
Petitions: A Voice for Sharing our Social History*

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* Double-blind reviewed article.

Abstract. From the earliest days of British settlement in Australia, petitions have been used by the public to voice their opinions on the issues and events that concerned them at the time. Often overlooked, they serve as a rich primary source of our social history. This Article will examine selected petitions from the Parliament of NSW's public website to hear directly from people living in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Case study one examines the very first petition made to the new colonial parliament in NSW, which by default became the first petition in Australia. By examining the clues left in the petition and what it spoke against we learn about life in colonial Sydney. The second case study examines petitions written in response to the arrival of the AIDS virus, showing attitudes and fears at a time when the virus and its transmission were not fully understood and contracting it was considered a death sentence. The third case study looks at the growing importance of animals to the people of NSW, both as valued family members and in concerns for their welfare in the 21st century. Examining the voices and views contained within petitions at various times allows the people of New South Wales to tell our social history.

WARNING: Please note the following Article contains content which may be upsetting. The texts, which are available on the public record, have been used to show attitudes at a particular time for context and demonstrate how views have changed. It is not the intention of the writer to upset or offend and the views expressed are not endorsed by the writer.

¹ At the time of preparing this Article Jennifer Gallagher held the position of Administrative Coordinator, Parliamentary Budget Office, Parliament of New South Wales.

INTRODUCTION

Chances are you have signed a petition during your lifetime. That petition was created because the issue was important enough to a person to ask those in power take action or make or prevent change and to you and others who sign and support that request.

For centuries, the community have used petitions as a way to inform leaders of the issues significant to them. While today's growing access to and use of the internet and social media allows people to freely express their thoughts and opinions, these are only recent platforms. In previous decades and centuries, the everyday person had to seek outlets like petitions to have a voice and convey their views.² Those voices found within petitions serve as valuable evidence for uncovering and understanding the social history of a community.

History has typically been written and presented by the elite from their own biases and world viewpoint or academics who rely on interpretation of a time or event they were not present for. Accessing the views that are recorded in petitions provides a unique primary source of social history. Petitions allow us to hear directly from people living through and directly impacted by conditions and events of that time. They also offer a voice for demographics rarely heard or recorded in history such as women, the poor, migrants or those with limited education. Considering the different viewpoints expressed within petitions can contribute to building a deeper understanding of life and society at that time.

This article will show how petitions can provide a rich firsthand source for the social history of the state New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Case studies will be presented using selected petitions made to the NSW Parliament during the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.³ Examining the opinions and information contained in these petitions alongside other evidence, I will show how they provide an understanding of the period they were created.

² Although petitions are written by individuals and the community, Parliament of New South Wales, *Standing Orders*, Legislative Council, Order No 68(1) and Parliament of New South Wales, *Standing Orders*, Legislative Assembly, Order No 123 and 123A require a Member to present it to Parliament on their behalf.

³ All petitions are publicly available on the Parliament of New South Wales website and are located under 'First Legislative Council', 'Minutes of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council', Hansard by date and 'ePetitions: closed for signature'.

The first case study was chosen as it is the first recorded petition received in Australia. It reveals life in the Sydney colony 40 years into European settlement. We see widespread theft of cattle being an issue and how the new government proposed to address it along with clues on life in early Sydney Town and the geographical boundaries at that time. The petitions used for the second case study are from the 20th century and were selected to demonstrate social attitudes in the years just prior to and following the arrival of the AIDS virus in NSW. While the content and language is uncomfortable reading it highlights how attitudes and fears around the gay community and AIDS virus have changed within the general community over the last forty years. The final case study shows examples of the growing focus on animals in the 21st century, both as valued family members who should be given more allowances in our society and greater concern for animal welfare. The petitions presented in this article provide a snapshot of what concerned the people in NSW from the earliest days of European settlement in NSW until today.

