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Wednesday 28 October 2015

**Journal
des débats
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Mercredi 28 octobre 2015

**Standing Committee on
the Legislative Assembly**

Petitions

**Comité permanent de
l'Assemblée législative**

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DE
L'ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE**

Wednesday 28 October 2015

Mercredi 28 octobre 2015

The committee met at 1304 in committee room 1.

PETITIONS

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Good afternoon, everyone. Another reminder: We'd like to start at 1 o'clock in future weeks.

Welcome to the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly this afternoon, to talk, yet again, about petitions, e-petitions and petition procedures. I think our goal today is to have an open discussion about whether or not we have e-petitions here in Ontario at the Legislature. It has to be, obviously, a committee decision. I would just ask if you could wait to be recognized for Hansard, because I'm assuming that this will be a fairly open discussion today. Just please wait to be recognized.

Essentially, I think what we need talk about first is whether or not we're going to move ahead with e-petitions here. I'd open the floor up for discussion and recognize Mr. Clark.

Mr. Steve Clark: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, members of the committee.

I feel very strongly that this committee, moving forward into the report-writing stage next week, should endorse the creation of an e-petition site, similar to many other Parliaments and Legislatures throughout the world.

I first want to congratulate our table researcher, Joanne McNair, on all of her reports. I also want to thank the delegations that appeared last week on privacy and personal information. I found all of their presentations and documents very informative.

I also want the committee to know that I did bring it up with my Ontario PC caucus this week. I believe, and I think it's shared amongst my colleagues in Her Majesty's official opposition, that we should continue the present practice of paper petitions, that we still should give constituents the opportunity, under the existing standing orders, to be able to give a petition to an MPP and have that MPP either table the petition or read the petition into the public record. I believe that should continue.

I also believe that a mechanism should be put into place that would allow existing MPPs, who have e-petition capability and desire, to be able to continue that practice. I believe that the standing orders should reflect that fact because, presently, they do not.

I also agree that we should set up a site on the main Ontario Legislature website, in a way that doesn't spend an exorbitant amount of money. I know that, in Ms.

McNair's reports, I am concerned about some of the dollars that have been spent on e-petition sites.

I really do believe that we need to make it easier for residents, as in her report, "to be able to start, share and support petitions." I believe it was a component of this government's Open Government initiative, so I believe they have a duty to move on that initiative and make it into a reality.

I do want to highlight, though, before I concede the floor to others, the section in Ms. McNair's report under "Possible arguments for opposing e-petitions," where it states that it "might lead to unreasonable expectations regarding what a petition can achieve." I want to highlight that for one reason: There are many petitions that are tabled in the Ontario Legislature that have thousands and thousands and thousands of signatures. Those signatories expect that the government is going to be responsive to that petition and provide a very full and open answer on the government's intentions.

I don't believe that that is an argument to oppose e-petitions; I believe it's a fact today. I know that many of my constituents who, when I send them the response to the paper petition, are very disappointed with the answer. I think we have to be mindful of public expectation and I want to reiterate that the public expectation is that e-petitions should be the new normal when it comes to communication with members of provincial Parliament.

I support our existing procedure, Mr. Chair; I support those members, like myself, who provide a space on their website for e-petitions; and I also support us moving forward next week, in the report-writing stage, to be able to provide a website that fills that need.

I look forward to hearing opinions from other members of the committee. Thank you very much. Mr. Chair.

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The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Thank you very much, Mr. Clark. We'll move to Mr. Balkissoon.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I had a question of Mr. Clark, just for clarification. I hope I heard you right, because I was trying to put on my ear-piece at the time.

You're saying that the current practices of MPPs who have petitions on their own personal website be recognized in the standing orders. Can you expand on what it is you—

Mr. Steve Clark: Presently, there's no such vehicle that the government would provide an answer to that petition. That petition would have to be printed out in the

format that we accept presently, under the standing orders, and either read into the record or tabled with the table, if it adheres to it.

