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Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, November 25, 2014

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Chair

Mr. Joe Preston

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● (1110)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): We'll call the meeting to order. We're here pursuant to the order of reference of Wednesday, January 29, the study of motion M-428 on electronic petitions.

We have two guests with us today. First is Ms. Hilderman from Samara. Great to have you with us today.

Second is Dr. Fox. Can you hear us?

Dr. Ruth Fox (Director and Head of Research, Hansard Society): Yes, I can.

The Chair: Great. We're going to get started.

We're going to give each of you a bit of an opening statement. Then the members around the table will ask you questions.

I think we'll start with you, Dr. Fox. I like to do that with the teleconference in case we lose it; at least you get some points in.

Welcome, and good evening to you, I guess. Please go ahead if you can with your opening statement.

Dr. Ruth Fox: Yes, good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee.

Perhaps I could just explain the Hansard Society's role and interest in e-petitions in the Westminster context. The Hansard Society is a political research and education charity based in London, but we work with registered charities around the world. Fundamentally, I suppose our role is described as Parliament's critical friend at Westminster. We've taken an interest for many years in public engagement with politics and with Parliament.

We regard e-petitions as an important way in which the public can engage with legislatures. But they pose some dangers if the system is not right, if the process and procedure is not right. Back in 2011, when the Westminster Parliament launched, I should say, the British government, really, launched the e-petition system here in the U.K., it did so with very little consultation with Parliament. Yet it is Parliament that has had to manage the problems with it.

As a consequence, back in 2012, the Hansard Society was asked by the backbench business committee of the House of Commons to undertake a study of the petitions system, which we did and which has led to what is now a current procedure committee inquiry into reform of the system here in London.

So that's the background and context. We wrote a paper called "What next for e-petitions?", which set out many of the concerns with the Westminster system, which may be of interest to the committee in terms of thinking about the issues if you do go ahead and implement an e-petition system.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is that report available to us electronically? Can we pick it up someplace?

Dr. Ruth Fox: Yes, I can certainly send a copy. It's available via our website for free download. That's possible.

The Chair: Great. We'll make sure we get that done, then.

Thank you very much.

We'll move to Ms. Hilderman, then, on your opening statement. Then we'll move to questions by members.

Ms. Jane Hilderman (Acting Director and Research Manager, Samara): I am Samara's research manager and an acting director at the organization. Samara, for anyone who doesn't know, is an independent non-partisan charity, working to improve political participation in Canada. I'm joined by my colleague, Mark Dance, who is providing some social media coverage of the committee today.

Today I'd like to discuss the context for Samara's support for e-petitions, as well as make suggestions for the committee's consideration. Yesterday, Samara submitted a written brief to the clerk of the committee that provides some greater detail about some of our suggestions. I understand that the text needs to be translated and then will be provided to committee later this week.

The House of Commons belongs to Canadians, yet public opinion suggests that Canadians increasingly see themselves as removed from the work that happens here on their behalf. E-petitions, we think, offer a really promising starting point for Parliament's improvement and innovation in the 21st century, in part because petition-signing is already a very common activity among Canadians.

In a recently published paper by Samara, we examined 20 different ways Canadians participate in politics beyond voting. We found that over half of Canadians, 51%, said they'd signed a petition in the last year. Importantly, these rates of petition-signing were similarly as high for the 18- to 34-year-old age group at 49%.

We're supportive of e-petitions because a well-designed system can do three things. First, it can ensure greater access for Canadians to Parliament's petitioning process. Second, it can help MPs better understand what issues are of concern to Canadians. Third, the implementation of an e-petition system would send a really much-needed signal from MPs to Canadians that they are willing to take steps to improve Canada's democratic process at a time when citizen satisfaction with the way democracy works has been falling.

So what are some considerations for a well-designed system? Samara has identified four points. First, ensure that openness, participation, responsiveness, and consistency are core principles as you design the petition process. This really may sound simple, but it's worth emphasizing how important it is to imagine that you are standing in the shoes of a citizen who will interact with the e-petition process and rules.

In practice, for example, this means taking steps to help ensure that signing a petition is a simple process, particularly given that research has shown that the first 10 hours after a petition launch are the most critical for gaining public momentum.

The second recommendation focuses on how we will deal with petitions as a Parliament. I suggest considering a role for a committee or committees to consider petitions as well. Among legislatures that have been introducing e-petitions as of late, including Scotland, Wales, in Australia, Queensland and Tasmania, and in Canada, Quebec and the Northwest Territories, none of them apply a signature threshold to launch a debate in the legislature directly.

I think it's important for the committee to consider why that is the case, why they've chosen to make those decisions as an appropriate response to petitions.

Third, it's really important to be able to clearly communicate to Canadians how e-petitions will be used and to see this as an opportunity to remind Canadians of the way they can express their ideas to members of Parliament through petitions and other means. For example, building on Dr. Fox's point, it is really important to minimize the risk of public disillusionment when petitions, electronic or otherwise, do not have an immediate or significant impact on legislation. This means helping set an appropriate level of public expectation where e-petitions are concerned.

Fourth and finally, e-petitions can be another tool for MPs to understand their constituent's concerns. In our exit interviews with former members of Parliament, a frequently cited challenge is that they don't necessarily have the easiest way of understanding what their constituents are most concerned about. They generally rely on citizens coming forward and contacting their office through correspondence, or go out to local events to gather opinions. Could citizens, upon signing, have the chance to notify an MP that they care about a petition issue? Or alternatively could MPs receive an automated report once or twice a month that advises on the number of constituents who have been signing petitions and on what issues? These are some of the sort of out-of-box examples that might be of interest to committee and provide further value-added for the investment you hope to make on an e-petition system.

Samara is happy to serve as a resource to all parliamentarians and political parties, and we hope our oral presentation and brief will provide some valuable ideas for members of the standing committee as they deliberate M-428.

Thank you so much.

●(1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much

We'll go to questions by members.

Mr. Richards, you're going to go first, then.

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Mr. Chair, thank you. My friend, Mr. Lukiwski, may have some questions as well.

I'll start with the guest we have by video conference today.

In your opening remarks, you briefly referred to some problems that you had with your system, but didn't elaborate much on them. I wonder whether you want to elaborate a bit on what some of the problems you've had were.

Dr. Ruth Fox: Certainly.

The first issue is really a constitutional and ownership issue that may not be relevant in your case. Here, the system was introduced by the government rather than by the House of Commons, or indeed Parliament—both chambers. It was the government that set up the IT system—the website that runs the e-petitions system, the infra-structure—but it was Parliament, the House of Commons, that had to manage the end result.