CASE STUDY ONE – THE FIRST RECORDED PETITION IN NSW

Like many practices inherited by newly established colonies, the right to petition was brought to NSW from Britain. Prior to the establishment of the NSW Legislative Council in 1823⁴ the earliest residents had to petition the United Kingdom (UK) House of Commons to ask for change or make complaints against the governor.⁵

The first petition in NSW, and therefore Australia as its first settlement, was recorded in the NSW Parliamentary Papers in 1829. The petition was in response to a bill introduced by the parliament to address cattle stealing in the colony. During the 19th century, theft was widespread with Governor Macquarie reporting two years into his administration that the 'practice of stealing bullocks, oxen and other cattle prevails to an alarming extent'.⁶ In the period 1819 to 1824, almost 83 per cent of cases relating to theft of livestock were for cattle, and in the month of November 1827 alone, 20

⁴ The first sitting took place on 25 August 1824.

⁵ Gareth Griffith, 'e-brief: Petitioning Parliament, NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, September 2010: p. 5. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/researchpapers/Documents/petitioning-parliament/Petitioning%20Parliament%20E%20Brief.pdf>>.

⁶ John Perkins and Jack Thompson, 'Cattle theft, primitive capital accumulation and pastoral expansion in early New South Wales, 1800–1850,' *Australian Historical Studies*, 29, 1998, p. 289.

people were put on trial for stealing cattle.⁷ While slaughtering or selling stolen cattle could relieve hunger, holding on to the animals was one way to build personal wealth in the Colony. In their article 'Cattle theft, primitive capital accumulation and pastoral expansion in early New South Wales, 1800-1850', Perkins and Thompson explain the value in possessing cattle in the land-rich but money-poor economy of colonial NSW. Acquiring cattle, particularly if stolen, served as an incentive to move beyond the settled areas and use the animals to settle on and claim land further into the interior.⁸ The animals also helped generate wealth for their owners via the demand for beef in the colony with Perkins and Thompson reporting farm workers were rationed between seven to ten pounds (3.17 to 4.5kg) of beef each per week.⁹ In addition to their meat, cattle provided the settlement with useful products such as their hide for leather, untreated skin and hair for use in ropes, whips and for mending, their fat (tallow) used for grease and an ingredient in soap and candles, the collagen from their skin, bones and horns making glue as well as their physical power to clear trees and plough land.¹⁰

A desire to own such valuable animals led to widespread theft in the colony and it was within this setting that the Regulation of Slaughtering Cattle Bill was introduced to address the issue.¹¹ The Bill aimed to control the butchery of cattle by requiring all slaughterhouses, excluding the killing of pigs and sheep, to obtain an annual license and provide notice of planned slaughters. Inspectors appointed by the Governor could visit the slaughterhouses and inspect slaughtered cattle or their skins to ensure compliance. Failure to hold a licence or produce evidence of the animals on inspection could result in fines or gaol.¹² This Bill prompted a resident of the time, Richard Brooks to write the first recorded petition made to a parliament in Australia. It was addressed to the governor and newly formed Legislative Council and spoke of the impact the Bill would have on him. Brooks declared:

⁷ Perkins and Thompson, *Cattle theft in early NSW*, p. 289.

⁸ Perkins and Thompson, *Cattle theft in early NSW*, p. 290.

⁹ Perkins and Thompson, *Cattle theft in early NSW*, p. 301.

¹⁰ Perkins and Thompson, *Cattle theft in early NSW*, p. 302.

¹¹ Ralph Darling, 'A Bill for regulating the slaughtering of cattle', First Legislative Council, 25 August 1829. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/fcdocs/FCDocuments/1829/00995.pdf>>.

¹² Darling, *Bill for regulating the slaughtering of cattle*, pp. 1-2.

To his Excellency the Governor, and the Legislative Council,

Having laid out a considerable sum of money, at the very extremity of the town adjoining Mr Dickson's steam engine, at the water-side, in the erection of a commodious and convenient slaughter house, I hope the above circumstances will allow my claim to be favourably considered by the Council assembled having taken the contract at a low rate, and any removals would be attended by a very serious loss.