I believe that when we're involved in report writing, we should move, especially with the e-petition site on the Ontario Legislature site, to a more natural language as opposed to the language we use with "whereases" and "Therefore, be it resolved." I think if we're going to move to an e-petition, we need to have plainer language.

But I believe that those who have e-petitions on their site should have a vehicle that, if it is on the site, there's a mechanism that we put into place in the standing orders such that they would get answer just as easily as we get an answer from the paper petition.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Balkissoon, any follow-up?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: My clear understanding, then, from what you're saying is that if we, as a committee today, agree to move forward and set up an e-petition process that is housed by the Legislative Assembly and administered by the Legislative Assembly, that is not adequate. You want to go one step further and recognize the one that's on your own personal website.

Mr. Steve Clark: I think there should be three opportunities. My goal, to use Ms. McNair's words in the report, is to make it easier for residents of Ontario "to start, share and support petitions." I think we need to have as many ways as possible for people to participate.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Any other input? Mr. Balkissoon.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Mr. Chair, I could comment on what we're doing here, if you allow me to. If there's somebody else, go right ahead.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): No, you have the floor.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I would urge the committee to support setting up a central e-petition site to complement what we do on paper today, and let it be administered and managed and operated by the Legislative Assembly, under the Clerk's administration.

I would say also that my interest today would be, let's not reinvent the wheel. We know our federal partners have implemented something. We instruct the Clerk and her staff to investigate the federal software program—is it something we could purchase and implement here very simply?—but also, if we purchase it, to look at opportunities. Can it be enhanced? Can it be modified?

On a go-forward basis, if we look at additional features, if this committee was to do a review in the future and say, "You know what? We want to add this one little piece," we make sure that with the federal program, if we were to purchase it and save some money, we will have that opportunity to do it in any type of licensing agreement we sign.

As I see the petition process, we keep the paper that we have and allow that to continue to function, because there's a lot of people in Ontario who don't have access to the Internet and do not have access to sign an e-

petition and will continue to need the paper practice to work for them.

What I also see with the e-petition is if we could replicate what's in the paper process today. We could look at the program, with someone creating it with all the securities to meet the privacy commissioner and whatever we heard last week, and we have thresholds of when a person signs a petition; how long it stays on a site; how many signatures it needs to have; and that a couple of members be allowed to sponsor it. When it reaches the threshold, then that member stands up in the House and presents it as we do today and the ministry responds, as they do today, so nothing changes from that end.

I would comment, because of what the privacy commissioner said and encouraged, that we could retain the records of the creator of the petition because they have done something very important themselves. But those who sign the petition, their records could be destroyed sometime after the answer has been provided so that there's no retention of data, there's no housing of data and there is no real expense to the future, because really it's simple data, which is just a name and a postal code, or something of that nature.

I have difficulty recognizing current members who have petitions on their website because I don't think it fits the Legislative Assembly's role to recognize that. I'm concerned about the risk, the safety, the mechanism. Unless we, the government, decide to create a website for every member to have access to and we administer it and put all the security concerns and risk factors that are taken into consideration in that website, and it's the government that is building that website for the member just to have his name on it—then I might be able to think about it differently. But I don't see that happening in a hurry, so I think that the best thing for us to do today is to look at a complementary system to the paper system that is administered by the Clerk, that's neutral, and we give the public access to sign that petition and we set some thresholds.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Great. Thank you very much, Mr. Balkissoon. We'll move to Mr. Mantha.

Mr. Michael Mantha: There are a couple of questions that came up through the petition system, and if you were to have them on the MPP site or the Legislative site. The one question that came up—I'm surprised I didn't think about it—is the issue about translation. There are petitions that are on certain MPP sites which are not translated. If we were to go down the avenue of having an e-petition on the MPP's website, would that be a requirement?

I understand that it would be a requirement if we would, or at least we would have to make that decision if we're going to centralize that service here through the Legislative Assembly. At least I would insist on that. I don't know about the rest of the committee members. If we were going to formalize e-petitions, then I would actually insist that it be done on the MPP's website as well so that there is full participation by everyone in the province.

