timeframe would it be? What would it take for us to actually go from today to be in a position to say to the Canadian public that they now have this new option to appeal to their Parliament? What kind of timeframe are we looking at, sir?

Mr. André Gagnon: If this committee works very rapidly, there are other steps that would follow before we could take action. The first one would be to table a report in the House.

I’m not sure how the committee would like to work, whether it would be a report that would have changes to the Standing Orders already built into it or not. I’m not sure what the report would look like in the House. Once a report has been tabled and there is a decision of the House—because there needs to be a decision of the House—let’s say the decision of the House is to make it happen. To make it happen would mean for us to try to find the funding for that. We would probably have to go before the Board of Internal Economy. I say this in a very simplistic way, but if we do that, we go before the board and get the funding, at that time you could count from three to six months, I would say, in a general fashion.

Mr. David Christopherson: From what starting point?

Mr. André Gagnon: From the approval of funding, because we would need funding to proceed with that.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay. Very good. Thank you.

I'll just segue very quickly. You mentioned budget. In your opening comments you thought maybe \$100,000 to \$200,000 initially and then 20% ongoing. Just for context, what is the administration budget right now of the House?

Mr. André Gagnon: The totality of the budget of the House is \$400 million.

Mr. David Christopherson: Right. Obviously dollars alone wouldn't be the stopper here. The ongoing operational cost you are saying is 20%. Is that going forward annualized?

Mr. André Gagnon: Maybe I could ask Soufiane to give you the details regarding the technical aspect of it.

Mr. Soufiane Ben Moussa (Chief Technology Officer, Information Services, House of Commons): Yes, indeed, it is 20% of the investment, which will cover the hardware and licensing software.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's an annualized cost. After we get it up and running, the initial costs would be about 20% the first year, but can we expect that percentage to continue going forward roughly?

Mr. Soufiane Ben Moussa: Yes.

Mr. David Christopherson: It seems manageable to me. Are there any red flags you want to raise? It doesn't sound like a ton of money. It's not enough to stop it.

Mr. André Gagnon: I would add that there's always a possibility as well regarding the staff who could be required to follow up on this initiative.

Mr. David Christopherson: Right. Thank you.

Have you had an opportunity to study in any kind of detail the systems in some of the provinces and territories, but also internationally? Have you had that opportunity?

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes, in a very superficial manner.

Mr. David Christopherson: What are your thoughts?

Mr. André Gagnon: We could certainly say that in all of those cases the context, the unique culture of each Parliament or country, was taken into account. It would be difficult just to apply very simply an approach from one Parliament to another. For instance, would you think that the U.K. example could be easily done here? We're not exactly sure of that. The Scottish example as well. The idea that having the appearance of individuals.... For instance, in Scotland they attempted at a certain point a petition signed by only one member and one individual or citizen could appear before a committee because it's a valid request and all of those things. Can we imagine that in this country? I think it would be difficult. I think we need to look at those in a conceptual way and try to get the best out of those situations.

Mr. David Christopherson: I think my time has expired.

Thank you very much for the excellent answers.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1155)

The Chair: Monsieur Lamoureux, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Welcome to the committee, Mr. Gagnon and Mr. Ben Moussa.

In order for us to accomplish anything tangible on this particular file, is it fair to say we would, in fact, have to make some changes to the Standing Orders? Can anything be done without making changes to the Standing Orders?

Mr. André Gagnon: Can anything be done without the changes? When you see how the numerous changes, as we've talked about.... For instance, for a take-note debate, nothing is in the Standing Orders regarding take-note debates on petitions. How many hours would you want to have that debate take place? How would it be determined? All of that is not in the Standing Orders. It does not exist in the Standing Orders today. That's a simple one.

As for presenting e-petitions, the idea of number of days, those are not in the Standing Orders either.

All of those things would need to be put in the Standing Orders before we would proceed, because you would need some guidelines. You need some rules to administer that e-petition system.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Yes, I do think that's an important point. In order to draw some sort of conclusion in a positive way on e-petitions, the committee would be required to amend our Standing Orders. That would have to be a recommendation, in terms of the committee, to say that we want this standing order to state this. That's a fair assessment then.

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: The take-note debate was suggested by the member. There was an earlier discussion about why we would limit it to a possibility of a take-note debate. You started to make reference to it in your comments. In the observations you have made, are there alternatives to a take-note debate with the 100,000 signatures that you would suggest to the committee?

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes, there are other alternatives, and I think you'll hear about one from the National Assembly of Quebec after we're done.

Most of them go around the question of committee appearance of individuals who want to put forward the ideas they have regarding specific situations. You have a number of petitions that have been signed by a number of individuals, and after a certain threshold they can appear before a committee to make their point. That has been identified in some countries as a possibility.

As you are aware as well, in the U.K. there is what they call Westminster Hall, which is not exactly a committee and it's not exactly the House. That's where debate takes place. It's a grand committee; it's not a committee of the whole. You could situate it in those types of categories. This is also a possibility that exists. We've seen that in other parts.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: That could be any sort of a standing committee, the people who would make the presentation, generally the sponsors of the petition itself and obviously not the signators.

You know, if I go on the Internet today, there are literally dozens, if not hundreds, of petitions out there. From what I understand, we're looking at something in which x , being the number of members of Parliament who would have to sponsor the petition, the ideal situation is your office would be provided the proposal: here is the wording of the petition and this is what we would like to do. It would then be approved, or changed and eventually approved, and then it would go on the Internet.

