

Institution: University of Glasgow
Unit of Assessment: C21 - Politics and International Studies
Title of case study: Improving access to and awareness of Public Petitions Processes
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

University of Glasgow research on the Scottish Parliament's public petitions system directly influenced processes for petition consideration through the production of a review of the petitions process, which prompted a year-long inquiry. Additionally, the research informed the Public Petitions Committee's public outreach and information efforts, with the aim of increasing public awareness of the petitions system. Beyond Scotland, the research has informed HM Government's ongoing policy debates around the operation and administration of its petitions system.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
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The Scottish Parliament's public petitions system is one of the hallmark, 'new politics' institutions adopted by the Scottish Parliament to increase public engagement with the law-making and policy scrutiny processes under devolution. Designed to increase the openness, transparency and accountability of the Parliament, Scotland's public petitions system is somewhat unique, allowing virtually anyone to petition the Parliament on any matter that is related to the Parliament's devolved powers. In theory, then, the system creates a mechanism for almost unparalleled public involvement not only in the law-making process, but also in the evaluation and scrutiny of policy outputs and outcomes.

For scholars of public opinion, political representation and public engagement, the petitions system provides an unrivalled natural experiment in civic responsiveness to political processes. To tap this potential, Christopher Carman (then Senior Lecturer at the University of Glasgow) initiated an extended research project in 2006, entitled '*Implementing the Buzzwords and Connecting with the Public: An Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Processes*,' with funding from the ESRC (RES-000-22-1820-A). The ESRC grant funded a postal survey of everyone who submitted petitions to the Scottish Parliament, as well as a series of in-depth interviews with petitioners. The particular focus of the project was to develop an understanding of how individuals' assessments of political processes influence their evaluations of the petitions system and wider diffuse support for political institutions. Additional issues addressed in the research related to the influence of petitions in the Parliament's consideration of legislation and its scrutiny of the Scottish Government. The research built on Carman's body of work on political representation and public perceptions of political representatives and processes, and voting procedures.

Shortly following the award of the ESRC grant, the Public Petitions Committee (PPC) announced a similar review of the petitions system. Carman was granted the tender for the review, producing an extensive report for the PPC entitled, '*An Assessment of the Public Petitions Process, 1999-2006*'.

The review demonstrated that the PPC had significantly changed since the first session of the Scottish Parliament, attributing this change in function and role to the need to find a balance between efficiency and effectiveness. The research pointed out that this was an important balance to strike given the resource-intensive nature of the public petitions process and emphasised that the process had to ensure that it was efficient and effective in order to meet the needs of the petitioners and maintain its integrity. The review also identified several issues which raised difficulties around achieving this balance among them the fact that the petitions system was predominantly used by older, middle-class, educated men, meaning that the petitions process provided an avenue for certain segments of society to voice their concerns while not offering the same opportunity to others.

Carman argued in the final report that in order for there to be a meaningful and effective petitions process, it should attempt to connect with all the people of Scotland. To this end, the report

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recognised previous attempts by the PPC to engage with the public through road show events and suggested the possibility of further outreach activities specifically targeting certain geographical areas to enhance social inclusion and engagement with the petitions system.

In addition to the lack of use of the petitions system by a broad section of Scottish society, the research also identified further difficulties in maintaining the balance between efficiency and effectiveness. The research also demonstrated that many petitioners felt they were not kept aware of communications between Committees as part of the consideration of their Petition. The report further concluded that these aspects of the process may undermine the perceived fairness, transparency and openness of the petitions system.

Carman moved to the University of Strathclyde from 2007- 2012 before returning to Glasgow University in January 2013. The impact from the research described here will therefore focus on his 2006 research undertaken at the University of Glasgow on behalf of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee.

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

- (1) Carman, C.J. (2006). *Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System 1999-2006*. Project Report. Scottish Parliament: [Link](#)
- (2) Carman, C.J. (2006) *Public preferences for parliamentary representation in the UK: An overlooked link?* *Political Studies*, 54 (1). pp. 103-122. (doi:[10.1111/j.1467-9248.2006.00568.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2006.00568.x)) [Output published in leading international journal committed to rigorous peer review]
- (3) Carman, C.J. (2013) *Barriers are barriers: asymmetric participation in the Scottish public petitions system*. *Parliamentary Affairs*. (doi:[10.1093/pa/gss039](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss039)) [Output published in an established, peer-reviewed academic quarterly covering all the aspects of government and politics.]