I have the honour to remain your humble, obedient servant,

Henry Brook

Sydney, 7th September 1829 (Brooks, 1829)¹³

Although the petition is brief and cannot be fully understood on its own, it provides clues that when researched provide interesting insight into life and society in early Sydney town. Although we cannot be certain, research shows Henry Brooks may be, or is likely to be the son of, Richard Brooks (1765–1833) a British ship captain who transported convicts to NSW.¹⁴ Later becoming a free settler, Brooks was granted land by Governor Lachlan Macquarie at Cockle Bay where he kept cattle and set up a successful business supplying meat to the public, ships and the government store.¹⁵ The 1828 census shows a Richard Brooks as a landholder owning over two thousand cattle and a large number of sheep and horses.¹⁶ The neighbour referred to in his petition, John Dickson (1774 – 1843), was a significant early settler. He migrated to the colony in 1813 and brought the first steam engine, mentioned by Brooks to Australia.¹⁷

¹³ A copy of the original handwritten petition can be found at Parliament of New South Wales Website, 'Documents'. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/fcdocs/FCDocuments/1829/00993.pdf>>.

¹⁴ According to the Australian Dictionary of Biography Richard Brooks had a son named Henry. Vivienne Parsons, 'Brooks, Richard (1765–1833)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 1* (2006) Accessed at: <<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brooks-richard-1830>>.

¹⁵ Vivienne Parsons, *Brooks, Richard (1765–1833)*.

¹⁶ New South Wales Government, '1828 Census of New South Wales, November 1828,' New South Wales State Archives and Records, 1828, pp. 140-141. Accessed at: <<https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/magazine/1828-census>>.

¹⁷ G. P. Walsh, 'Dickson, John (1774–1843)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Accessed at: <<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dickson-john-1977/text2395>>.

This steam engine commenced in 1815 and powered a flour mill which helped provide bread for the colony.

Further investigation shows Dickson had been recommended by the Colonial Office as an 'excellent engineer and millwright' and was granted fifteen acres of land at Cockle Bay, along with a large portion of land in western Sydney.¹⁸

Brooks and Dickson's names reveal they were British and settled on land that had been claimed or granted to them. Brooks' reference to living on the extremity of Sydney Town highlights that while today Cockle Bay is part of the inner-city Darling Harbour waterfront entertainment area, during the 1820s it was considered the outskirts of the settlement. We know that the colony had both a steam engine and abattoir in operation and their location, as well as their contribution to early manufacturing and industry.

The petition also provides evidence of the diet of the Colony. As the Bill being objected to is concerned with cattle, it is clear that cows and bulls are being farmed in the Sydney area and local beef is being consumed.

Examination of the Bill itself provides enhances our understanding of life in early Sydney. Clause III of the Bill states people wishing to obtain a license for a slaughterhouse need to apply '... in Writing, to the Bench of Magistrates nearest to his, her, or their usual place of Residence'.¹⁹ The use of 'her' indicates that although females were greatly outnumbered by males in the colony at this time it was known, or considered socially acceptable, for them to own or be in charge of a slaughterhouse. Clause VI of the Bill states that '... nothing in this Act contained shall extend to prevent any Person or Persons from slaughtering Cattle for his or her Family, Servants, or Labourers...'²⁰ provides a picture of the households during this time with many having convicts, or freed convicts taking on paid work to serve them. Finally, the reference to '...no Slaughter-house or Place for slaughtering Cattle shall be licensed in the Town of

published first in hardcopy 1966, accessed online 9 November 2021 and 'Pier St Precinct - Archaeological Remains' Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority. Accessed at: <http://www.shfa.nsw.gov.au/sydney-About_us-Heritage_role-Heritage_and_Conservation_Register.htm&objectid=160>.

¹⁸ Walsh, *Dickson, John*.

¹⁹ Darling, *Bill for regulating the slaughtering of cattle*.