Would the hundreds of others be completely irrelevant to the debate, no matter the number of signatures they would acquire?

Mr. André Gagnon: I'm not exactly sure what you are.... Maybe I didn't understand well.

I think the proposal refers to 10 members of Parliament who would be needed after a petition has reached, let's say, over 100,000 signatures. Those 10 members would be needed to make sure that there is a take-note debate in the House. I think that is the proposal at hand.

But to start with, if there's only one member implicated in some ways per petition, in the sense that it would be a member who would be sponsoring or endorsing the petitioner to say, "I support the individual who wants to put a petition on the website", I think those are the two....

• (1200)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Right. For example, if I surf the web and I find the dog abuse registry and there are 150,000 signatures on it, I then bring it to you and say, "I like this petition. I have nine other MPs. They all like it, so we want to bring it in." Can I do that?

Mr. André Gagnon: I understand. Sorry, I didn't get that part.

To put it very simply, no, you could not say that you have 150,000 signatures on this website and you just want to put it on this one so that we can get a debate. You could probably say that you've heard there are a lot of citizens who are interested in that issue; there is a citizen in your constituency who is interested in the issue and has approached you and said, "I want to put a petition on the public parliamentary website of the House of Commons." That is where we would start counting the individuals who would sign the petition. You're not taking petitions from elsewhere, because as you can imagine, if you decide to do that, all of the questions that were raised regarding the authenticity of signatures, all of the follow-up that we want identified as being addressed or looked at, would not be possible from that perspective.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: In regard to the current system of petitions, I think you mentioned there are about 4,000 coming in this year. Do you have any sense over the last number of years whether that is a fairly constant number? Is it a growing number? What is the general feeling toward petitions?

Mr. André Gagnon: This year is an important year; let's put it this way. Last year was a prorogation year. There were close to 2,000 petitions, and before that, close to 2,650. There have been a lot of petitions over the last few years, but this year there's a good number.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: If there was a norm, in your opinion, is there an overall increase? I can appreciate the election cycle, but is there a feeling that the number of petitions and the demand for

petitions is actually increasing, that more people want to sign petitions?

Mr. André Gagnon: That I could not comment on. I'm not sure about what the trend is here.

What you could see in terms of the situation as well is that you could see the number of petitions declining. Why would that be? For instance, we get a lot petitions in the House. We have a member who presents five petitions one day, and another member who presents five petitions the day after. Those petitions, let's say, have 100 signatures on them. That makes 10 petitions and 1,000 signatures. You could have one petition on the website that would have 1,000 signatures. In those terms, there are fewer petitions but as many people signing them. If you get more people signing them, maybe we could be in a situation where we would get fewer petitions tabled in the House. It's difficult to see where we would be going with that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lamoureux.

We're moving now to Mr. Richards, for four minutes, please.

We'll see if we can complete this round and then move on.

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): I'm going to go back to some technical questions again. I have to admit that technology is not my strong suit, so I apologize if my questions are simplistic.

The concern I have here is whether there's the ability to verify that each signature is one person. I know you did address that in your opening remarks, and I know you've addressed that in response to some other questions, but I'm still left with a few questions that I'm hoping you can help me with.

You talked in a fair bit of detail about IP addresses. Certainly the idea of being able to limit it to one per IP address was talked about at our last meeting. You mentioned what you thought some of the challenges with that would be, and I understood why those would be the case. I'm wondering if something could be done maybe within the technical capabilities to raise some kind of a red flag if there was, say, a certain number, maybe it was 20 or 10, whatever it might be from the same IP address, so that you would be able to say, "Hold on a second. Maybe we should have a look at this." Is there something that can be built in to flag it at that point? What could be done to follow up on that if that was possible?

Mr. André Gagnon: The answer is yes to that.

We need to start with the idea that at first the Clerk of Petitions would get the list of those who have signed the petition. From that perspective we would be able to see very rapidly who has signed the petition, and if there are funny names or whatever, as we've seen with petitions signed "Mickey Mouse", or whatever, in the past. Over and above that, we could say that there could be or would be a more technical report included in the process saying how many signatures came from the same IP address. This could be one of the flags set up in order for the Clerk of Petitions to say, "Okay, there are 200 signatures coming from the same place. How can we go about looking at that?" If there would be a serious doubt in looking at this information, say, we need to pursue that, there are other ways afterwards to check and go further down that route to authenticate the signatures.

•(1205)

Mr. Soufiane Ben Moussa: Essentially we can put a lot of parliamentary controls in the report to say there are some things that are wrong, and at that point, you can do it manually by calling, using the phone number. You can also automate that function to send messages to mobile phones or even to call automatically to confirm, and give another code. Then there are a lot of levels of authenticity that we can add. However, from our analysis, the majority of the systems are using only the e-mail system to confirm.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, so essentially it would require some individual follow-up whether by phone or e-mail or whatever to verify that those were all done by the person who was claiming had done them. That's it, essentially.

I think you mentioned in your opening remarks that you would have the ability to block any IP address outside Canada from being able to submit. Did I hear that right?