We have a 100,000-signature threshold here for consideration of a petition by the House. It was the backbench business committee of the House of Commons that had to manage that, but it hadn't been involved at all in the process of discussion or negotiation with the government about how that would work. There were some problems as a result, when government time in the House was not set aside for the backbench business committee to enable it to consider, quickly enough, the petitions that had reached that 100,000 threshold. There were some reputational and media problems that arose as a result of petitions reaching the threshold and of there being a delay at the point at which they could be considered.

There was also an issue about who owns the data and who has access to and can utilize the data. Parliament—the House of Commons, the backbench business committee members—did not know who the petitioners were. They had very little information about who the petitioners were, because the data was owned or held by government. So there were some issues there.

The second issue involves the threshold, the introduction of the 100,000 signatures for consideration of the debate. It was presented in the media as if there would be debates, but in fact the wording around the petition systems was that the backbench business committee would consider it. The issue was that, if you reached the 100,000 threshold and you didn't have a debate, it created a public engagement problem.

Now, that hasn't happened on many occasions. But for example, when a bill is going through Parliament and is being debated at length, if a petition on that subject then reaches 100,000 signatures, should it be debated again alongside the existing primary legislation processes and procedures that are ongoing at the time? There was an issue there in relation to a bill for reform of the NHS that caused some difficulties.

Should members themselves be allowed to use a petition and to register petitions? At the beginning in the U.K., that was not stipulated clearly, and some members did use the petition system for that purpose. Eventually it was decided that in fact this probably wasn't appropriate—members have other ways to register their concerns—and that this was for the public, not for members.

The U.K. has very low admissibility criteria, in relation to being a U.K. citizen and having a postal code that is verified on the system. But certainly as of this summer, when I last looked at it, something like just fewer than 25,000 petitions had been rejected as inadmissible in some way, either because they were not clear enough in what they were asking for or were duplicates of other petitions. There was an issue there in relation to clarity, as to what people were being asked to do and whether they clearly understood it. Also, in terms of a concern around duplication, how do you deal with petitions that are very similar?

Third, what is the role of MPs in this? Originally, in the House of Commons members wanted quite a gold-plated system that would provide them with direct links to petitioners and through which they would be informed when their constituents had registered a petition. That isn't really now the case with the system that we have. We have a much more flexible system, but it has caused some difficulty for members who feel that they're not terribly well informed about what their constituents are doing and the issues they are raising.

In order to have a debate on a petition, if it reaches 100,000 signatures, it's still at the call of these members to take it forward; and there was no information on the system to petitioners at the beginning to clearly indicate to them that as well as getting the 100,000 signatures they would need to get a member to sponsor it for them in the House. That caused some difficulties and delays in bringing forward a number of the petitions for consideration before the backbench business committee. There are still some issues there around whether members are getting as much information as they would like.

● (1120)

Then there the a wider issue of management in terms of managing the system going forward, making sure that Parliament or the House, if it is going to be responsible for it, has the skills, the capacity, and the infrastructure to develop the system, to take account of any future IT developments, social media developments, that will no doubt emerge in the coming years, and to ensure that it is kept up to date and is as easy and as flexible in the way that the lady giving evidence for Samara has indicated is necessary.

Certainly here in the U.K., government has greater access to IT capacity skills and resources than does the Parliament at the present time. Therefore, at the moment, we have a situation where it is managing the IT infrastructure and Parliament is managing the parliamentary process. Our view, very strongly, is that the parliamentary process of just going for a debate is not good enough, that there are many other ways in which the House might wish to consider petitions and in which petitioners themselves might wish Parliament to consider it. For example, going to a committee for consideration, possibly being tagged to the order paper, being related to a question in the House as opposed to a full blown debate.... There are a range of ways in which it could be considered and at the moment, the situation where only if you get 10,000 signatures do you get any kind of written response from a government minister and only if you get to 100,000 would it be considered for a debate is rather inflexible.

Those are, broadly, the key concerns.

Mr. Blake Richards: I don't think I have a whole lot of time left.

I have none.

Okay.

The Chair: Thank you for your question.

We'll go to Mr. Scott for seven minutes.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Benefiting from Dr. Fox's presence again, on the Preston principle that we don't want you to disappear, I'll start my questions with you, Dr. Fox, and then move on to our Samara rep.

You were talking a bit about the backbench business committee in deciding which e-petitions that receive 100,000 would go forward to debate and you suggested that the process by which the petition system was created has created problems for the committee, so that's been very useful.

I wanted to delve into one particular aspect, and I'm not sure if it's played a role in determining whether any 100,000-signature petitions have gone to debate or not. It's the question of duplication of petitions, which is, a petition comes in and it's about the agri-business and saving seed, and another petition in roughly the same time period comes forward and is about agri-business, saving seed, and its connection to the specific economic strategies of GMO corporations. They're not exactly the same and you can imagine, as well, that although they overlap, the premises of one, the preambular premises, might be different, and the plea for relief might also be different.

Is there any experience yet with determining what degree of duplication is too much and when one has to sit in the queue until another has gone forward? Is there any kind of experience with that? My immediate concern is this. I would prefer to let a thousand flowers bloom and allow petitioners to frame in their own language what an issue is about and would have no particular problem with petitions going forward on the same topic, but I'm concerned that there's a fair bit of emphasis in other petition systems on duplication. Is there any experience with that?

● (1125)

Dr. Ruth Fox: Yes, in the U.K., essentially what happened was that a member of staff in the Office of the Leader of the House of Commons was left at the beginning to determine what constitutes a duplicate. There was no process around it whatsoever so it was very much sort of "try it and see how it works". They were, quite obviously, struck at the beginning by the sheer volume of petitions that came in. It was very difficult in the early days to figure out an effective way of dealing with duplicates.

They still haven't in a sense resolved the problem. I'll give you the example that's been relevant here. There were concerns about a death penalty e-petition. They were sure that 100,000 signatures would be generated for an e-petition supporting the reintroduction of the death penalty. What in fact happened was you ended up with dozens of different types of e-petitions on the death penalty, none of which ever reached 100,000, and therefore, considered for debate.