The one thing that jumped out to me was one of the cons, which is to accept e-petitions from an MPP's website. It says, "Some citizens might be reluctant to sign a petition hosted on an MPP website as that might be seen as support for a party."

And I'm only going to speak for myself, as I know there are individuals who have approached me and said, "I'm not going to sign your petition, Mike. I don't want to be contacted by anybody out of your office. I understand the issue and you have my full support on that issue, but I'm not signing your petition."

If that petition was hosted on a neutral site, would that individual sign it? Would it create the goal of having more participation, as I think ultimately what we all want in this room is having that opportunity to get more individuals to participate? I'm leaning towards having it on a central site but I'm also looking at it as an MPP. Those electronic petitions are issue-based—at least the ones that I have on my website—and it provides me an opportunity to engage with my constituents. If there is a way that we can validate both, it's what I'd like to see.

However, I see the importance of having the centralized neutral area so that individuals who do want to support the issue but don't want to be seen as supporting an issue that Mike Mantha raised—I understand that view as well.

At our last meeting, there was a question in regard to what do we do with the information that is on that e-petition and how do we control that as MPPs, if it's on our website. I'm a little bit concerned that that information—although I would particularly direct my staff to treat it with the utmost confidentiality, it might just happen that there's a breach there. That's a little flag that I have for myself. But again, having said that, it's also a tool that MPPs have used for years—years and years and years—in order to have that contact or that direct link with their constituents.

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How we proceed with this is going to be interesting to see because the decision will be made. I would like to see a way that I can actually engage with my constituents, use my website for petitions and have the ability to introduce those. However, I do understand the concerns and the issues that individuals might have by signing my petition. I hear my colleague Steve, with what he'd like to desire, but I think at the end of the day, we do want to have greater participation; I think it's ultimately our goal. A centralized e-petition might be the answer. However, I think we should also look at how we can engage our constituents through our own websites as well.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Thank you, Mr. Mantha. I'm going to move to Mr. Ballard next. But just so we're clear and all on the same page, I'm hearing that there is a consensus as far as moving toward e-petitions. As far as processes, it's a bit different, but I think there is a consensus to move to e-petitions, which I think is great.

We've heard now from a government member, the opposition end and third party as well. So I'd like to hear more. Mr. Ballard?

Mr. Chris Ballard: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just a couple of comments on what I've heard: I agree with the Chair that what I'm hearing is agreement that we do need some type of e-petition system in future as a way of better engaging our citizens and making it easier for them to engage with the Legislature.

My sense is that it really needs to be a system that is run and controlled by that neutral party, the Ontario Legislature, rather than individual MPPs. I don't think there's anything that would stop an MPP from continuing to do their own petitions online. They would still face the same issues they face today in terms of submitting them, but there's nothing to say you couldn't have a petition set up and then a link to it from your website, promote it on your website, a "Click here to sign the petition" sort of thing. I think there is a way of accommodating. If you really want to promote a petition as an MPP, there's a way of doing it without having two places where that information is stored and sorted etc.

Maybe what it really is too is that a lot of MPPs are looking for a simpler solution which is more of a simple polling software that you can get virtually for free anywhere, that if you want to ask questions of your constituents, they can come in and say "yea", "nay" and whatever they want to say.

I heard MPP Clark talk about perhaps the need to use plain language as we move forward with a petition system, and I hear that. Coming from a communications background, I've spent an awful lot of my career trying to write things in plain language so as to demystify processes. I think we need to look at the language of petitions to that effect, but at the same time, there is something important about an official petition written using the right language. The "whereases" and the "therefores" are not that complex, I don't think. So I'd be cautious about stripping some of the formality away for fear that we make a petition perhaps seem a less important thing in the eyes of petitioners.