Mr. André Gagnon: Let's say you have a situation in which there are tons of signatures coming from London for whatever reason. I'm not sure we would be able to block those signatures, but we would be in a position to say that they were not valid and that we would not count them. I'm not sure where that process would take place.

Mr. Blake Richards: Essentially you'd be able to verify whether they were from within Canada or not and then determine whether there needed to be follow-up. That was what you were referring to.

Mr. André Gagnon: As you are aware, one of the check boxes that would need to be filled out would involve the individual indicating "I am a Canadian". That would be one of them, along with the addresses and the phone number found in there. When you add all of those elements together, if there's a phone number that is a European phone number, well, we are getting the situation to be much clearer in terms of—

Mr. Blake Richards: Just so I'm completely clear—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

We'll go to Madam Latendresse, for four minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Gagnon, thank you for your presentation.

I would like to echo what my colleague Mr. Christopherson said about the importance of hearing from the experts who know all about the nuts and bolts of translating these measures into reality.

I want to follow up on what Mr. Christopherson said.

In the past 10 years, since the last time you appeared before the committee on e-petitions, how many provinces and other countries have begun accepting electronic petitions? Do they make our job easier than it was in 2005?

Mr. André Gagnon: Thank you.

When we began looking into the issue in 2005, the members of the House modernization committee had visited Scotland. That was the major event relating to electronic petitions. Scotland was somewhat of a forerunner in the field.

Since then, a large number of legislative assemblies have put in place e-petition systems, some more advanced than others. While they cannot all be put in the same category, many of the assemblies, including the Northwest Territories' and Quebec's, showed bold thinking by bringing forward e-petition systems. In fact, I believe you are going to hear from representatives of those two provinces' legislatures today.

A number of countries, particularly in Europe, developed e-petition systems of varying degrees of sophistication. Some countries have a relatively simple system in place, while other assemblies, such as the European Parliament, have taken a much more comprehensive approach. So there are variations in terms of how quickly the different systems came about and how advanced each of them is, but a lot of work has been done in the area.

The report prepared by the analysts lists a lot of these countries, or legislative assemblies.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I entirely agree with what you said about every country having to tailor the system to its own reality and unique needs. Seeing all the countries that have managed to do that in their own legislative assemblies makes me hopeful that we will be able to establish a system that reflects our reality, here in Canada.

Would Mr. Stewart's system be fairly easy to adapt to our current rules and procedures?

•(1210)

Mr. André Gagnon: Other than the issues I raised, I would say it is for the committee to decide whether the challenges posed by the system could be overcome.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: If you consider where the technology was 10 years ago, when you appeared before the committee to discuss the various challenges and options around e-petitioning, do you think it would be easier to implement such a system today, in 2014, technologically speaking?

Mr. André Gagnon: Thank you for the question.

It will give me an opportunity to bring up another initiative, the committee effort to go paperless. Your committee has undertaken such an exercise, as has the Standing Committee on Finance, which has solicited tremendous cooperation from Canadians in that regard.

In fact, more so than technology, initiatives like that are probably more helpful in terms of getting us ready. With technological advancements come technological challenges, especially around the issue of security. That means the House's system needs to be strong and its network, well-protected.

Security is an important consideration these days, especially when introducing a system like this. Committee efforts aimed at going paperless and promoting online cooperation, as the finance committee has done, make us better equipped in terms of implementing the system. So it has less to do with better technology and more to do with administrative and committee preparedness.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're well past time there. I think we're going to call it quits there and thank you for coming today. We apologize for a bit of an abbreviated session. We may ask you back or ask more opinions in the future on this one as we move forward, because we recognize that what we say yes to, you have to do. As Mr. Christopherson was putting it, sometimes it's really easy from these chairs to say what's going to happen, but we'll consider you the purveyors of this, if we end up having to do it.

Thank you.

We'll suspend for just two minutes while we being in another group of witnesses and carry on with our meeting.

•(1210) _____ (Pause) _____

•(1215)

The Chair: We will come back to order, please. We are still in public and with new witnesses.

We'll do all three opening statements and then we'll ask questions.

Mr. Wudrick, you may go first.

Mr. Aaron Wudrick (Federal Director, Canadian Taxpayers Federation): Mr. Chair, it's a pleasure to be here today and to speak to Motion M-428. I thank the committee for the invitation.

This motion is, I think we can all agree, one that clearly cuts across the political spectrum, and we're happy to speak to it.

My name is Aaron Wudrick. I am the new federal director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. We are a federally incorporated non-profit citizens' group with more than 84,000 supporters across Canada. Our advocacy is centred around three key principles; those are lower taxes, less waste, and accountable government. It's on this third principle, accountable government, that I appear here today.

The principle that citizens should have a voice in government in between elections is critical to our democratic tradition. One of the ways this has long been recognized is through the use of petitions as a means to measure popular support for an initiative, whether it be demands for government action or recognition or to voice opposition to particular legislation. It is a healthy and a useful tool to inform politicians about what is important to Canadians and to let Canadians stimulate debate on those issues.

We believe that politicians should welcome petitions and what they stand for, both as a guide and as a check on their instincts, and I'm sure that many members of Parliament, whether in government or opposition, have at least once or twice been caught off guard by the reaction from their constituents on some piece of controversial legislation that they either support or oppose. These petitions, when given formal standing by Parliament, are a way for Canadians to express themselves in a manner that is more powerful than simply speaking to their member of Parliament.