Westminster, in a sense, because it only has the threshold of 100,000 to be considered for a debate, simply ignores the problem. This is why we've argued that a petitions committee, which could look at a number of petitions in a particular area of policy, could decide over a period of time to look at a number of petitions that have achieved different levels of signature, to decide what should be done with them, and to have a debate on the death penalty and all the various aspects of it that the public had raised in their petitions. At the moment, in Westminster, they simply don't get anywhere. They're simply ignored, and therefore, there is a concern that it's a very thin form of public engagement, which is why we would recommend to you that you have some kind of committee system to deal with that.

Mr. Craig Scott: Okay. That helps a lot. Thank you.

I would also note, just by way of your very careful observation earlier, that our Westminster system could differ enough from yours that certain things wouldn't be the case. When a petition with no fewer than 25 signatures, tabled in Parliament, is enough to require the government to answer, regardless of whether or not there are several petitions on the same thing, quite obviously the government will consolidate its responses and give almost the same response to similar petitions, but it has the opportunity to vary the response a bit.

So even with only 25 signatures, at the moment, we have a government that has to at least respond. What we do in the parliamentary sense with these petitions with very few signatures is another question. That's just to let you know, on that one point about how duplication would interact with low signatures, that the government does still have to respond here.

You indicated that we can get hold of something called "What next for e-petitions?"

Dr. Ruth Fox: Yes.

Mr. Craig Scott: From the questions from my colleague Mr. Richards, or even from what I've just said, and putting aside whatever you've already said, I'm just wondering if there are any specific recommendations for reforming the e-petition system in the U.K. as contained in that document, or that you would now want to put on the table that you haven't already mentioned.

Dr. Ruth Fox: First of all would be a petitions committee, I think, to consider a number of routes in which a petition could be considered.

Secondly, you mentioned that you have an existing paper petition system. I would think about how you integrate it together with the e-petition system.

What we've ended up with here in the U.K. is in effect three petition systems: an e-petition system for the House of Commons, a written system for the House of Commons, and a written system for the House of Lords. They're all slightly different. Actually, in an integrated system, e-petitions are simply a technological way of delivering petitions quickly. So integrating them, thinking about how the e-route and the written route are similar, and what procedures and processes you want for them both, would be useful.

Then I would think very strongly about the member role you want in this process. That is absolutely vital. In the U.K. system, what we've ended up with is quite a thin form of engagement, where members of the public engage with a website. They don't really have that much engagement with Parliament and with MPs.

● (1130)

Mr. Craig Scott: Great.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: About 10 seconds.

Mr. Craig Scott: Okay. I will now give my time to Mr. Lamoureux.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Great, and if we all just smile for a second....

Your time is now up.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Lamoureux for seven minutes.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): I thought it would be seven minutes and a few seconds there, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You know I'm flexible.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: No, I'm kidding.

I appreciate the presentations by both presenters. I do have a few questions.

First off, dealing with this whole issue of duplication and similar petitions, let's say you have a number of written petitions. Can a written petition rule out an e-petition? Has there been any exploration of that, or has that been given any consideration?

Dr. Ruth Fox: In the U.K., no. The paper petitions are dealt with as they've always been dealt with. They're presented on the floor of the chamber. They're listed on the order paper. The government can respond to them in the form of an observation, if they want. But they're not integrated with e-petitions, and they don't stop any petition on a similar subject going forward. There's no real integration of them at all.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Are there any restrictions in terms of petitions of repetition in the House in England? Can you have eight MPs presenting the same petition? Does that sort of duplication occur?

Dr. Ruth Fox: I think you could, conceivably, but there are very few paper petitions presented through that route.

I can check this with the clerks of the House, but to the best of my knowledge that doesn't tend to be a problem.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Have you found a diminishing demand for the paper or written petitions because now you're doing the e-petitions, or has it even been noticeable at all?

Dr. Ruth Fox: I don't think there's been any noticeable impact. What you will find is that there are a number of online petition systems in the U.K. that the public will use. The 38 Degrees website has an e-petition system as well.

What we're tending to find is that members of Parliament individually may get fewer written petitions presented to them at the constituency level, because a lot of their constituents are using online forums. But members of Parliament might not have intended to present, or perhaps in the past actually presented, those petitions in Parliament anyway, as very little happens with them. Effectively they end up in the bag behind the Speaker's chair—quite literally—so they're not regarded as a particularly effective process.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Now then, are there certain things that trigger the House to take action? For example, if you get the 100,000 signatures, is there a day of allocated debate assigned to a petition?

Dr. Ruth Fox: It's usually 90 minutes. Basically what happens is, at the 100,000-signature point, the leader of the House of Commons writes to the chair of the backbench business committee informing her that the petition has reached a threshold. The backbench business committee then has to decide if and when it will schedule a debate on that issue. Now its time is allocated to it by the government, and it's a set number of hours each year and it has to decide—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I'm just concerned about time, that's all. What happens if you get like 50,000 signatures on a petition?

Dr. Ruth Fox: Once you reach the 10,000 signature threshold, you will have a written statement on the website. After that, unless you reach 100,000, you get nothing.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: So, what happens if you get....? Oh nothing. So, if you get 300 signatures, absolutely nothing happens. It's not introduced to the floor, commented on, or anything of that nature.

How many petitions would be on...? If we go on to the website, the official government parliamentary website, how many petitions could we anticipate seeing?

● (1135)

Dr. Ruth Fox: The last time I looked at this in any great detail was in the summer. At that point they had 5,800 petitions that were open, so again, with the issue of context, of duplication, it is very difficult for the public, for members to find things. It needs a really good search functionality, which that site is not great for. Overall, there have been over 60,000 petitions that have been registered on the site, but at any one time you can have 5,000 or more that are open.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Yeah, I'm thinking of how, as a citizen, I go onto the website, and it could be quite overwhelming to see 5,000 petitions. I think you have to have fairly good search engines to try to define your area and so forth.

What percentage would actually get over 10,000 signatures?

Dr. Ruth Fox: It's about less than 1%.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Less than 1%, okay.

Now in terms of members submitting a petition to the House directly, is there a minimum number of signatures required for that?

Dr. Ruth Fox: For the public to submit a petition?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: No, as a member of Parliament they can submit petitions, I assume, to the House directly, a written petition.

Dr. Ruth Fox: For a written petition, there's no minimum number of signatures. The member can just bring forward whatever petition they've been presented with, if they wish.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Right. Now for us, we have that minimum threshold of 25 signatures. We get 25 signatures, we come to the House, we present it, and we get to speak for a minute of two on it. Do you have something equivalent to that there?