²⁰ Darling, *Bill for regulating the slaughtering of cattle*.

Sydney²¹ assists us today in understanding where the boundaries of the Town of Sydney were at various times via the locations of slaughterhouses.

Examining the petitions contents, the Bill and environment of the time reveals the issues in society at the time and how people saw themselves impacted. Cattle theft and the government's attempt to control this via regulating their slaughter was an issue in the earliest days of colonial NSW and late in the next century, it was human casualties that concerned some of the community in NSW.

CASE STUDY TWO – THE CLIMATE AND FEAR IN THE ARRIVAL OF AIDS IN THE 1980S

The arrival of the AIDS virus and its associated death sentence in the early 1980s brought fear to many across the world, including the NSW community. To understand the attitudes and response to its arrival, it is important to look at the social environment during the period of the emergence of AIDS.²²

As British colonies, all settlements within Australia inherited their anti-homosexual laws from the United Kingdom. The laws making homosexual acts illegal were maintained by the colonial governments. Following Federation in 1901, responsibility of its status fell to state governments who continued the practice of keeping homosexual activity illegal and subject to punishment.²³ During the late 1960s and 1970s lobby groups emerged seeking to decriminalise homosexuality. A march for gay rights in Australia took place in Sydney on the 24 June 1978 as part of a solidarity event with the San Francisco movement. The daytime march was followed by an evening march for those who felt being seen could put them at risk and impact on their employment. At the evening march, 53 people were arrested by police and two days later the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper published their names, addresses and occupations. Being identified lead to many participants losing their homes and jobs and

²¹ Darling, *Bill for regulating the slaughtering of cattle*, Clause XII.

²² While the HIV virus was discovered as the cause of AIDS in 1984, I will use the term AIDS in this writing as it was the commonly used name for both during this period.

²³ At various times, punishment for gay sexual activity in Australia ranged from a life sentence to the death penalty, including imprisonment for life in NSW until 1924.

suicides occurred.²⁴ In response to the arrests, several petitions were presented to the NSW Parliament by various Members²⁵ speaking out against the treatment of protesters and asking '... that the Legislative Assembly ensure that all charges arising from the arrest of homosexual demonstrators on the nights of June 24 and 26, 1978, be dropped unconditionally'.²⁶

While these petitions show support for the gay community and their right to protest without persecution, other petitions presented to the parliament expressed a less tolerant view. In 1981 the following petition signed by 404 citizens of NSW was received which opposed

... any changes in law which would legalise and/or encourage:

Legalisation and recognition of homosexual unions as a legal marriage;

Adoption of children by homosexual or lesbian partners;

Legalisation of acts of sodomy in private or public;...

The petition also requested that '... steps be taken to:

(1) Reject moves to amend the Crimes Act, 1900; to legalise sodomy;

(2) Establish a special department within the N.S.W. Health Commission to:

Develop methods of helping people to overcome or-deal with homosexual tendencies through counselling, psychological and medical assistance; and

²⁴ First Mardi Gras Inc., 'The First Mardi Gras'. Accessed at: <<https://www.78ers.org.au/what-happened-at-the-first-mardi-gras>>.

²⁵ See 'Homosexual Demonstrators' petitions presented to the Legislative Assembly by Knott and Peterson on 9 November, 21 November and 12 December 1978 and McGowan on 29 November 1978. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/hansard/pages/home.aspx?tab=Browse&s=1>>.

²⁶ Legislative Assembly, *Homosexual Demonstrators petitions*.

conduct a vigorous campaign to combat venereal disease amongst practising male homosexuals; and

(3) Prohibit any films, material or books in State schools which undermine the family and marriage by falsely presenting homosexual behaviour as a harmless, valid alternative life-style; and praying that the Legislative Council will take no measures that would legalise sodomy and so undermine marriage, child-care or the family which is the basic unit of our society.²⁷

This petition provides a first-hand example of the level of public homophobia that existed in the early 1980s. The request for government to 'treat' people shows a belief that a person's sexual orientation could be 'overcome' by counselling or medical treatment, along with the fear that any acceptance or legitimisation of their lifestyle was a threat to traditional marriage and family and how they felt society should be.