With respect to Motion M-428 specifically, we think it should be uncontroversial that we bring the mechanisms for gathering petition signatures into the 21st century. In most other ways, government has evolved and has adapted modern technologies that allow members of Parliament to do their jobs better. These include such simple things, which we take for granted now, as e-mail and social media, which allow MPs to communicate with their constituents. Also, the ability

for witnesses to appear at these committees by video is of course a relatively recent phenomenon.

Moreover, as I caught from some of the previous witnesses, many other countries have embraced e-petitions, and we see no compelling reason that Parliament should not do the same.

If anything, we believe that Motion M-428 does not go quite far enough. In particular, we are concerned about the provision that requires a petition to be sponsored by five members of Parliament before it can be considered by Parliament. While on the one hand we certainly understand that it's reasonable that Parliament would want to avoid parliamentary business being hijacked by a flood of e-petitions, this provision gives rise to the possibility of a petition on an issue with potentially hundreds of thousands of signatures that would not be considered by Parliament simply because it did not have those five sponsors.

What we would suggest is something in this vein: that a petition beyond a certain threshold, perhaps a very high threshold, trigger a take-note debate with or without the requisite number of MP sponsors.

That being said, we do not wish to make the perfect the enemy of the good. This motion simply brings a well-established principle into the modern era. We believe that by supporting this motion, Parliament would be demonstrating its commitment to greater accountability and would be giving voice to thousands of Canadians who feel that the political system does not speak to their concerns.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Arseneault, perhaps you would like to go next.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Arseneault (Director, Parliamentary Proceedings Directorate, National Assembly of Quebec): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, and ladies and gentlemen of the committee.

My name is François Arseneault and I am the Director of Parliamentary Proceedings at the National Assembly of Quebec. First of all, I would like to thank the committee for having invited me to appear, and I hope that what I have to say will be useful to you as you continue your work.

Since the 2009 parliamentary reform, it has been possible both to start and to sign an e-petition on the National Assembly of Quebec's Web site. This option is in addition to signing a paper petition. One reason for this reform was to make the National Assembly more accessible to Quebec residents and to make it easier for them to participate. It was also important to ensure that the e-petition process was secure.

An MNA who agrees to present an electronic petition must submit a signed notice to the Secretary General of the National Assembly and include the following information: the period of time during which the petition will be posted on the assembly's Web site to collect signatures, between one week and three months; the full name and contact information of the person initiating the petition; and the text of the petition. A ruling on whether the petition is compliant must be given within seven days of receipt of the notice submitted by the MNA.

An e-petition is non-compliant if it was not initiated and signed on the assembly's Web site, the text of the petition exceeds 250 words or it contravenes Standing Order 35 of the National Assembly. Standing Order 35 provides that a petition be rejected if it addresses a matter of sub judice—so a matter that is before a court of law—it imputes improper motives to a member, or it fails to use acceptable language—so it contains violent, abusive or insulting language. An e-petition is non-compliant with the Standing Orders of the National Assembly if it does not seek to redress a grievance that falls under Quebec jurisdiction.

Once a petition has been considered, if it is ruled admissible and compliant, it will be posted on the assembly's Web site to collect signatures. No other electronic petition with the same subject can be initiated during the time the first petition is posted.

Once the petition is available online, all citizens who wish to sign it must fill out a short form with their first and last name, city, province, postal code and email address. Once this information has been submitted, citizens will receive a confirmation email at the email address they provided. The citizen must then click on the URL link in the email to confirm their electronic signature. If they fail to click the link, their signature will not be recorded.

Thanks to a signature management software program called *Gestion des signataires*, the signatures are sorted according to various criteria. Assembly employees must verify signatures that the software program has flagged. It asks for verification in the following cases: if there are duplicates; if a name seems suspicious, as in the Mickey Mouse case mentioned earlier; if the citizen provided only their initials; or if the signature was confirmed using a National Assembly email address.

Once the period for collecting signatures for an electronic petition is over, the sponsoring member has 3 days to table the abstract of the petition in the Chamber. The relevant committee has 15 days following the tabling of the petition to decide whether to examine the petition or not. If the relevant committee chooses not to examine the petition, if, after the 15-day time limit, the committee has not agreed to examine the petition, or if the committee has prepared and submitted a report on the petition, the government has 30 days to respond to the petition in writing.

This is a summary of how the e-petition process works. Now, what about citizen participation using this process? Our statistics do not go back very far, since e-petitions have been in use for only five fiscal years. This means that the data must be interpreted with care.

From the tables in the appendix of the brief, you can see that 200 petitions are tabled annually in the National Assembly, on average. Approximately 70 of these are online petitions. Over the

years, there has been a slight increase in the proportion of e-petitions tabled when compared with paper petitions. However, the total number of petitions tabled has remained relatively constant, with some small variations.

In contrast, if you look at the number of people who sign these petitions, you can see that all the petitions taken together over the course of a year have about 500,000 signatures in total. Electronic petitions account for approximately 300,000 of these signatures.

● (1220)

In short, the number of electronic signatures has increased through the availability of this new method of citizen participation when compared with the number of signatures on paper. It is also worth noting that the total number of signatures for all types of petitions has not increased by very much.

Thank you for your attention. I am available to answer any questions you may have.

● (1225)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Mercer, go ahead, and then we'll go to questions.

