

## PETITIONS

A petition is a request by a group of citizens for Parliament to take action to solve a particular problem. It is the oldest and most direct way that citizens can draw attention to a problem and ask the Parliament to help them. The Parliament receives many petitions each year on many different subjects.

### Form and content

There are certain rules that must be followed about the form and content of petitions, which protect the intentions of petitioners and ensure their authenticity.

In the House of Representatives, a petition must be presented on paper and comply with the standing orders (rules) of the House. Each petition must contain the call for action or reason for the petition at the top of the page. This description can be no longer than 250 words. The principal petitioner, being the person who initiates or organises the petition, must place their signature and address on the first page. When signing a petition, the signature must be in a person's own handwriting. A petitioner who is unable to sign for a particular reason may ask another person to sign on their behalf.

The Senate follows a similar process, but the petition must be addressed to the Senate and the request must conform to the standing orders of the Senate.

A senator must present a petition to the chamber on behalf of the petitioners and it must be certified by the Clerk as being in accordance with the standing orders. A petition must contain a statement of the total number of people whose signatures are included. The senator's name must be included on the front page, but their signature is not included in the petition. The Senate currently accepts electronic petitions.

### Presentation to the Parliament

The Senate and House of Representatives each have rules about how a petition can be presented to the chamber.

In the House of Representatives, petitions are presented on Mondays by the Chair of the Petitions Committee. These are presented along with any responses by government ministers to petitions previously presented to the House. The Chair announces the subject of the petition and the number of signatories for each petition, and often makes a short general statement. Any member of the House may also present a petition at various times throughout the sitting week. Members may also make a short statement.

In the Senate, petitions are lodged with the Clerk for presentation to the Senate. This may be done on any sitting day.

After a petition has been presented to the Parliament, the full terms of the petition (but not the signatures) are printed in Hansard for that day. Petitions may also be forwarded to the minister responsible for the administration of the matter raised in the petition.

### History

The right to petition the monarch and Parliament to solve a problem dates back to the 13th century in Britain. Early bills (proposed laws) were little more than petitions to which the monarch had agreed. Petitions in their current form date from the 17th century.

In the Australian Parliament, one of the most famous petitions was presented to the House of Representatives in 1963. This petition was presented by a member on behalf of the Yolgnu people of Yirrkala in the Northern Territory. It requested that the Parliament recognise their traditional land on the Gove Peninsula in Arnhem Land, which was under threat from mining. This petition combined bark painting, English and Yolgnu languages and was decorated with Aboriginal designs. The petition is on public display in Parliament House. As a result of the Yirrkala Petition, the Parliament established a select committee to investigate the issue (see Parliamentary committees).

Some unusual petitions have been presented to the Senate, including one that was written on a jacket and continued on a roll of cloth. This petition related to the textile, clothing and footwear industries and was presented on 2 April 1992.



The Yirrkala Petition

Yirrkala artists, Dhuwala moiety, Yirrkala Bark Petition 14.8.1963, 46.9 x 21cm, natural ochres on bark, ink on paper, House of Representatives, Canberra.  
Yirrkala artists, Yirija moiety, Yirrkala Bark Petition 28.8.1963, 46.9 x 21cm, natural ochres on bark, ink on paper, House of Representatives, Canberra