Dr. Ruth Fox: Yes, the member will present it on the floor of the House. It will be handed over to the Speaker who literally puts it in the bag on the back of the chair. It's listed on the order paper, and the member can speak for a few moments on it, but that's it.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Okay, thank you, Ms. Fox.

Ms. Hilderman, with regard to participation in terms of the public, do you have any thoughts in terms of how practical it is to have 5,000 petitions online? How do you see this thing unfolding? Would you provide some comment on that?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: I think what I want to emphasize is that as a committee you're asking all the right questions in terms of how you actually make this functional and an experience that's worth a citizen's time to go on and sign.

I'm not an expert on digital interface but I think there are experts out there. Think about websites like Change.org and Avaaz.org that host thousands of petitions, and they've managed to do it in a way that allows citizens to try to find those petitions that they want to sign.

I think a really important design feature is that it needs to be shareable, like whatever petition is very shareable on social media. I know the U.K. platform does do this where it's very easy to tweet or Facebook the link to the petitions so that you're driving traffic from your followers or your friends to a petition. What we know from how petitions work and the curve on participation is that with petitions generally most of the activity happens in the first 10 hours of a petition's lifetime, so if you don't have thousands of signatures happening in those first 10 hours, you're probably not going to have a petition that reaches 10,000 or 100,000 threshold.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Lukiwski for four minutes.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think I'll start with Ms. Hilderman on this one because I'm not sure, Ms. Fox, if the question I'm about to ask would be better answered by you or by Mr. Winter, who is going to be appearing later this morning. It's about privacy. We have talked at some length in this committee about the need to protect the privacy of those signing e-petitions, specifically to not allow political parties to data mine, to try to take some of that information and use it for their own political purposes.

Ms. Hilderman, I would assume you would agree with that concept, that we need to put in provisions and protocols to prevent data mining from occurring, so I'll ask for a couple of comments on that. Then, Ms. Fox, if we have any time left I'd ask you to comment on, perhaps, what security protocols have been established in the U.K. If you can't or we don't have enough time, I'll ask the same question to Mr. Winter when he appears before us a little later on this morning.

But Ms. Hilderman, we'll start with you.

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Great.

Absolutely, I think privacy is an important consideration. I know that in order to verify signatures, it's likely you're going to be collecting more than only a name. You're going to be collecting an address, and an email probably, to verify who they are. You're right. There should be some guarantee that the information will be kept securely.

That said, many petition sites do let people have their names listed, if they so choose, and maybe the community they're from, or in this case the riding. I think this is where in my remarks I suggested that there also be consideration as to how you can balance privacy while making sure that there's a feedback loop to parliamentarians—not to political parties but to parliamentarians—that allows them to know what their constituents are thinking about in terms of their petition activities

I think that can be a real strength of an electronic system, and I'm optimistic that, given online expertise that I'm sure you have access to, you can balance the security functions of that with the provision that helps people feel there's a conversation happening with the petition process, that it's not simply citizens putting their names online and then never hearing anything back. Here's a chance, especially if they opt in, to hear back from government if there's a response, or to know that their MP has been notified that this is an issue of importance.

● (1140)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you for that.

To that point, we have also been discussing at this committee mechanisms by which government could respond directly, and in fact, even perhaps allow the petitioners to receive notification as to when the debates may occur in the House, so that people can actually take a look at the debate that's occurring as a result of their signature on a petition.

But Ms. Fox, would it be appropriate for you to comment on this? Are there security protocols in place in the U.K. to prevent political parties from data mining, or is this a question I should better ask Mr. Winter?

Dr. Ruth Fox: If Mr. Winter is from the Government Digital Service here in the U.K., I think he would be your best route. Certainly, the GDS would be the best people to speak to on this. As far as I'm aware, the political parties don't have any access to the data. Indeed, the data is not kept for very long actually by government itself, so that has not posed a problem thus far. The bigger problem is whether parliamentarians have access to it.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Sure.

Speaking to your point about the length of time you retain e-petitions, how long is that and what method then...? Is it merely deleted or is there a more secure method of getting rid of those e-petition signatures?

Dr. Ruth Fox: Again, I think you'd have to speak to the Government Digital Service. The petitions are open for quite a long period of time, so the data will have to be retained for that period, but what they do with it after, once the petition period has closed, I'm afraid I don't know.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you.

The Chair: Great. Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Rankin. It's good to have you here today.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Thank you very much, Chair.

I appreciate your being here. Since I only have a short amount of time, I think I would like to start with Ms. Hilderman from Samara. Thank you.

You talked in your presentation, in your second point, about the signature threshold issue, pointing out that neither Quebec nor the Northwest Territories have such a threshold, and I can certainly see it for the small jurisdiction such as NWT. But the motion before us, M-428, by the member for Burnaby—Douglas, actually talks about one MP sponsoring the petition, so there would not appear to be the kind of role for the backbench committee that we heard about from Dr. Fox, and for 100,000, perhaps five members endorsing it for debate.

What is your recommendation with respect to a signature threshold here?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: I think this is a real issue for your committee to try to piece out. Building on Dr. Fox's comments, I think it may be to your advantage to think about the flexibility for you as parliamentarians to decide how to deal with a petition. My point was that in part right now...if the motion is implemented as it is suggested, you'll be creating two parallel systems, one for written petitions and one for electronic petitions, which are treated quite differently. For a citizen who's signing something, whether it's by hand or online, what they're doing is expressing their support for the issue. They don't necessarily see why that support should be funnelled through two different sets of rules and processes, one where you only need one MP to support it in order to get some response from government, and another system that would require five MPs.

Mr. Murray Rankin: Doesn't the fact that a member has to stand up and essentially take responsibility address the frivolous and vexatious types of petitions that you want to weed out? Doesn't that address that problem adequately, in your view?

Ms. Jane Hilderman: Certainly, I think you're probably correct. Another way to deal with it would be at a committee level. There was some concern that you could have a funny petition that gains enough support that could justify debate. But you're right, having an MP sign off on it should mitigate that concern.

● (1145)

Mr. Murray Rankin: All right.

I would like to go, please, to Dr. Fox. Thank you for your excellent presentation. I just was a little unclear on one point you made in answer to a question, and that concerns the issue of clarity, the number of e-petitions that appear to be rejected as a consequence of being found to be unclear. That was quite startling, and I don't understand why that occurs. If there is this vetting process that you've described, how is it that so many are rejected? What is their fate? Do they get reintroduced after consultation with somebody who's responsible for that?