Although anti-discrimination protection was legally granted in the year following this petition, homosexual activity remained illegal in NSW until 1984. It was in this context, with people who were gay often being seen as 'other' that a new, mysterious illness arrived. This virus, which was viewed as a death sentence in its early days brought fear to much of the community and added fuel to the homophobia of the day.

The first official report of a new infection attacking the immune system in young healthy gay men appeared in June 1981²⁸ and was reported in the Australian gay newspaper *Sydney Star Observer* in July 1981 and six months later in the mainstream *Sydney Morning Herald*.²⁹ Australia's first identified case was presented by an American tourist at St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney in October 1982.³⁰

²⁷ Parliament of New South Wales, '*Homosexual Acts' petition*, Minutes and Proceedings of the Legislative Council, 2 December 1981, p. 98. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/hp/housepaper/8733/Min-19811202-Cor.pdf>>.

²⁸ The Albion Centre, 'A HIV/AIDS Timeline: Emphasising the Australian / New South Wales Perspective', 6th Edition, 2012, p. 6. Accessed at: <https://www.acon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/History_of_HIV_5th-Edition.pdf>.

²⁹ The Albion Centre, *HIV/AIDS Timeline*, pp. 6,7.

³⁰ The Albion Centre, *HIV/AIDS Timeline*, p. 8.

In the early days, all cases of the new virus appeared in healthy young males who were gay and it was named GRIS (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) with some media referring to the virus as the 'gay plague' and 'homosexual cancer'.³¹ The emergence of cases in intravenous drug users (regardless of sexuality) and prostitutes aligned this new disease to 'immoral behaviour' for many. When cases of AIDS being contracted through blood transfusions were seen in children and straight adults who were not injecting drug users, increasing fear struck the general community. In 1985, three-year-old Eve van Grafhorst, who had contracted AIDS via a blood transfusion, was banned from attending her local pre-school as it was feared she may infect other children. She and her family migrated to New Zealand to avoid the open discrimination shown towards her.³² The same year, Australian airlines ANSETT and Trans Australia Airlines (TAA) banned HIV positive people from flying with them.³³ The image of AIDS being a frightening death sentence with the potential to infect and kill anyone was furthered by a national television advertisement showing the Grim Reaper targeting men, women and children and warning '... if not stopped it could kill more Australians than World War Two'.³⁴

These examples reveal the growing fears within the community at a time scientists and doctors were working to understand the disease and its transmission. A combination of the limited knowledge of AIDS and how fast and wide it would spread, the gaunt images and deaths of people infected by the virus and the existing homophobic attitudes meant gay men were viewed by many as diseased and dangerous with the potential to infect and kill anyone.³⁵ Rather than being seen as victims who deserved sympathy, gay men were often viewed as deviant with the potential to inflict the virus on to

³¹ Jennifer Power, 'Movement, Knowledge, Emotion: Gay Activism and HIV/AIDS in Australia'. Canberra: ANU Press, 2011, p.31.

³² Simon Royal, 'Eve van Grafhorst was diagnosed with HIV and hounded out of Australia, but her legacy endures', *ABC News*, 18 November 2018. Accessed at: <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-18/remembering-eve-van-grafhorst-after-hiv-diagnosis/10491934>>.

³³ '2 Airlines Won't Carry AIDS Victims, Los Angeles *Times archive*, 23 July 1985. Accessed at: <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-07-23-mn-7381-story.html>>.

³⁴ Simon Reynolds, 'Grim Reaper (advertisement)', April 1987. Accessed at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U219eUIZ7Qo>>.

³⁵ Power, *Gay Activism and HIV/AIDS in Australia*, p. 31.