Mr. Tim Mercer (Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Tim Mercer. I'm the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories.

The ability of residents to petition their government through their elected legislature has existed in the Northwest Territories for many years. The first recorded instances predate the relocation from Ottawa to Yellowknife in September 1967 of what was then known as the territorial council.

The debates of the council from March 6 to 10, 1967, indicate that six petitions were presented. One of these supported the application of a Hay River man for Canadian citizenship. Another called for increased medical services in the community of Gjoa Haven, which was then part of the Northwest Territories. The remaining four called for the off-premises sale of beer in Hay River, Fort Smith, Inuvik, and Yellowknife.

In addition to shedding light on what was on the minds of residents back in those days, these examples also illustrate the focus of written petitions on largely local matters. They worked reasonably well for issues centred on specific geographic regions or communities. Like Canada, however, the Northwest Territories is a vast and sparsely populated land. Its communities are separated from one another by long distances and the absence of convenient transportation infrastructure.

The old system of written petitions simply wasn't conducive to mobilizing public sentiment on issues that spilled across local boundaries or cut across the territory as a whole. Electronic petitions were introduced in the NWT Legislative Assembly on a pilot basis in the spring of 2010. It was not unanimously supported.

Some of the concerns expressed at the time related to the perceived inability to authenticate electronic signatures, the protection of personal information and privacy, cost, workload, and the provision of a visible and easily accessible platform for the airing of frivolous and vexatious grievances. While these were all valid concerns, the pilot project did demonstrate that each of these could be mitigated to the satisfaction of the initial detractors.

Prior to an electronic petition going live on the assembly's website, it is first vetted by the Clerk's office to ensure that it meets the criteria established in the rules of the Legislative Assembly. These criteria, similar to what my colleague from Quebec just mentioned, include ensuring that the subject matter of the petition is within the competent jurisdiction of the Government of the Northwest Territories or the Legislative Assembly, that it does not include libellous or defamatory statements, that it uses appropriate language, and that it does not address matters that are presently before the courts or similar quasi-judicial tribunals.

Because similar vetting does not occur for traditional written petitions, electronic petitions are less likely to be ruled out of order at the time of tabling. When a proposed electronic petition is rejected, the subject matter of the petition and the reason for the rejection are posted on the Assembly's website, even though it is not subsequently open to signature. In most cases the Clerk's office is able to work with the lead petitioner to resolve any outstanding issues prior to its being made publicly available or rejected outright. Decisions of the Clerk's office to reject a petition are subject to appeal to the Speaker.

The concern over the authenticity of signatures is addressed by requiring petitioners to enter their full names, civic addresses, and e-mail addresses at the time of going onto the system. Prior to a signature being added to the online petition, an e-mail is sent to the individual, who must acknowledge its receipt. Only one signature per e-mail address is permitted, and a limit is placed on the number of signatures that may originate from a single IP address. We don't limit it to one signature per IP address, in the event that there are families, like mine, who have one computer and several e-mail addresses and all the family members may wish to sign. Petitioners are also required to solve a simple arithmetic problem to prevent mass computer-generated signatures.

Members who were concerned about the authenticity of signatures were reminded that these protections, while by no means insurmountable by someone determined to distort the final results, far exceed the scrutiny applied to traditional written signatures, many of which are illegible.

Although the lead and subsequent petitioners are required to provide their civic and e-mail addresses when accessing the system, only the person's name and community of residence is ultimately published on the website. The system makes it clear that personal information is only used for the purposes of verifying the authenticity of the petitioner and providing updates on the disposition of the petition, if expressly requested.

Following an evaluation of the e-petition pilot project in 2012, the Assembly resolved to permanently implement the initiative within its Standing Orders. In the two years since implementation, 14 e-petitions have been established and tabled in the Assembly. Many of these have been tabled in combination with traditional written

petitions. There have been three rejected and each of the rejections took place because the respective prayers called for the redress of matters outside the competent authority of the Government of the Northwest Territories or the Legislative Assembly.

The technology used for the site was purchased off the shelf from a firm located in the United Kingdom for a price of \$8,000. Minimal customization was required to meet the Assembly's requirements. The site is hosted and maintained by the firm in the U.K. for just over \$800 a year, although it is accessed seamlessly from the Assembly's website with an identical look and feel to the remainder of the site.

• (1230)

There has been a marginal increase in the workload within the Clerk's office as a result of the implementation of the petitions. However, the overall result has been an increase in the quality and clarity of petitions that are tabled in our legislature. More importantly, the initiative has led to the significant improvement in citizen engagement and access to the NWT's political institutions, particularly on the part of residents who are normally far removed from the proceedings of the House, and on issues that cut across geographic and regional boundaries

Mr. Chair, I thank you for the opportunity to share the experiences of the NWT Legislative Assembly with electronic petitions. I'd be pleased to respond to any questions that you have.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Let's do that.

Mr. Lukiwski, you're going to be up for a seven-minute round to begin with. Please let us know who you're asking your questions to as you are asking them.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Gentlemen, thank you for being here.

I think if you had been following discussions of this committee, and hopefully you have, you would understand that there is a general acceptance by all members on the committee that we should move forward with e-petitions. It's not a matter of if, but a matter of how to.