Dr. Ruth Fox: One of the key reasons they may be rejected is that they don't make a specific request. So, if they ask a specific question of the government or a particular department, that would be one of the grounds. Another ground may be that there is a very similar petition and the government has determined it is a duplicate and therefore rejects it. Those are the kinds of grounds. Certainly at the beginning of the process there were an awful lot of rejections. I think it has eased as time has gone on, and the volume has dropped as well, which has made it easier to manage.

With regard to the clarity of the process, one of the issues is, for example, how does the public petition Parliament itself? If the concern is not about a government department, what happens then? If it's about how Parliament is managing its business, there's no facility, for example, to enable the public to petition the Speaker or to petition a committee in that way. So there are some difficulties there and reasons that the petitions have been rejected. One of the difficulties is definitely the search function on the site, which makes it so difficult, given the enormous volume of petitions, to manage that process.

Mr. Murray Rankin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Fox.

We'll go to Mr. MacKenzie; we'll finish up there.

Mr. MacKenzie, you have four minutes.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Thank you.

I think, Dr. Fox, we had heard that one of the issues about petitions initially was that many of them were coming forward that had nothing to do with the federal government, as we would have here. They were dealing with issues, perhaps, that had motor vehicle regulations, and so on. Would those be locked into that 25,000 that you spoke of?

Dr. Ruth Fox: Some of them, yes, would be. The bigger problem, I think, has been if it's a petition that's been directed not at central government but at a particular local authority, a council, for example, about a very localized matter, those would be rejected. The other issue, of course, is that in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, in our devolved settlement now, a large amount of domestic policy has devolved to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and so on. If it was in their devolved responsibilities, they would also be rejected.

The problem in the petition system, though, is that there is no mechanism when the petition is rejected to inform the petitioner that they could go to Scotland or Wales, or their local council, and petition them. I think in terms of thinking about the process, signposting elsewhere is quite important. It isn't in the Westminister system at the moment, and that is a flaw.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Sure.

I think most of us would agree that the theory behind electronic petitions is excellent. The problem is that the practicality sometimes gets ahead of where we are. When I hear Ms. Hilderman talk about maybe no threshold on numbers, and so on, and what it does and whether it translates into a committee, I don't know where we'd find the committee time to do some of those things, or even the debate time. Currently I think our take-note debate is scheduled for four hours. It's not that we can't change some of those things, but, Dr. Fox, did I hear you say that your debates are 90 minutes on petition items?

Dr. Ruth Fox: Yes, generally speaking. The backbench business committee could seek longer, but generally they've been 90 minutes or less.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: How often would they have had those debates now?

Dr. Ruth Fox: I think there have been just over 30. I'll need to check this, but there have been only about 30 since the system was set up.

The committee was certainly concerned at the beginning about being overwhelmed, but with the 100,000 threshold, so few petitions get through that it hasn't been a major problem. I think in our system the bigger issue is what happens to the petitions that get 99,999. What's the form of public engagement in those circumstances? At the moment, there isn't anything much.

● (1150)

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Certainly. I might be wrong, but I'm guessing that members of Parliament in your government get letters and notes and telephone calls regularly from constituents.

Dr. Ruth Fox: They do on a huge scale, an enormous scale.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: So I guess what you're saying is that constituents not only communicate by way of petition but make their views known in many ways.

Dr. Ruth Fox: Absolutely. Yes.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Okay.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: I think we'll end it there. We will suspend just for a couple of minutes while we go to our next panel.

I thank both of our witnesses from the first part.

Dr. Fox, thank you for all you shared with us. It was very good information.

Ms. Hilderman, the same, and please stay tuned. Watch what we're doing here and let us know your thoughts on it, please.

Thank you.

● (1150)

———————————— (Pause) ————————————

● (1155)

The Chair: I'll call us back to order. We're still here talking about electronic petitions.

We have Catherine Bochel, who is from policy studies at the University of Lincoln, and we have from the Office of the Leader of the House of Commons of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Mr. Winter and Mr. Shaw.

Ms. Bochel, I think we'll have you go first, if you would, please. If you have a bit of an opening statement for us, that would be best. Then we'll do opening statements from the other group, and then the members here will ask questions, if that's all right. So, if you're ready, please go ahead.

Professor Catherine Bochel (Reader in Policy Studies, University of Lincoln, As an Individual): That sounds good.

Thank you for inviting me.

This brief presentation draws on my research into petitions systems in the U.K., including in Scotland and Wales.

Having an e-petitions system can be a good thing for representative democratic bodies. Such systems can facilitate citizens' input and participation in the democratic process, they can inform politicians and policy-makers about public concerns, and they can also be designed to have an educative function, in that they can provide some people with an opportunity to engage with the political system and to learn how it works. They enable people's voices to be heard and this may help underpin the legitimacy and functioning of representative institutions and the policies they implement.

In terms of outcomes, while e-petitions systems tend to specify exactly what petitioners can achieve by submitting a petition, there are other benefits to petitioners. For example by getting their e-petition published on the petitions' website they're getting publicity for their issue and promoting it to a wider audience. They're automatically getting an outcome even if it is not an issue requested in the petition. In addition there's sometimes media interest in the issues raised and the public in the U.K. can watch any debates on petitions online.

In the U.K.'s e-petitions system there are two thresholds that may take place. If a petition receives 10,000 signatures it should receive a response from the relevant government department. If it reaches the 100,000-signature threshold it becomes eligible for debate.

Scotland and Wales have quite different systems. I can say something about those if you wish.

The e-petitions system introduced in the U.K. by the coalition government is one of direct access, which means that anyone who's a British citizen or resident in the U.K. can submit a petition directly to the e-petitions system. There is no requirement to have a sponsoring member of Parliament.

In the first three years of the U.K. e-petitions system it received approximately 53,500 petitions, of which 28,500 were admissible in

that they met the terms and conditions of the system. Out of these, debates have been held on 25 petitions and 145 received a response from the relevant government department.

My research on petition systems in the U.K. illustrates there are a number of features that might usefully be taken into account when designing an e-petitions system. While these vary with the age and scope of the particular system they might include for example a clear statement of purpose. What is the purpose of the system? Is it for people to communicate their views to members of Parliament? Is it for engagement, or something else?

There is a need to manage expectations by making it clear to petitioners what they can and cannot achieve by submitting a petition, and a need to be clear about the possible range of outcomes for petitions. It's also necessary to consider the type of access to the petitions. Will the system have direct access, so that anyone who is eligible to submit a petition is able to do so in a straightforward manner, or indirect access, where a petitioner will need to find an MP to sponsor the petition? It's worth considering what thresholds you might use.