I think I'll leave it there for now, but I am encouraged by what I'm hearing, and I think we're coming to some conclusions.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Great. Thanks, Mr. Ballard. Mr. Balkissoon?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I just wanted to add a comment. I take Mr. Mantha's comment on the language issue. I thought that was automatic because the government's running it. They'll do it in two languages.

I was just going to mention that, yes, a member can use their own website to notify their constituents that somebody has created a petition: "Here's the link to sign up." Or on your own website, you could create a page that says, "This is how you do a petition to the Legislature," using the e-petition format, and link it to the government's site, because we're allowed to do that. That way, the information is actually stored and controlled, and all the risk factors are taken away from that member. I don't have a problem with that, also, if we mention it in our report, the system be designed to allow members to link up, because that's the only way you're going to promote it.

I wholeheartedly support all his issues. My only hang-up is still individual members creating their own petitions on their own website.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Thanks, Mr. Balkissoon. I'll recognize Ms. Wong.

Ms. Soo Wong: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I am very pleased to hear that all three parties are interested in e-petitions.

I think we didn't get a chance, when we had the two witnesses before us last week—we didn't drill down, to ask the witnesses. The information currently—the members opposite are having the e-petition. When that information is deposited into your website, what is happening to those data? Sensitive information is being captured, in terms of personal information. How do you protect that personal, sensitive information in terms of the privacy legislation? For those reasons, I'm concerned.

I think that all of us are busy members here at Queen's Park as well as in our constituency offices. We must not break our own law, especially when you have private information that is being gathered by each individual member who is currently having their own petitions. I don't recall any one of us, when we were here listening to the witnesses, asking the two experts who were before this committee the question about what we do with this information. Currently, members have that data. Are they required by law to keep it for X amount of time? How long is this information kept? Is it then sent to archivists, so that they will be storing it for you? I don't know.

I just want to make sure that if we're going to have two systems of e-petition—one centrally for all of us, and one individually, or individual members continue to do business as usual—we've got to make sure it's consistent, and that there's clarity and, most importantly, that we have one policy that governs everybody. Right now, I am not sure.

I'm also very pleased to hear that our colleague is also interested that those individuals who have no access to the Internet or people with a language difficulty or new Canadians who still want to use the traditional method of doing petitions, will be respected. I think that's the right thing to do.

But I think that having two systems of e-petitions can create challenges. I just wanted to put that on the table.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Thanks, Ms. Wong. An excellent discussion so far. It has made my job easy, so far.

I would like to see if we could push the committee on coming to a consensus, hopefully, on a few things. Number one, am I hearing that the committee supports keeping the paper petitions as we have now?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Absolutely.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Secondly, does the committee support having a centralized assembly e-petition?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Absolutely.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): And then the last one, which I've saved until the end, is the individual MPP websites petitions.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I don't agree with it.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Could we maybe have a bit more discussion? We'll go to Mr. Clark.

Mr. Steve Clark: I guess that there are some members of the Legislature who have this on their websites, to date. They've adhered to the rules. If they wanted to table that petition, they would print it out and have a signature on it, because, as you know, our existing paper petition policy only requires one signature on the petition before it is either tabled or read into the public record, which is less than many of the electronic petition thresholds that Ms. McNair has provided in her report to the committee.

I happen to believe, again, that you want to give people the most opportunity to participate. Just like, as Mr. Mantha said, maybe someone doesn't want to deal with an individual website, there might be someone out there who might not want to deal with the website. Maybe they would feel that the OLA website is a government website, and they may not understand how the website is run.

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That's why I feel that there should be the most opportunity for someone to participate. If that is through three different systems, then I think that's fine.

But I do want to say that there is a role for our experts who appeared last week. I do want to take the opportunity to comment on Ms. Wong's previous words before the committee. I do believe that our speakers last week should be providing a guide to members of the Legislative Assembly who do take in information, not just on e-petitions but throughout their offices, to ensure that they're aware of their legalities in terms of collection of data and personal information. I do see that as a separate discussion, a very valuable discussion, that all members should participate in.

