

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Lincoln		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 19 – Politics and International Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Petitions Systems: Enhancing Representative Democracy		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2009 – 2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> BOCHEL Catherine	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Associate Professor	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 1 Sep 91 to date
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014 – 2019		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)  Petitions are a popular means for the public to communicate their concerns to Parliament. Research by Dr Catherine Bochel, of the Lincoln Parliamentary Research Centre (ParliLinc), identified weaknesses in the petitions system set up by the Coalition Government in 2011 and significantly influenced the development of the new Government and Parliament system established in 2015.</p> <p>Recommendations from Bochel's evidence to two House of Commons Select Committee inquiries were adopted by the House of Commons and significantly influenced the establishment of a Petitions Committee and the introduction of a wide range of flexible responses to petitions. Through her work on procedural justice and a 'fair process' she developed a conceptual framework which 'shaped ... thinking about how a petitions system should work in practice'.  <b>[5.4].</b></p> <p>Bochel's research also contributed to the Canadian Parliament introducing an e-petitions system.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)  Petitions are clearly popular with the public, with the House of Commons Petitions Committee receiving 99,031 e-petitions with over 55.3 million signatures from July 2015-July 2019. They play an important role in communicating public concerns to parliamentarians.</p> <p>Research by Bochel has taken place at a time when there has been an increase in interest in petitions systems as a means of enhancing representative democracy in the UK and around the world. It was undertaken in settings including the Westminster Parliament, the devolved legislatures and local government from 2009 - 2019 <b>[3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4]</b>. Initially funded by the British Academy, the research included interviews with petitioners, committee clerks and members of elected bodies. Among the key elements were an exploration of the extent to which petitions enable different degrees of participation, and a consideration of what the idea of procedural justice – a 'fair process' <b>[3.5]</b> might tell us about petitions systems. Whilst identifying significant challenges to the effective operation of petitions systems, the research concluded that such systems have the potential to act as a significant input to representative democracy.</p> <p>Bochel's research <b>[3.2; 3.3]</b> identified significant weaknesses in the petitions system set up by the Coalition Government in 2011, including that it raised the expectations of petitioners through a statement on the website: 'e-petitions is an easy way for you to influence government policy in the UK' (HM Government, 2011). The reality was that for most participants the system afforded them the opportunity to air their views, but with little or no 'real' participation or empowerment. It therefore did not fulfil the main stated purpose of the system, might lead to petitioners feeling that their participation is not valued, and risked creating disillusionment among those who used it, potentially undermining not only the individual system but wider perceptions of the political</p>		

system. From her research in Westminster and the devolved legislatures, Bochel was able to distinguish between 'descriptive' systems, such as that set up by the Coalition government, which for the most part simply accepted and recorded petitions, and 'substantive' systems, 'where the emphasis is on the content of the petitions', 'which are able to act upon them, and which therefore have the potential to influence social policies' [3.2, p. 811], which fits more closely with the characteristics of the new Government and Parliament system set up in 2015, and those in the devolved legislatures.

Through her work on procedural justice, Bochel developed a conceptual framework to assess the extent to which petitions systems in political representative institutions are underpinned by broader ideas around voice, decision-making and transparency [3.5]. This is important because large numbers of people submit and sign petitions, yet many are unlikely to achieve the aim of their petition. Therefore, petitioners' experience of, and treatment by the system is important, and may affect not only how they view petitions systems, but potentially also wider political and governmental processes.

Key findings included that procedural justice can be a useful tool to underpin the workings of petitions systems [3.5] and that positive features of a petitions system include:

- having a mechanism such as a Petitions Committee to consider petitions;
- that actions on petitions should not be confined to those that reach particular signature thresholds, but should include a wider range of more flexible responses;
- the opportunity for petitioners to engage with the political system and to perhaps learn more about how it works;
- the integration of the petitions system into the broader system of the elected body or government.

This research led to a three-year House of Commons/Political Studies Association Academic Fellowship in Parliament looking more widely at Parliament's engagement with the public and whether procedural justice is a useful tool to explore this [3.6].