These are a few things you might wish to think about. Thank you.

● (1200)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Winter and Mr. Shaw, please, an opening statement, if you have one.

Mr. Mike Winter (Head of Office, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons of Great Britain and Northern Ireland): Yes, thank you, Chair.

It's a pleasure to be invited to give evidence to the committee today.

If I could start with introductions, I'm Mike Winter, and I'm the head of office for the Leader of the House of Commons, the Right Honourable William Hague, MP. I have overall responsibility for ensuring delivery of parliamentary reform policy, including on e-petitions, for the Leader of the House of Commons on behalf of the U.K. government.

My colleague, Chris Shaw, is a parliamentary adviser providing procedural advice to the U.K. government on secondment from the House of Commons where he serves as a clerk.

We appear before you as officials of the U.K. government with the support of the minister.

We should point out that, following a debate in May of this year, we are currently working with the Procedure Committee of the House of Commons on an e-petitions system, which is jointly owned between the House of Commons and the government. We expect a report from the Procedure Committee within the next few weeks followed by consideration and decisions of the House of Commons. Given we're in the middle of the process of negotiations you will understand if we may not be able to give definitive answers to some of your questions today.

I know you're keen to hear from technical experts. I hope the committee would be willing for us to supplement our evidence with written evidence from the Government Digital Service, who run the technical aspects of the system, should that be necessary.

I'm happy to go into questioning. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Winter, we'll go to Mr. Lukiwski for a seven-minute round to start off with.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you all for being with us today.

My question will initially be for Mr. Winter.

Mr. Winter, we have been discussing, at this committee, security and privacy issues regarding e-petitions, specifically how do we ensure that the privacy of the information forwarded to the House of Commons via e-petitions is respected and the privacy of the individuals signing e-petitions is respected. Specifically we want to ensure that no political party would be able to data mine those petitions for use in their own political world.

Could you please give me a breakdown of the protocols that you may have established in the U.K. that could ensure that privacy concerns are addressed and the security and provision of the names are not data mined by political parties? For example, when someone signs an e-petition does his or her name and address and all subsequent information appear on the government website? What would prevent anyone from harvesting that information as petitions are being tabulated? Do you have other security provisions that absolutely prevent any data mining from being able to be used by political parties?

Mr. Mike Winter: Okay, thank you.

Yes. When we were setting up the system we worked with the Government Digital Service, which is responsible for implementing and overseeing the range of government digital provision to citizens. A decision was made very early on within the standard government protocols that we would store the minimum amount of information on individuals necessary to make the site workable. So the information that we store on the system is people's names, postal codes, email addresses. That's the only information that's stored on an individual.

This is currently stored by the government and it isn't made available to any third parties. So it cannot be mined by political parties or others.

In terms of your secondary question regarding what appears on the website, the author's name would appear for the creator of the website and someone signing a petition. But the email address or contact address is not available on the website, so it is a minimum amount of information and it isn't able to be used by anyone wishing to contact those people.

We store the information for the minimum time possible. At the moment we are storing information for the period of the administration. That's five years. This is largely because with the permission of those creating or signing petitions, we ask them to tick a box if they want to have further information about the progress of that petition. For example, whether it's been debated. Therefore, we

store the information necessary for the government to make contact just to update them about the progress of the petition.

● (1205)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Further to how long you store this information and how you dispose of it, when you finally dispose of the information that you've received after a number of years, please explain to me how that is done. Is it just simply hitting the delete button or do you actually try to go down a little further to prevent any breaches? As we all know, just because you delete something off a personal computer it doesn't mean that information is gone forever. What provisions do you put in place to ensure that the absolute privacy of individuals is maintained?

Mr. Mike Winter: The information is stored on one host computer via the Government Digital Services. So that information isn't transferred onto personal computers or other hard drives.

I would have to ask our technical guys to perhaps write with further information on the exact procedure that is taken to ensure full deletion. With this current system, which has only been in operation since 2010 and is due to finish in 2015, we haven't actually deleted any information from the system as such yet. But I'm sure there is a process in place that we could inform you about.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you for that.

For the remaining time I want to go to a little different route. We heard a representative at committee from the Northwest Territories here in Canada who said when they set up their e-petition program in their government they actually bought a software program from the U.K., right off the shelf, that was able to facilitate what they needed in terms of formulating an e-petition program in their government. Did you develop your own software or did you customize an off-the-shelf software program? Exactly how did you establish the software and hardware that you have to facilitate e-petitions in the U.K.?

Mr. Mike Winter: The software, again, was put together by the Government Digital Service, but you're quite right, that software is now open-source software and is available for anyone else to use to establish their own petition system. Obviously, they will need some technical expertise to correctly configure it for a new system, but it is open-source software that is available.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Could you give us an estimate at least, if not specific information, as to the total cost of implementation of this program—software, hardware, labour costs, that type of thing—and perhaps the yearly operating cost as well?

Mr. Mike Winter: I think there are several aspects to it dealing specifically with the technical aspects. I think the initial implementation costs, capital costs, were somewhere around £80,000. The ongoing operating costs are roughly half of that, about £40,000 per annum.

The Government Digital Service, as I've explained, work on a range of government services and sometimes allocate some of their available time to do small changes to the e-petition sites. There are some marginal costs, staff costs, technical staff costs, included there. Those are the technical costs.

There are other aspects of costs of the system, including staff costs for the moderation of e-petitions, which is currently done by individual government departments and is spread—again marginal soft costs are spread throughout the 20 government departments, mainly in their correspondence or parliamentary units.

The House of Commons, as I've explained, is currently considering a joint system, jointly owned with the government. Part of that could be a petitions committee. I think that would be a significant additional cost to the technical costs and moderation costs I've outlined.

●(1210)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Scott for seven minutes.

Thank you.

Mr. Craig Scott: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to direct my first two questions to Professor Bochel, and then I think I'll pass it over to my colleague, Mr. Rankin.

I very much appreciated both your paper and the summary of the speaking notes. It was very helpful that you set out parameters or features, including clearly knowing what the purpose is and needing to manage expectations, especially when we know that when citizens interact with MPs and government, it's often the dashing of expectations about how their interaction is handled that is a problem, and not so much the outcome. So I found this all very useful. I think when we come to perfecting the design that my colleague from Burnaby—Douglas has put in his motion, I honestly think that your reminders will almost serve as a tick list for us, so thank you.