But I still contend that we need to provide the most opportunity for folks to participate. I happen to agree that if members, whether they be government members or opposition members, do presently use some form of electronic petitions on their site, they should be able to continue to do that; that if the consensus of the committee is that we don't change the standing orders to legitimize that, then they can continue to do what they're doing now and be able to have their constituents' views on the public record.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Just to clarify—again, if you have feedback on this—it's my understanding that we wouldn't be stopping or preventing MPPs from having petitions through their website, right?

Mr. Steve Clark: I don't know if we can.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I don't think we can, Mr. Chair. What an MPP does—

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): I just wanted to make sure that we're all clear on that.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: What an MPP does within their own boundaries—they're responsible, and they're accountable to their constituents.

It's sort of a quasi MPP site and government site, when a member creates his own site, so the same rules don't apply. He could continue to do what he's doing as long as whatever he presents in the House conforms to the two policies that exist: the one for paper or the one for electronic.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Right. I just wanted to make sure we were all on the same page.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: No, we're not saying he has to stop.

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

Mr. Chris Ballard: Thank you. I just wanted to clarify—and MPP Balkissoon clarified that for us—that MPPs can put whatever they want to on their website, but if it's a petition, it has to meet the criteria that we set forth. So most likely, it wouldn't meet it.

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

Mr. Steve Clark: No, I'm fine.

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

Mr. Michael Mantha: Help me out here: So e-petitions will continue on an MPP's website, or can continue?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Yes.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Paper petitions are going to continue, or are going to be provided?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Whatever you're doing today, continue to do it if you so choose.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Again, help me out here: If I'm going to have e-petitions, then all it requires is for me to print out my e-petitions and put this one signature that I got Steve to sign over it, in order to table it in the House.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: That's up to you.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I know, but again, help me out: What's the problem in regard to accepting the e-petitions? Because you know they're under this paper. Help me out here.

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

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I think it's the accountability and the privacy issues that we have to be concerned with, because it's your website and not the government's.

Mr. Michael Mantha: That's right, but all those signatures on those petitions are coming in anyway, whether we accept—I don't know. I'm just trying to—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Maybe we want to invite the Clerk back here to tell us.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Any further discussion on what Mr. Mantha brought up? Mr. Ballard.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Thanks. If I can recall a few of the things, I think verification was one of the key issues we heard. If someone actually writes down on a paper petition, you're pretty sure that they're a living, breathing individual and not a robot, based somewhere, that's slamming your website.

To put a petition in front of the Legislature, it has to meet a test, and one of those tests is, can we verify that someone has signed this?

Mr. Michael Mantha: But aren't we doing it—when it comes into the Clerk's office, again, it comes in with a thousand e-petition signatures. I'm covering it with one signature, putting it in. You're responding to that one signature, right?

Mr. Chris Ballard: Okay, now I'm lost. The one signature is for what? Just on paper?

Mr. Michael Mantha: On paper. These are all the ones that I collected on my website.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Which aren't verified.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Which aren't verified.

Mr. Chris Ballard: Are not verified.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I get this one. In order to present these on the Clerk's table, I get the one. I get Steve to sign it or I get Chris to sign it, just so we can follow process. I table it and I get the process that I'm expecting.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): We're going to move. We've got a bit of a speaking order. Just one thing, though: MPPs can't sign a petition.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I'm just using that for an example. I'm just using that for discussion purposes, because sure as hell the left wing or the right wing will find somebody who wants to sign the darned thing anyway. Again, we're going to be responding to it anyway.

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

Mr. Steve Clark: Just very short, Chair: I'll give you an example of what I've done. For example, with the government allowing the closure of Kemptville campus by the University of Guelph, the students wanted to get their voices heard. So we developed an e-petition on the site, which was the vehicle the students wanted.