'normal' people.³⁶ These fears can be seen clearly in the following petition, one of many, presented to the NSW Parliament in 1985.

The Petition of citizens of New South Wales respectfully sheweth:

That because of the dramatic spread of the AIDS disease in New South Wales, with more than 50 000 AIDS male carriers in Sydney, and because the AIDS cases are doubling every three months:

Your Petitioners therefore humbly pray:

That the Parliament of New South Wales will take urgent steps to prevent the spread of the AIDS disease among homosexuals; will introduce urgent measures to prevent the spread of AIDS disease among homosexuals; will introduce urgent measures to prevent the spread of AIDS to the heterosexual community, especially through blood transfusions; will immediately close all AIDS disease centres, such as homosexual bath houses, brothels, and so on; will commence compulsory blood testing of the homosexuals in Sydney to locate and treat the AIDS carriers; will repeal the homosexual schedule of the Anti-Discrimination Act, 1983, and will repeal Mr Wran's private member's sodomy bill, known as the Crimes (Amendment) Act, 1984³⁷; and will institute a levy on all homosexual organizations, newspapers, clubs, bars, and so on, to pay for AIDS medical research and treatment.

Your Petitioners therefore humbly pray:

That your honourable House will protect our community from the AIDS epidemic, and will do all it can to promote the healthy heterosexual lifestyle, especially in our education system.

³⁶ Power, *Gay Activism and HIV/AIDS in Australia*, p. 44.

³⁷ The Act decriminalised homosexual acts between consenting males over the age of 18 in NSW.

*And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray*³⁸

This petition shows the fear around a new, little understood virus and the attitude towards the people they felt responsible for it in the 1980s. The references to homosexuals and promotion of a 'healthy heterosexual lifestyle' reveal an anxiety about the gay community who are viewed as 'other' and wielders of the disease. It is interesting to note that the stigma and blame being directed towards the gay community does not appear to be projected on to injecting drug users or any other demographic in any of the petitions relating to AIDS that were reviewed. The petitions in this article demonstrate social attitudes during a particular period and should be examined as part of a bigger picture of the views towards homosexuality and HIV/AIDS in NSW. Medical research and advances mean HIV is no longer a death sentence and the annual World AIDS day is openly supported by many public figures including NSW politicians from different parties who have spoken of their support and the work being done for people with the virus.³⁹ In another sign of change in social attitudes can be found is the most recent *Anti-Discrimination of New South Wales Annual Report*. It shows while 0.1% of enquiries received by them related to HIV/AIDS vilification, no complaints were made in 2020/21. Similarly, 0.1% of enquiries received during that year related to homosexual vilification with 0.4% of complaints made were related to sexuality-based discrimination.⁴⁰ Further evidence of community and social acceptance came at a federal level with the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey which showed the majority of Australian's supported legalising same-sex marriage which resulted in the *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017* (Cth) to allow this.

The petitions of 1981 and 1985 are examples of fears that existed during this time and how their authors and signatories believed society 'should' be. By following the story of HIV/AIDS from its early days until today we see social shifts in attitudes and growing

³⁸ Parliament of New South Wales, '*Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*' petition, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 13 November 1985, pp. 9519-9520, Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/hansard/pages/home.aspx?tab=Browse&s=1>>.

³⁹ Such as Independent Alex Greenwich MP praising the Positive Life NSW organisation on 21 November 2013 and the Trevor Khan MLC speaking on the ACON Honour Awards on 18 September 2014, recorded in Parliament of New South Wales, *Parliamentary Debates*, 21 November 2013. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/hansard/pages/home.aspx?tab=Browse&s=1#>>.

⁴⁰ Anti- Discrimination New South Wales, *Annual Report 2020-21*, NSW, 2021, pp. 37-38.

acceptance. The increase in empathy and respect for a community that had been marginalised is also evident today in society's attachment to animals, particularly pets, and in concerns for animal welfare.