I was just wondering about something that the previous witness from Samara suggested. There are two mechanisms. If we say that engagement is a serious goal or co-goal of the system, not purely two-way communication but engagement, could there be mechanisms to alert MPs, if this is easily programmable, of constituents who have signed any given petition, including updates, reports, etc., that would indicate and help MPs understand where people are at on a range of issues? Do you see that as an engagement? Would that be a beneficial engagement tool, or would you have any concerns?

Prof. Catherine Bochel: I think it would be useful. I presume you do it through postal code matching and people's postal codes would be matched with the MP's constituency. It could be used to alert an MP that a petition is being submitted by one of their constituents, but I don't think they should necessarily have to take that on board. They can see whether it's an issue that they believe is relevant or not.

Mr. Craig Scott: I was actually, too, thinking as far as in terms of the signatories.... So if you had a petition that only got 5,000, versus the 100,000 threshold we seem to be looking at here for triggering some kind of parliamentary debate, if an MP were informed that there were 50 signatories from their riding on this issue, would that be a worthy thing, or would you have any concerns?

Prof. Catherine Bochel: If you have only 50 signatories, then that might be an area for concern. You would want to have specific thresholds for your petitioners to meet in order to respond to petitions.

Mr. Craig Scott: The other thing that came up in an earlier meeting was how the House reports back on the most successful petitions, the ones that do trigger some reaction, let's say in terms of a debate in the House.

The idea is to send everybody an email with a link, explain what happened, when the debate took place, and alert people in advance, so that if they want to, they can watch. Afterward, send a link to the House of Commons video footage of the debate. Is that a mechanism you've seen done anywhere, and if not or if so, do you think it's a good idea?

●(1215)

Prof. Catherine Bochel: I think it's an excellent idea. It shows that the House is keen to engage with the people and is listening to the people.

It enables people to see that the House is not only engaging with their issue but it's participating as well through debates raised on issues they're interested in.

I'm not sure exactly what the U.K. system does, but certainly the U.K. people can watch debates online. There can be a massive interest in them. There was one petition, the Hillsborough petition, and 37 MPs participated in the debate and something like 330,000 viewers watched the BBC Parliament channel that day, in comparison to a daily average of 120,000. I would say that it is a very important mechanism.

Mr. Craig Scott: Thank you. That's a great example.

The Chair: Mr. Rankin.

Mr. Murray Rankin: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses.

I'd like to direct this to Mr. Winter and to Mr. Shaw.

I know it's been only a few years—I think it was 2011 when this process started, so this may be a premature question—but in light of the experience that you've garnered, have there been any proposals received for amending the process to date?

Do people think it's working quite well, or are there any changes your experience would suggest that we might consider?

Mr. Mike Winter: There have been several changes to the system already. There have been some relatively minor ones in terms of the wording of the website. There have been some procedural ones. At the start of the process, the government did not respond to e-petitions and about 18 months into the process we decided that having a new threshold, the 10,000 threshold, would elicit a government policy response to that petition. That's something that was introduced during this Parliament to change the interaction and help improve the engagement.

In terms of the parliamentary handling, the House has approved a specific time, outside of what was otherwise allocated, to allow for the debate, specifically, on e-petitions. That was new time that was found to debate e-petitions.

There have been several changes, some minor technical, some procedural, in terms of how we engage with petitioners, and some from the Parliament end in terms of the time allocated.

The current process, following the debate in May where we worked with the House of Commons Procedure Committee, has thrown up some new challenges, particularly relating to some of the points that have been made with regard to how you engage petitioners, what the member involvement is, and how you might use the technology to show which petitions are particularly popular in a certain area by postal code. Probably the biggest one that the House is considering would be the establishment of a petitions committee that would allow better member input into the outcomes that are available following the engagement.

It's certainly been an evolutionary process since 2011, with some changes already made and some in the pipeline.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I'm going to give you, Mr. Winter, an example, and I'd be interested if you can provide an explanation of how it would actually work.

If I'm sitting down, watching the news, and I'm really upset because I see this issue on the environment, and if I want to do a petition—and I'm convinced that I'm going to do a petition—what do I do in terms of getting the petition onto your website?

Mr. Mike Winter: At the moment, it's relatively straightforward. A quick Google search would take you to the home page. There are prompts on the home page that encourage people to search for that subject. You'll appreciate that quite a few petitions are rejected because they're duplicates of existing petitions. It's relatively easy. It only takes, at the moment, one person to come up with a title for the petition, to put in the subject, and choose the government department that they think is responsible for it. It then goes to the government department for moderation and then goes live once it's been moderated, usually in one week, allowing other people to sign it.

I would just add, we find that most people signing e-petitions, about half of them, come on to the system not through the home page but come on to a specific e-petition via Facebook apps or mobile. We find that a lot of petitioners are signposted to the petition site by other people who are starting campaigns, or by their friends who have set up a petition and shared it throughout the system and said, please sign this petition. I say about half, 48% of people, actually enter the site via a mobile app, via Facebook.

● (1220)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: So the essence of the beginning is when I notify your office, it takes about seven days and then it appears, as long as it's not a replication of another petition that is out there.

From the day in which it appears on the website, does it stay live indefinitely, or do you have a timeframe that after 60 days of being dormant the petition is closed off? How does that work in terms of timeframe?

Mr. Mike Winter: Currently there's a choice of three, six, or twelve months, which the petitioner chooses. We thought it was important at the start to give petitioners that choice. But I think it's one of the things, through experience, we've discovered is probably more problematic than it is helpful. Most people, if they put three months, then get to two and a half months, and think I'd actually like a longer time to gather more signatures. So I think we're going to go for a standard length, but it will probably be towards the longer six or twelve months. But that's one of the issues that's currently being discussed with the Procedure Committee in the House, as to what a sensible length of time would be for a petition to remain active.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Could you give a guesstimate in terms of what you think of the number of petitions that are actually live, that would have less than, let's say, 25 signatures? What percentage of those petitions?

Mr. Mike Winter: I could give you some actual figures.

Less than 25 is going to be a very large proportion. I don't know if I have that exactly at hand. We know that about 30% of approved petitions have two supporters or fewer, and about 58% have five or more supporters. So I can't give you the figures off the top of my head in terms of 25, but you'll recognize from that there is quite a significant proportion of approved petitions that have relatively few signatures, I would say.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Right. I can't recall how many petitions you get in the year, but you're saying about 30% of those petitions would have two or fewer signatures.