In addition, we did a paper petition that we had at a number of public events, and we also had a PDF of the paper petition on the website. If a family or a business wanted to download that PDF and put it at their counter or pass it around down their laneway and their county road, they could. So we had a situation where there were people who were at public meetings and also students who filled it out electronically.

Ultimately, when I tabled the petition, I obviously didn't table the electronic signatures, but I did read it into the public record that I had—I think the one time when I first did it, I had about 8,000 people who did it electronically. I still got their words on the public record. Their signatures or their emails were not recorded. They were not archived.

The only time that I really communicated back to them was when I got the answer from the government. When the government was soliciting comments through their provincial facilitator, we communicated back and said, "If you want to provide comments to the facilitator, this is the way to do it." That was how we communicated back to them, just like many of us would communicate back to those signatories on a paper petition.

Again, I want to reiterate—because I like Ms. McNair's words—that I wanted to make it easier for residents to start, share and support a petition, and I think we need to do it under multiple platforms.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Thanks, Mr. Clark. Mr. Balkissoon?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: The more I listen to what Mr. Clark is saying, the more I believe that until we implement the central site and know how it functions, you can't respond to his need to put it in the standing orders. I'm sitting here and saying, "Okay, if I have a website and I put all the cover pages explaining how petitions work at the Legislature, etc., and here's the link to go sign a particular petition"—I mean, as an MPP, if I know there's a particular petition on the web that I'm interested in, I can encourage people on my own website. But direct them to the government website? I see it performing the same function.

So I'm having difficulty agreeing to this, because what is the main purpose of a petition? It's for the government to respond. And the issue here is, who should the government be responding to? In an e-petition that will be done in-house, there will be the person's name and email address, so it will be an automatic response through email quickly, electronically.

In the case of Mr. Clark's paper petition, as far as I understand it—and if I'm wrong, maybe the Clerk will correct me—if you present a petition to the minister or a ministry with one signature, that's the only person who gets a response. The electronic names on there get nothing. It's up to the MPP to convey that. As an MPP, instead of me taking on all that workload, I'd be happy to put it on the main website and let the ministry respond to all those emails. I'm still doing my job. I'm still helping my constituents to access government, but I'm doing it in a different format and using a different medium, which is the web pages on my site explaining how the process works. I see also, when you link into the government website, that the first couple of pages will do a complete explanation of how this system works—the advantages of it, how you're going to get a response and the timelines. It will give you the thresholds. All the instructions will be there, so the person participating will be fully aware.

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I have difficulty saying that we will put in the standing orders to accept the format that Mr. Clark is talking about. Let's get the central one working. Maybe after a year, or three or five years, of experience, we might see the merits of his system, but right now I cannot picture it.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): I just wanted to ask—you keep referring to the government website, but you mean the assembly website—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: The assembly website—well, the government. This whole place is the government.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): The Legislative Assembly.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: The opposition is part of government. We're governing on behalf of all the public.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): You mean the assembly website.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Yes.

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

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Thank you, Mr. Chair. First of all, I'm enjoying the conversation as well. I want to echo your comments.

I have some lingering concerns with what Mr. Clark is proposing, and I want to get to that in a moment.

But the access to democracy that we've been discussing almost since the onset of these conversations—we heard from several people who underscored that the public's confidence in any petition system is strengthened by the level of credibility that it has, and by their assurance that the information they're signing and the things they're affixing their name to will be used in a credible way. I think, but I'm not sure, that understanding how their information gets used is important.

So I'm going to use change.org, which is a website that I know. I know it's not a Legislative Assembly one. They're very clear about how your information gets used and how it's kept and safeguarded, and how your personal information will be safeguarded, at that. I think that's important.

What I am concerned about, getting back to Mr. Clark's suggestions—and maybe I'm just not clear, which is entirely possible—is how we assure people that we're going to safeguard their personal information. In a central system, I have a greater degree of confidence that we'll be able to provide them with that level of confidence. I guess I'm just querying how we're going to give people reassurances about their personal data and how it's kept.