Key Grants:

Economic and Social Research Council, 2006: *Implementing the Buzzwords and Connecting with the Public: An Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions*, Grant Amount: £31,000

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)
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Carman's 2006 research provided the first comprehensive, independent study of the Scottish Parliament's petitioning system. It influenced the development and practice of the petitions system by, among other things, underpinning a year-long inquiry into the public petitions process undertaken by the PPC between June 2008 and September 2009. It has also informed the policy debates on the petitions system in Westminster.

Influence on Scottish Parliament Petitions process

Carman submitted his final report on *Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System 1999-2006* ('the Report') to the PPC in October 2006. The report was launched by the PPC at its meeting of 30 October 2006 [1] during which PPC members commented on the helpful and stimulating nature of the report. The PPC also acknowledged the equality issues identified by Carman in the report relating to the sectors of society who were most likely to lodge petitions. Noting this in the discussions, members of the PPC commented that it raised important issues about improving the public petitions process; members suggested that the report would provide an evidence base for the PCC's successors following the 2007 General Election.

In June 2008, following the previous year's General Election, the new members of the PPC launched an inquiry into the public petitions process. Both the minutes of the PPC's meeting of 24 June 2008 [2] and the final report of the inquiry, published on 16 June 2009 [3], demonstrate that the PCC was motivated to undertake the year-long inquiry in order to engage with the findings and recommendations made in Carman's 2006 University of Glasgow-based research.

The PPC launched the inquiry on 24 June 2008 with the aim of investigating how to improve awareness of the existence of the public petitions process, particularly amongst hard to reach

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groups; participation in the process itself; and the scrutiny role fulfilled by the PCC, issues which had been highlighted in the 2006 research. By adopting this remit, the PPC sought to identify and implement improvements to the public petitions process that would be of benefit to all its key stakeholders: potential and actual petitioners, the PCC, the wider Parliament including other committees, and public bodies in Scotland including the Scottish Government.

As part of the year-long inquiry, the PCC analysed written responses from 43 NGOs, public bodies, individuals, and charities. Additionally, it held public meetings in Duns, Easterhouse, Fraserburgh, and Edinburgh between December 2008 and April 2009.

In his written response for the inquiry, Carman examined the key issues raised by the PPC in light of the data and findings from his 2006 research. Carman recommended, among other things, that the PCC should commission further research into the extent of public awareness of the petitions system prior to developing an awareness campaign; the PPC subsequently commissioned research on public awareness of, and engagement with, the petitions process as part of the inquiry.

The PCC published its report on the inquiry into the public petitions process on 16 June 2009. Among its key findings the report revealed a widespread ignorance of the remit of the Scottish Parliament and a perception that it held little power. The report also found that, as a direct result of this, the public was not well informed about the Scottish Parliament's public petitions process. The PPC therefore made several recommendations for improvements in the report in relation to public awareness and understandings of the public petitions process that had been highlighted in Carman's 2006 research. It acknowledged that the promotional material of the PPC should be redesigned to make it more accessible and attractive to disengaged audiences; that a wider range of communication methods should be used to publicise the petitions process; that web-based tools linked to awareness and use of the petitions process should be improved and extended; and that there should be greater engagement with local government enabling members of local councils etc. to signpost constituents to the petitions process, where appropriate.

The Scottish Government and The Scottish Parliament Corporate Body responded to the report in July 2009 [4]; it was subsequently debated in the Scottish Parliament in September 2009, following which several of the PPC's final recommendations were implemented, including: a complete revision of public engagement flyers and documentation to reduce the amount of information included in the leaflets and make them available in more languages; and the adoption of online and social media, including Wikipedia, YouTube and Twitter (@SP_Petitions) as a means of reaching groups that may be unaware of the petitions process and who use social media on a daily basis. The PPC also redesigned the layout of its web pages to make them more accessible for people of all ages and abilities. In addition, the PPC produced a new film providing information about the petitions process and an animated guide on how to complete a petition [5].