Mr. Mike Winter: Yes. We have about 15,000 petitions submitted each year. About 50% of those, about 7,500 petitions a year, so 30% of those 7,500 would have two or fewer supporters.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Can you give us an idea of how many would have more than 10,000 signatures?

Mr. Mike Winter: I think the figure was given earlier. About 150 have reached the 10,000 mark at which the government provides a policy response—so it's about 150.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: What about third-party agencies such as, let's say, labour groups or chambers of commerce? Do you find they will often engage the petition process as organizations through individuals?

Mr. Mike Winter: I don't think that's been a particular feature. There are other organizations out there that are known for their petitioning and their lobbying through that route. There are some examples. The biggest petition we had was about cancer screening for young women, which received 325,000 signatures, and that was supported by a local regional newspaper and got a lot of publicity that way, and then through national media. There may be evidence in some of the petitions, but I think most of them are just picked up through social media and other things. I'm not aware of a particular organization having specific issues in the way that you mentioned.

● (1225)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Just so I'm clear in my own mind, once the mandate of the current government is over, then everything is deleted, so it's based strictly on election cycles. If one petition starts six months before the mandate comes to its conclusion, that petition —everything—comes to an end upon the election being called and the writ being dropped.

Mr. Mike Winter: That's correct. We have already started alerting people to the fact that we will take the site down when Parliament is dissolved on March 30, which happens automatically now under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

The obvious administrative problem would be that if you had a new administration coming in and there was a live e-petition site that had e-petitions with a government response, it wouldn't necessarily reflect current government policy. So it was felt that having a cut-off point that was linked to the electoral cycle made administrative sense in terms of operating the system.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: So then there is no expectation or obligation whatsoever that a new government would respond to any of the petitions that would in fact have been signed?

Mr. Mike Winter: No, I think, particularly given the desire to see the site more jointly hosted by government and Parliament, we've used this election as a suitable point at which to stop the old site and launch the new site with some changes. I think the electoral cycle process would inevitably be a sensible one. In any case, anyone signing a petition is told that they can submit a new petition once the new site is up and running, but the new administration would not be expected to respond to the old petitions.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Richards for four minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you for joining us today.

Something we've had a little bit of discussion about is residency requirements for petitions and how we verify residency on petitions. I don't think I've heard you address this at all. Do you have residency requirements for your petitions, and if so, how do you enforce that residency in the case of electronic petitions?

Mr. Mike Winter: We require a signer of a petition to declare that they are a U.K. resident or a British citizen. They can be living abroad. They also need to have an active email account. We require those who live in the U.K. to provide a valid postal code, which is checked against a Royal Mail database for validity. I guess the question is whether someone from abroad who isn't a British citizen could sign the site. I guess the short answer would be yes, but we do ask that a signer make a self-declaration that they are a British citizen or U.K. resident.

Mr. Blake Richards: So they do make that self-declaration. You said that the postal codes are checked. Is just a random sample of postal codes checked or are all postal codes checked when the petitions are submitted?

Mr. Mike Winter: My understanding is that all postal codes are checked automatically against the database. That's my understanding.

Mr. Blake Richards: So it sounds as though there is probably some potential for abuse, if someone is self-verifying that they are a resident, and outside of checking postal codes there are not a lot of safeguards in place for that.

Mr. Mike Winter: With verification there are several steps that we take for people signing petitions. When they send an email, they get an email confirmation, so we can check that the email account is valid. It takes some action on their part. We also ask them to enter a couple of randomly generated words, using the recapture type of software that you would be used to using on websites to stop automatic signing of petitions through automated processes.

I think the level of verification and security are suitable for what the site is, which is an e-petition site. If someone is very determined to sign an e-petition, so be it, I think. Most of the checking, particularly on IP addresses and other things, is done by the technical staff who do account for patterns of signing that might be unusual, just to check that the system is working okay. The verification does certain things, but a determined person would be able to sign some petition from abroad.

● (1230)

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure. Understood.

You mentioned watching for unusual patterns with IP addresses, etc. Do you have some kind of barrier, that once there is a certain number submitted from a certain IP address or a certain email address, that determines that there should be a closer look at those particular signatures?

Mr. Mike Winter: One of the reasons we store the email addresses is to stop people signing the same petition more than once. That's one of the things the system does automatically. We don't stop an individual signing a number of petitions. There are no restrictions there.

As to the IP addresses, I'm told by my technical team that in some large organizations, if they share a Wi-Fi connection it would have the same IP address, so they don't limit by IP address but they do look out for unusual patterns. I don't think there's a threshold as such, but we don't restrict by IP address because of that problem with Wi-Fi connections.

Mr. Blake Richards: What further verifications would they then do when they notice those unusual patterns? Obviously, there is some further verification being done there. What would that consist of?

Mr. Mike Winter: I have to be honest with you. I don't think we've ever found anything to give us cause enough to investigate further. So I have to say I'm not quite sure what we would do if we did find something wrong with the system. I guess it would be a matter for the technical staff to report back to the policy officials and ministers, to report the behaviour to see if anything is needed to happen due to that, but we haven't had that scenario yet.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: I'll go to, Mr. MacKenzie, you had a couple of questions.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Very briefly. Mr. Winter, I understood you to say that you do keep track of some of the addresses. Not to say there would be anything wrong with that, but do you have serial petitioners, that is, people who sign virtually any petition that gets posted?

Mr. Mike Winter: The official answer is yes, there are some who have signed a large number of petitions and certain individuals do like signing e-petitions. I think the sort of success in terms of the system might be though that since the system started, it's roughly about 3.5 million individuals per year. That's over 10 million individuals in a relatively small country who have signed e-petitions, so I think there are some serial signers. But I think it's also a system that's used by millions of people in the country, which I think is one of the good points.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I asked that question because one of the things I noticed was for some of the community bloggers it will be the same people over and over who respond. I'm not being critical of them, but I think that is their hobby and their pastime and I suspect that when you put something online, when people find it they will spend a fair bit of time attaching their names to a variety of things.

Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux, did you have that one more question you wanted to ask? I have a little time and I'll be really kind to you today.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I appreciate the kindness, Mr. Chair, but actually I've forgotten the question.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: All right, thank you. I love your honesty and that's what gets you elected.

We thank our witnesses. I understand that you are working together with your Procedure Committee on putting together a report. We all know how hard and diligently procedure committees work, so we'll let you wait for yours but we sure want to see it when it's finished, too.

We thank you all for being our guests today. Thank you for the great information you were able to share with us.

We'll suspend now for a couple of minutes while we go in camera.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]