In that light, I'm going to address my comments, with all due respect Mr. Wudrick, to Monsieur Arseneault and Mr. Mercer, as they're representing jurisdictions that have actively had e-petitions in their own legislative assemblies for the last number of years.

I will ask both of you a question, and I'll start with Monsieur Arseneault.

Is there any advice you could give our committee as we move down the road to hopefully get to a protocol that allows e-petitions? Is there any advice you could give us, perhaps bumps in the road that you encountered that we should try to avoid, or any particular areas of implementation that we should concentrate on to make sure this implementation process is as seamless as possible?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: The approach you're taking right now is great. I have been following the committee's discussions and have noticed just how carefully you are studying the issue.

Practically speaking, when we made the decision in Quebec City to launch an e-petition system, it took staff about six months to put it in place. Obviously, it had a lot to do with technology. Initially, we really had to make sure that the technology we used dovetailed with existing parliamentary technology.

One thing made the job easier for us in Quebec. Although it could have done the opposite, it ended up making things easier for us. At the same time as we were launching the e-petition system, we were completely overhauling our Web site and information architecture. We were able to incorporate the e-petition option into a much broader project. It was a bit easier to introduce because we had modified the system slightly. When citizens click on the option, it has to work. That is the most important element; people notice right away when something doesn't work.

The second most important consideration was ensuring that the people at the assembly who would be reviewing the petitions were properly trained and ready to handle any problem that might arise. When we launched the system, we worried that we would be flooded with electronic petitions, but that did not happen. We never had a flood, but the number of e-petitions did increase gradually as citizens became aware of the option.

The two most important considerations are technology and staff preparedness. I am not talking about the procedural component, but it goes without saying that everything has to work properly in that regard as well.

However you decide to proceed, I am certain you will have very knowledgeable people to guide you throughout the process.

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: *Merci.*

Mr. Mercer.

Mr. Tim Mercer: Mr. Chairman, I think in addition to what my colleague just said, I would advise to expect the unexpected and not to be thrown off the game plan. Things will happen.

It's important to keep risks in perspective. We're not talking here about legally binding petitions or plebiscites, or even votes conducted under the Canada Elections Act. We're talking about very general expressions of political interest and will on the part of citizens. I think you will experience small hiccups along the way, but it's about keeping them in perspective. You're probably going to catch things through your electronic petitioning system that always existed, but largely went unnoticed in the former system.

•(1235)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you both for that.

Let me turn now for a moment to cost. I find it interesting that both your legislatures contracted or bought software to assist you.

Monsieur Arsenault, you mentioned the *gestion des signataires*.

Mr. Mercer, you said you found an off-the-shelf software program in the U.K., and you mentioned the cost of about \$8,000 for that.

Monsieur Arsenault, how much did the *gestion des signataires* software cost your Assembly?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: When I was getting ready for this meeting, I talked to our IT people and asked them that very question. Unfortunately, I was unable to get an exact number. Because we launched our system in the process of completely overhauling our Web site, as I explained earlier, there was some overlap in the work involved. So it is hard to separate the tasks related to the e-petition initiative from those associated with the larger Web site project. We can say that it took 650 person-days to put the system in place over a period of 6 months. We had to devote 650 person-days to the e-petition component.

You should know that we did all the work. It was done internally, and we did not really use any outside consultants to put the system in place. But it is a matter of scale. Obviously, you have to keep in mind the fact that we were in the process of completely overhauling our Web site and information architecture, not just dealing with the e-petition component.

The maintenance issue may be of interest to you. In fact, almost no maintenance is required, given that the system practically runs itself. Of course, little glitches arise from time to time but not very many, mainly because the bulk of the software was developed internally.

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: If I'm hearing you correctly, you would both suggest that perhaps we should look at purchasing some external software to assist us in the management of signatures, but the nuts and bolts of reconstruct on the architecture side should all be done internally. Would that be a fair comment? Certainly from the National Assembly, it sounds as if that's the approach you took.

I'm not sure, Mr. Mercer, if you had to hire any outside help when you implemented your system.

Mr. Tim Mercer: Mr. Chairman, no, we did not hire any outside help. We worked very closely with the vendors of the software in question. There's a difference between scope and scale. Obviously, the Northwest Territories is a very small jurisdiction in terms of population, but the complexity of the matters and the complexity of managing the system I think are the same regardless of scale. They were quite willing to adapt the system to meet our specific needs. I think we've all had experience with trying to customize existing software, and the customization was relatively painless in this case. I don't think it's necessarily a matter of scale in that case.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Madame Latendresse, for seven minutes, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by making sure I understood you correctly Mr. Arsenault. In response to Mr. Lukiwski's question, you said that you did all the work internally. You did not hire any outside people or use existing software. Is that correct?

Mr. François Arsenault: Basically, the bulk of the work was done internally. It's hard to give you an answer because it isn't black and white. We did use consultants for the Web site overhaul, so that's why things are a bit blurry.

• (1240)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I see.

I have a question about something you said at the beginning of your presentation. It is a question the committee had as well.

You said that an electronic petition on the same subject or issue as another petition that is already posted could not be initiated. How do you decide when the subject is too similar? How different must the second petition be in order to be accepted?

Mr. François Arsenault: Thank you for your question. It is certainly an interesting one.

It is a practical decision that falls under the clerk's authority and depends on the nature of the petitions and people reviewing them.