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1 Bochel, C. (2020) 'Petitions Systems: Outcomes, 'Success' and 'Failure'', Parliamentary Affairs, vol. 73, no. 2, pp. 233-252.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsy045>
- 3.2 Bochel, C. (2013) 'Petitions Systems: Contributing to Representative Democracy?', Parliamentary Affairs, vol. 68, no. 4, pp. 798-815.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss005>
- 3.3 Bochel, C. (2012) 'Petitions: different dimensions of voice and influence in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales', Social Policy and Administration, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 142-160.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2011.00828.x>
- 3.4 Bochel, C. and Bochel, H. (2017), 'Reaching in? The potential for e-petitions in local government in the UK', Information, Communication and Society, vol 20, no. 5, pp. 683-699.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1203455>
- 3.5 Bochel, C. (2016) 'Process matters: petitions systems in Britain's legislatures', Journal of Legislative Studies, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 368-384.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2016.1202644>
- 3.6 Kelly, R. and Bochel, C. (2018) 'Parliament's engagement with the public', House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper, Number 8279, 6 April 2018.

<https://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/id/eprint/31664/1/Parliament%27s%20engagement%20with%20the%20public%20library%20briefing%20paper%206%20April%202018.pdf>

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The principal impacts of this research have: 1) contributed to the establishment of a new petitions system and Petitions Committee in Westminster; 2) informed the workings of the new system; and 3) supported the creation of an e-petitions system in the Parliament of Canada.

##### *Background*

In March 2013, Bochel submitted written evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee Inquiry and was invited to give oral evidence [5.1a, 5.1b]. Her evidence highlighted the failure of the existing system to meet public expectations, and that the 'hybrid' nature of the existing system was a source of confusion to the public. She recommended that the ownership of the system should rest with the House of Commons, that users who do not have access to the internet should be able to submit paper petitions, that the focus on the number of signatures attached to a petition as a way to make decisions about actions on a petition be reconsidered, and that a Petitions Committee be established. These were cited extensively in the inquiry report [5.1a], and also reflected in its recommendations, with the Committee concluding 'that the House should be invited to agree a Resolution on public petitions which would outline the principal features of a new system' (para 134).

##### *Impact in REF period*

On 8 May 2014, the House of Commons agreed a motion supporting the establishment of a collaborative petitions system with the government in the 2015 Parliament. The motion called on the Procedure Committee to work with the Government and other interested parties on the development of detailed proposals. Following this, Bochel was invited to give oral evidence to the Procedure Committee inquiry into 'E-petitions: a collaborative system' [5.2b].

The Committee accepted a number of her recommendations, including, crucially, that:

- a new select committee, the Petitions Committee, be established;
- and that the Committee have a wider range of options in how they could respond to petitions.

Also, following Bochel's recommendations to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, in addition to actions being triggered by signature thresholds, the new Committee was enabled to respond to petitions by:

- asking for further information from relevant organisations on the topic of the petition;
- inviting petitioners to give oral evidence to them;
- or undertaking an inquiry into the topic raised by the petition.

In December 2014 the House approved the subsequent report *E-petitions: a collaborative system*, resulting in the introduction of a new substantive petitions system and a new Petitions Committee. This was a significant step, suggesting that Government and Parliament were taking the concerns of petitioners seriously. The new Committee was able to draw on a more appropriate range of responses, and to provide some petitioners with the opportunity for more in-depth engagement with Parliament [5.2a; 5.2b].

Bochel's research continued to have further impact on the implementation of the new system. The Clerk to the new Committee asked Bochel to 'advise the Committee as it thinks about how to address the task ahead of it'. This involved Bochel attending meetings with the Clerk and sending the Clerk a written statement of recommendations [5.3a] which were '... enormously helpful' [5.3b]. The Committee adopted a number of these, including that:

- statements about what petitioners can and cannot achieve be included on the website for the new Committee, and

- the purpose of the new system be communicated to petitioners by a variety of means, including a short video on the website to set out the process of submitting a petition, and potential outcomes for petitioners.

A further email from the Clerk noted that the Committee had launched a consultation on its working methods and stated, 'You will recognise some of your recommendations in there (sometimes adapted to fit the framework the House has given us)' [5.3c].