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

Ms. Soo Wong: Just a parallel to Ms. McMahon's comments, Mr. Chair: I think I want to drill down more questions for the two witnesses that came forward last week.

Besides archiving, if an individual member has their own website with petitions, how long is that personal information kept? Will the information then be passed over to the archivist's office and be restored for deposit?

The other piece is, where is there accountability and responsibility if the member's website is hacked? We see that all the time—every day out there—white collar crime. People go into different people's websites. Where is the duty to report in if your website has been hampered—and the responsibility of the members? There should be some kind of sharing back with whoever the independent officer of the Legislature is that must be reported back to, because their personal information has been compromised.

I know, coming from public health, that any personal information from public health where I was working—if any staff information is compromised or lost while travelling to and from clinic, that's reportable.

So when a member's website has been compromised, where and when is there a requirement to report in? And there's an accountability factor, and it must be transparent.

I'm concerned, because when one incident happens to one member, all of us are affected. I just want to raise those questions now.

I hear the concern Mr. Clark said about making more accessibility for the public to participate and engage. But I would hate to think something happened to his website and personal information of some young person from his community is now shared with others. I don't know. I hope it never happens, but I need to safeguard that personal information. We have a duty as legislators to protect that personal information.

Those are my comments. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): I'd like to recognize the Clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): Just on Mr. Balkissoon's point, currently when you put in a paper petition, the only person who receives a response is the MPP who put it in. The government does not go through all the names on it and respond to those people personally. There is one response to the MPP who has filed the petition. How they distribute that would be up to that MPP.

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

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: So if we create an e-petition, then the MPP who sponsors it will get a response? We could also put in this new process that that same response just be mass-emailed to every email that's on the list. I mean, we could create such an easy process, because if the person signed the petition and put their email on it, then that's easy.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Or post the response on the website where the petitions are.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Whatever, yes.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Okay. If we'd just move forward and get some clarity around the third approach, which is the MPP websites—are we ready to make a decision on that? Or does everyone want to, I guess, kick it down the road one more week, think about it for a week, come back and make a decision next week?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I would say that we could make a decision that we want the central system—

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): And the paper ones.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: —and next week we come with all the paperwork to create the framework, so that the Clerk's office can go away and come back with the info.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): How do we feel about the MPPs' individual sites, then?

Mr. Steve Clark: If I can interject, Chair, I think Mr. Balkissoon acknowledged that individual members can continue to do what they want and engage their constituents in any way. I'm disappointed that we couldn't get consensus by the government members on integrating this third system in—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Mr. Chair, I want to correct Mr. Clark.

Mr. Steve Clark: No, no, I'm just—I'm not finished yet.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I want to correct Mr. Clark. This is not a government position; this is my—

Mr. Steve Clark: I'm not finished—

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I want to correct—

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): One at a time. Mr. Clark, finish, and then I'll recognize you, Mr. Balkissoon.

Mr. Steve Clark: I do just want to say that it's my understanding that our present paper petition system is reflected in our standing orders. So if we do make a decision on e-petitions in our report-writing stage, we must also get the approval of the House leaders to make that change so that we can move forward. I think, as I've said in this committee many times, that that is a pretty integral part of this process, and that if we do not get the consensus, this won't happen. I just want to again express that, because to me it is an integral part of our discussion.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): And again, the task of our committee is to present a report to the House and let that move forward at that point.

I'd like to recognize Mr. Balkissoon.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: So, as I was saying, I think today we could agree on creating that central e-petition. As I said before, I would like us to look at a first priority, which is to just copy the federal government process and investigate if it will work.

Interjection: Or the UK.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I'm just saying, "If it will." If it's easy, we do it; if not, then we do the framework for our own at our next meeting.

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

Mr. Steve Clark: I was prepared. I consulted Ms. McNair yesterday. I felt it would be helpful in our report-writing stage. Even though we have the documents showing what each Parliament does, I believe that we should have a chart or a graph showing the differences in the different systems and use that as a guide to build our consensus. I'm not going to say that I want one system over another today.