They carefully examine the text of the two petitions. If the subject of the second petition is too similar to the first, they will not deem the second petition non-compliant; instead, they will decide that it cannot be posted immediately. The second petition cannot be posted until the period during which the first petition is posted is over. National Assembly staff, under the president's, or speaker's, authority, carefully analyze and compare the two petitions. Ultimately, the decision falls to the president should a question arise.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: So it is really dealt with on a case-by-case basis. In each case, you have to determine whether the petitions are sufficiently different.

Mr. François Arsenault: Precisely. When a new petition is received, the person in charge has to review it in light of those already posted on the Web site. The person flags any potential problems, and then a decision is made.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Very good.

Now I have a good understanding of what happens at the National Assembly once a petition is tabled, but I also have some questions for Mr. Mercer.

What happens once a petition is deemed acceptable and tabled in the legislative assembly? How does the process work?

Mr. Tim Mercer: Thank you for the question.

I will try to answer in French.

The process is almost identical to that used in other parts of the country. Once a petition has been submitted, an MLA—one will suffice—must table it in the legislative assembly. The government then has 60 days to respond to the petition. An MLA can also propose a motion to immediately debate the petition in committee or the legislative assembly. Every member of the legislative assembly has to agree, however.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: If I understand correctly, the motion, once introduced, must receive unanimous consent. If it does, it can be debated in committee or the legislative assembly. Is that right?

Mr. Tim Mercer: Actually, unanimous consent is not required, just the support of the majority.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Very well.

My next question is for Mr. Wudrick.

Could you please explain how your organization uses e-petitions to promote citizen engagement?

[English]

Mr. Aaron Wudrick: Thank you for the question.

We do a number of initiatives mainly through our website and we also have people in the field. We use a hybrid system. We have the petition placed on the website and then we also have our field agents. When they are soliciting for donations and such, they are also presenting these petitions to people.

We've long been a user of e-petitions. In several cases, we got some that went into the hundreds of thousands, I believe. I'd have to check on that for you.

So yes, not only are we advocating that Parliament use them, but we use them ourselves.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Have you encountered any problems, such as those involving signature authenticity? Would you say your system is equipped to verify signatures?

[English]

Mr. Aaron Wudrick: Yes, we do our best. I think it's probably akin to any other organization that's collecting signatures: it's difficult to verify everything. I think that's been alluded to by many of the other people who've presented. I think we have to bear in mind when we're talking about e-petitions that we don't make the standard absurdly high, when we consider that right now when we use regular petitions, there's only a certain level of scrutiny.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Absolutely.

Do I still have some time, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: You have two minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I want to come back to Mr. Mercer.

I found your comments very interesting, particularly what you said about the Northwest Territories being so vast and its population being so spread out. In other words, it is sparsely populated.

In light of our federal system, which covers the entire country, do you not think it is very important to put this system in place? If a petition is submitted in Nova Scotia, it is practically impossible to ensure that someone in the Northwest Territories will receive a paper copy. An e-petition system would, however, allow us to cover the entire country. People could sign petitions coast to coast to coast.

What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Tim Mercer: I completely agree.

In this day and age of electronic communications, petitions can be circulated more easily right across the country. It is easier for people in the Northwest Territories, who live in very remote communities, to access them online.

• (1245)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: My last question is for Mr. Arsenault. Having studied computational linguistics at Université Laval, I have a bit of a personal interest in this.

I was wondering about the software you use to analyze the names of people who sign petitions.

Do you have a sense of how the software detects a name that appears suspicious?

Mr. François Arsenault: I'm no IT expert, but I had a look at the database of names just last week to refresh my memory before meeting with the committee. The database was provided to the National Assembly. I'm not certain whether the names are from the phone book or other such source. I could get back to the committee with more information on that.

The software scans the names on the petition and flags those that are not in the database. It allows us to view only those names that might be problematic. Usually, they aren't, so the person responsible simply unflags them. In short, the software pulls up too many names, as opposed to not enough.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: That way, you're able to catch the Mickey Mouse's and other suspicious names on the list.

Thank you.

Mr. François Arsenault: Exactly.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lamoureux, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: The driving force for us here seems to be that having e-petitions would ultimately allow Canadians from all over the country to participate. If we get 100,000 signatures, it would initiate a take-note debate.

Mr. Arsenault, I'm looking more at you for this, because I'm looking at the Quebec site and I must compliment those individuals. It really is consumer friendly. Even I can understand it. It's fairly straight-forward, looking at it. It seems to me, just going through this, that your petitions are not necessarily to acquire a minimum number in order to generate some sort of extra activity at the legislature. Is that a fair comment? Is it just another way in which you can submit petitions, generally speaking?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: That's right.

Unlike what the sponsor of motion M-428 proposed, in Quebec, the petition does not have to have a minimum number of signatures in order to be tabled in the legislature. And that applies to petitions in both paper and electronic form. It would even be possible for a petition with just one signature to be tabled in the legislature.

There is a difference, however. Our rules dictate that, in order for a petition to be studied by a committee, a majority of the members in each parliamentary group must agree. In other words, every parliamentary group must consent. But a petition does not have to have a minimum number of signatures in order to be tabled.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I notice in going through it that it really varies in terms of the number of signatures. You have one that has five signatures on it. You have another one that has 30,940 signatures on it. The number of signatures really doesn't count in terms of having it go forward. Your legislators, as you put it, have to have a vote on it.