These outcomes confirmed the findings in Carman's 2006 research which had prompted the Public Petitions Committee's inquiry.

HM Government's Petitions System

Beyond Scotland, Carman's research has been widely referenced in the ongoing discussions on reform of the HM Government's petitions system. Those discussions have been held with the aim of producing recommendations to make the procedures for petitions more accessible and transparent and better able to meet the reasonable expectations of those members of the public who engage with the process.

Carman's 2006 report was widely cited by the House of Commons Library, which provides research and analysis for Members of Parliament, in its 2010 briefings on *Proposals for a Public Petitions Committee* and *Proposals for an e-petitions process for the House of Commons* (published in March and February 2010) [6]. The Library drew from Carman's findings on the Scottish public petitions process in both briefings to inform the House of Commons about

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processes in other legislatures when considering how similar systems might be introduced at Westminster.

On the basis of his in-depth research into the Scottish petitions system in 2006, Carman was invited to participate in a seminar in Whitehall facilitated by the House of Commons Backbench Business Committee (BBC) on 6 March 2012. The BBC is a cross-party committee which schedules subjects for debate suggested by backbench MPs, and the Hansard Society (HS), the UK's leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity.

Carman explained his 2006 research findings to the BBC and assisted the deliberations on revisions to HM Government's petitions system following the launch of an e-petitions system in August 2011. As a result of this consultation, HS identified a number of problems that threatened to undermine the e-petition system's effectiveness and which, if not addressed, risked reputational damage to the House of Commons in particular, and an exacerbation of public disillusionment with the political system in the long-term.

HS further recognised that most other legislatures, including Scotland, have a unified petitions system that allows for different routes of submission for petitioners, i.e. either in paper form or electronically. HS believed that by introducing a separate system of e-petitions for the UK Parliament, those without internet access may be disadvantaged. On this basis, it was concerned that this might affect perceived fairness of the e-petitions system among the public and those submitting petitions. Carman had raised the problem with the perceived fairness of the Scottish Parliament's petitions process, and public engagement with it, in his 2006 Report. The Hansard Society relied on Carman's research findings from both his 2006 Report and the evidence he provided at the seminar on 6 March 2012 in its final report about the e-petitions system, where it directly quoted his contributions:

'...research on procedural justice and public perceptions of political processes, 'provides unmitigated evidence that individual-level evaluations of how 'fair' (or 'unfair') a political process is have a very strong influence on the willingness to accept the outcomes of these processes' and thus 'individuals are often willing to accept outcomes they do not prefer if they believe the outcomes were derived through a fair process' [7].

HS was keen to discuss the establishment of a Public Petitions Committee similar to Scotland's and which Carman examined in his 2006 report. On the basis of Carman's and others' evidence, HS recommended the establishment of a Petitions Committee, supported by staff in a Petitions Office. The Procedures Committee for the House of Commons, which considers the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, rejected the proposal to introduce a Petitions Committee but discussions around this are ongoing within the House of Commons.

Carman's University of Glasgow research thus continues to impact upon continuing developments to the UK Parliament's Public Petitions Process.

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

1. PPC 30 October 2006 Meeting Minutes: [Link](#) and PPC Annual Report 2007-8 at: [Link](#)
2. PPC Report of Meeting 24 June 2008 re: motivation for Inquiry into Petitions Process: [Link](#)
3. PPC Report of Inquiry into Public Petitions Process, 16 June 2009: [Link](#)
4. Response to Inquiry Report by Scottish Government: [Link](#) and Scottish Parliament: [Link](#)
5. PPC Webpage with revised publicity material, film, and guide on how to launch a petition: [Link](#)
6. House of Commons Library, *Proposals for a Public Petitions Committee*, March 2010; *Proposals for an e-petitions process for the House of Commons*, February 2010 [Available from HEI]
7. Hansard Society, 2012, *What Next for e-Petitions?*, London: Hansard Society-citing Carman's research and contribution to House of Commons 6 March 2012 Seminar [Available from HEI]
8. Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee, Scottish Parliament can attest to impact of Carman's research on Committee's work [Contact Details Provided]