I've made some comments that I don't think are generally agreed upon by the members regarding the UK system. I do believe that it would be in our best interest if Ms. McNair would devise a chart showing the different thresholds for the different e-petition sites and how a member is integrated in that. I think it would be very easy for us to have that document for next week so that we can use that as our consensus builder.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Balkissoon, then Ms. McNair.

Mr. Steve Clark: And I'd be prepared to move a motion on that at the end of the committee.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: That's fine. My concern is to investigate the software that the feds have got. Would it be practical? Because how you store data within a software—they're all subroutines between a faceplate. So to me it's, can we do it and do it reasonably cheap?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): I think Ms. McNair can comment on that.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. Regarding the House of Commons in Ottawa, their site isn't live yet, so we don't really know exactly how that thing's going to work. It won't go live until whenever the new Parliament actually meets.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: But would they have a paper-work framework of the architecture of the system?

Ms. Joanne McNair: They gave us what they felt they could give us, which we shared. We went over it a couple of meetings back.

The UK platform is open source. It's downloadable, and it's free. You can modify it any which way you want, to suit your needs. It's the same with the White House's platform that they developed: It's free, open source and can be downloaded.

I had discussed this briefly with iDivision, when this process first started. I sent them links to both, and they said they'd play around with them. I don't know if they actually did follow-up on that.

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Can we get feedback between now and next week?

Ms. Joanne McNair: On if they've actually played with them?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: Yes. Like, what would be their preference?

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes. If they haven't done anything with it, they probably won't be able to give you feedback at this point.

I just wouldn't look at the House of Commons one yet, the federal one, until the thing's actually working and we see what it does, because right now it's—

Interjection: It's theory.

Ms. Joanne McNair: Yes.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Ms. McMahon.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: I don't think I disagree with that idea, Mr. Chair. My concern remains about data and confidentiality. Open source systems are—I'm not a tremendous expert on this, but my understanding of them is that you can hack into them very easily. I think security is important.

Again, I go back to my earlier comments, which focused not on the plausibility of ideas so much as people's comments to us, which were: "Make it a secure system that we can get behind and have confidence in." I think it's important that we safeguard people's information and create a system that's going to give them that assurance. Whatever system we create, I hope that it has that as a central feature.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): I'm going to ask if it's okay to have Ms. McNair make a comment on the open source system.

Ms. Joanne McNair: "Open source" just means it's free to download. You can put in all the security constraints that you want. You can make it as secure or as unsecure as you want with that.

The UK one is based, obviously, on the UK government's one, which has been up and running since 2011. They've not been hacked at all.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: Good. That's great to hear.

Ms. Joanne McNair: You can make it as secure or as unsecure as you want. All it means by "open source" is that it's on GitHub.

Ms. Eleanor McMahon: I know what that means, yes.

Ms. Joanne McNair: You download it and then you fix it the way you want.

Interjections.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Okay. If there is no further input and feedback, we'll reconvene next week.

Mr. Steve Clark: Wait—

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): I'm sorry. Mr. Clark?

Mr. Steve Clark: I think we should, by a motion, ask the researcher to table a report before the committee showing the comparison between the systems that we've studied over our several months of studying e-petitions.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Trevor Day): Which models—

Mr. Steve Clark: She gave us a report and she has asked for our feedback. I believe that, based on this document that we got this week called Discussion Paper: E-Petition Process and Issues, we should look, in a chart format, at the processes and issues faced by the Legislatures and the Parliaments that have been a part of our review, so that, very easily, without having to go through all the pages, the members can see how a petition is tabled, how long it's up on the site and how it's communicated back to the petitioner, so that it will cause, I believe, quicker consensus by the committee.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Okay. We have a motion on the floor from Mr. Clark. Any further discussion?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: More information doesn't hurt. If he wants it, we support it.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Do we agree? Agreed. Okay, see everyone next week.

The committee adjourned at 1354.

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