The other thing I noticed is the date of opening for signing versus the end of the signing period. How do you determine if it's going to be for three months or six months?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: The individual who initiates the petition and the sponsoring member will notify the secretary general of the period during which they would like the petition to be posted online. The rules set out a minimum time limit of one week—which never happens—and a maximum time limit of three months. Other than that, it is up to the petitioner and member, together, to decide on a timeframe.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Okay.

Is there any role for other legislators to play? For example, if I say I like a petition and I'm going to sponsor it, how does someone across the way or other MLAs—I think they're MNAs in Quebec—get engaged in a petition that they might like? Can they submit the same petition online? Is there a way for them to get engaged in the process?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: A second petition cannot be posted online while the first is still posted. The period during which the first petition is posted must have ended before the second petition can be submitted. A petition that is scrupulously identical has occasionally been submitted once the online posting period of the first petition has ended.

If a second MNA is interested in the contents of the petition and wants to make a contribution, on a practical level, the MNA can intervene after the petition is tabled. The MNA can ask the relevant committee to hold a deliberative meeting to decide whether to examine the petition. That is when the member can intervene in favour of the petition and let the committee know that he or she would like it to examine the petition.

• (1250)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Mercer, is yours of a similar nature to what we've been talking about, where it's very general, all petitions, and there is no minimum or maximum number of signatures in order to have an MLA initiate bringing it forward?

Mr. Tim Mercer: Yes, it's very similar. Our minimum number is actually three, but I think that's just a matter of semantics more than anything.

What we have tried to do with our e-petition system is to have the procedure unchanged from a written petition. It's exactly the same process, only a different way of doing it. We do not have a system similar to what's being proposed in the House of Commons, where if there's a certain threshold of signatures, then a different process takes place. The process that takes place is the same regardless of the number, so long as that number is greater than three.

Typically what happens is that the petition is tabled. It's referred to a particular ministry, and the minister then responds to the petition within 60 days. That response is then tabled in the House.

However, any member, as I mentioned earlier, can give notice and have a debate on a particular petition by way of a motion, either in the standing committee or later in the regular orders of the day for the House.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: On that point, Mr. Arsenault, how does one initiate it? Is it just one member who would also then bring it to a potential vote, asking it to go to a committee? How does that work?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: A vote is held, but not in the Chamber. Once the petition has been tabled, the Chamber does not decide whether a committee will examine it or not, even though that would be possible procedurally speaking. Practically, however, the committee meets and votes on whether it will examine the petition. According to our rules, a majority of the members from each parliamentary group must agree. So it is not just a majority decision. Let's say we had a majority government. It would not have the power to impose its decision; instead, it would need the consent of opposition members on the committee.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I would make the assumption that the same principles and rules apply for paper petitions as for e-petitions.

Mr. Wudrick, in regard to the association, when you make reference to accountability—and I think about the take-note debate—one of the suggestions deals with the situation where we get 100,000 signatures plus. That's a lot of Canadians putting their names to a particular issue.

Is a take-note debate the only thing we could be talking about, or is that something we could maybe take to a committee, where a committee would be mandated to look at it and possibly have witnesses and things of this nature?

Do you have any thoughts in regard to what should happen when you get 100,000 people signing a petition?

Mr. Aaron Wudrick: That's certainly open to debate.

Our real concern was that by having the requirement of a certain threshold number of MPs to sponsor, you could end up with the awkward situation where you have hundreds of thousands of people and nothing being done.

From where we sit, we'd certainly be open to it being referred to committee or being dealt with in some other way, as long as the door wasn't simply shut because they didn't meet the threshold of the MP sponsors.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Finally, Mr. Wudrick, I've been listening to Mr. Arsenault and Mr. Mercer talk about what happens in the respective legislatures where e-petitions are almost as normal as paper petitions. Here we're talking about 100,000 signatures.

What are your thoughts? I suspect you would support what's happening in those two jurisdictions. Would you not see this as a positive thing for Ottawa to allow for e-petitions generally speaking?

Mr. Aaron Wudrick: Absolutely. I think that the experiences both of colleagues at the table here and then also around the world.... There are many other jurisdictions that have implemented this. We think it's a simple matter of translating a principle that everyone accepts into the 21st century.

The Chair: Thank you for coming today.

I'm sorry that we had to compress our time, but I do thank you. A lot of information came from the two of you. If you think of other things that will help us with this program that you could put in writing and send to us, thoughts or things that you ran into, by all means, please do so. This committee has some work to do in a fairly short order on this.

Committee members, there is a quick piece of committee business.

• (1255)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Is it in camera or not?

The Chair: It's a budget for this study, so I think I can do it in public.

I have to leave right at one o'clock, so I'm trying to make sure that this happens and that I never have to go to liaison committee again.

Mr. David Christopherson: It wasn't that bad.

The Chair: It was in camera, so I can't discuss how painful it truly was.

The request for the project budget for the study of Bill C-428 is being distributed right now. It explains that we'll be doing a fair bit of video conferencing, along with the witnesses we've already had.

We're asking for a budget of funds in order to complete this study.

Mr. David Christopherson: I so move.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Is there anything else for the good of this committee today?

Adjournment has been moved.

The meeting is adjourned.

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