The Chair of the new Petitions Committee wrote to Bochel recognising her contribution [5.3d]. The significant influence of her research on the development and implementation of the new system were underlined by a letter from the Clerk to the Petitions Committee [5.4] saying '... your research has played, and continues to play, a hugely important role in informing the establishment of the UK Government and Parliament petitions system. ... your evidence to that [Procedure] Committee assisted in the development of the proposals that were finally implemented. ... I am hugely indebted to your work on the concept of "procedural justice" in shaping my thinking about how a petitions system should work in practice. It has underpinned the development of a framework for the new petitions system and the working methods of the Petitions Committee'. The Clerk of Committees also recognised Bochel's contribution, '... your evidence to the Procedure Committee helped it in its development of the framework for the new petitions system which was agreed by the House of Commons in 2014 and put into effect after the 2015 general election. Your work continued in your assistance to the Clerk of the new Petitions Committee in developing its working methods' [5.5].

The research has also begun to have an impact in other legislatures, most notably in the Canadian Parliament where Kennedy Stewart MP brought a motion, to establish a system for electronic petitions [5.6a], in which he cited Bochel's research in support of his case. Her work having informed his original arguments [5.6a; 5.6b], Bochel was then invited by the Canadian Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to give oral evidence in 2014 [5.6c, 5.6d] on the proposal to introduce e-petitions to the Canadian Parliament. Drawing on her research on petition systems in the UK, including in Scotland and Wales, she provided examples of features that might be taken into account when designing an e-petitions system including providing an educative function, and demonstrating a variety of potential outcomes for petitioners. A new system was subsequently agreed and launched in December 2015. The MP wrote to Bochel saying that 'Both the committee and I found your insights invaluable' [5.7].

It has also been cited by the Scottish Parliament in response to requests by other legislatures for their inquiries into e-petitions, including to the Chair of the Standing Committee, House of Representatives, Parliament of Australia, and the Parliament of New South Wales [5.8a; 5.8b].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 a. Reports of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee  
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpolcon/82/82.pdf>  
 (Volume I, report and oral evidence, pp.38-41. Transcript of oral evidence, Ev 12- 16; 28-29).
- b. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpolcon/82/82vw.pdf>  
 (Volume II, written evidence, Ev8-10).
- 5.2 a. Report of House of Commons Procedure Committee, E-petitions: a collaborative system, 4 December 2014, Third Report of Session 2014-15, HC 235. (Report, pp.9, 18-19).  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmproced/235/235.pdf>
- b. Oral evidence (transcript) to House of Commons Procedure Committee, June 2014 (pp. 3-5, 8, 10-12, 13-15, 18).  
<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/procedure-committee/epetitions/oral/11098.pdf>
- 5.3 a. Suggestions for the new Petitions Committee, June 2015

- b. Clerk to Petitions Committee email 16 06 2015.pdf
- c. Emails from Clerk of the Petitions Committee (Clerk to Petitions Committee email 24 07 2015.pdf)
- d. Letter from Chair of Petitions Committee

5.4 Email from the Clerk to the Petitions Committee 03 08 2018

5.5 Letter from the Clerk of Committees, House of Commons 19 12 2017

- 5.6
- a. Stewart, K. (2014) *Modernizing Petitions in Canada: Proposal for an electronic petitioning system*, House of Commons, Chambre Des Communes, Canada, November 2014.
  - b. Stewart, K., Cuddy, A. and Silongan, M. 'Electronic Petitions: A Proposal to Enhance Democratic Participation', *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Autumn 2013, No. 1. pp. 9-13.
  - c. Evidence to Procedure and House Affairs Committee of the Canadian Parliament, November 2014, <https://openparliament.ca/committees/house-affairs/41-2/58/professor-catherine-bochel-1/>
  - d. Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs of the House of Commons, Canada, 33rd report, 26 02 2015 (see pp. 2-3).

5.7 Letter from Canadian MP, sponsor of Petitions Motion, 13 04 2015.

- 5.8
- a. Letter from the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee to the Chair of the Standing Committee on Petitions, House of Representatives, Parliament of Australia. Bochel's work on procedural justice is cited and a link to her article is provided in the evidence submitted to the Australian House of Representatives. A link to the letter is included here: <https://www.aph.gov.au/epetitionsinquiry> under 'Submissions' – number 8.
  - b. Presiding Officer (Rt Hon Ken Macintosh) of the Scottish Parliament cited Bochel's article on procedural justice (2016) in evidence to the Parliament of New South Wales.