CASE STUDY THREE – THE ROLE OF ANIMALS

Animals, both domestic and wild, are growing in importance to our society today. On the 12 October 2021, the following two petitions were presented to the NSW Legislative Assembly:

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly,

It is hard to believe that in 2021 a property owner can refuse a tenant to have a pet reside at a rental property for no good reason.

The laws recently changed in Victoria to allow pets in any rental property and the owner had the right to request a pet 'bond' should any damage occur. Pets are part of the family, can be mental health assistance animals, and should be allowed to live anywhere without prejudice.

*Please change the law to reflect the fabric of a modern family and allow pets in rental properties.*⁴¹

And

To the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly,

Sydney Ferries currently allow dogs on ferries when the dog is contained within a box, crate, basket etc. Such a rule is both onerous and unnecessary. It acts as a deterrent to the use of an essential service. It doesn't meet community expectations of Sydney being a dog friendly city.

⁴¹ Parliament of New South Wales, 'Mr Alex Greenwich—from certain citizens requesting the Legislative Assembly change the law so property owners cannot refuse pets in a rental property in New South Wales'. *Tabled Papers*, Legislative Assembly, 12 October 2021. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/la/petitions/Pages/taled-paper-details.aspx?pk=80250>>.

This petition calls for a relaxation of the rules and Sydney Ferries to take a more dog friendly approach to the provision of services.

This petition proposes that the existing 'box' rule be replaced with a rule that allowing dogs on ferries when wearing a dog collar and dog lead and traveling within an area of the ferry to be designated by the vessels captain.⁴²

These two requests emphasise the role and value of pets in our lives today. The desire for pets to be accepted as a norm for rental properties and a more dog- friendly approach on public transport shows NSW is part of the global trend of viewing pets as part of the family.

The view of pets as a family member in today's society, rather than property or working animals is supported via the increasing money spent on pets with gifts being marketed and purchased. Major retail businesses such as Westfield and David Jones offer pet photos with Santa alongside those offered to children, Kmart stores have multiple aisles dedicated to pet products and novelty clothing, hotels promote pet stays, the major Australian insurance companies now offer pet insurance and recent aviation rules allow for airlines to choose to carry animals alongside their owners in aircraft cabins.

The increasing demand for pets, particularly the highly priced 'designer' breeds, has led to petitions not only seeking increased rights for pets and their owners but also concerns on how people are sourcing and obtaining their pets. A petition that is frequently presented to the NSW Legislative Assembly calls for a ban on selling pets in pet shops. It reads

Most puppies and kittens sold in pet shops are bred in 'mills' where dogs and cats are kept in sub-standard conditions and continually bred until they die. Cute puppies and kittens displayed in pet shops cause impulse purchases of pets. Thousands of these animals are dumped each year when people realise the time, cost and responsibility of caring for a pet. In New South Wales alone over 50,000 unwanted cats and dogs are destroyed every year in pounds and shelters.

⁴² Parliament of New South Wales, 'Petition of more than 500 signatures—Ms Felicity Wilson—from certain citizens requesting the Legislative Assembly allow dogs on lead be permitted on Sydney ferries', Legislative Assembly, *Tabled Papers*, 12 October 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/la/petitions/Pages/taled-paper-details.aspx?pk=80334>.

The undersigned petitioners therefore request a ban on the sale of pets from pet retail outlets; sales and advertising restricted to responsible breeders and those re-homing unwanted pets; and detailed information in responsible ownership provided when pets are sold, including an animal's expected lifespan, growth, dietary and exercise needs and expected costs of ownership.⁴³

This petition shows concern for animal welfare and the impacts of impulse buying and overbreeding for profit. Public concerns about animal breeding practices have led to two NSW parliamentary committee inquiries with both receiving a high level of submissions and public interest demonstrating the passion held by many on this topic.⁴⁴ There is also an increase in the number of committee inquiries looking into animal welfare. Active committees and inquiries include the Select Committee on Animal Cruelty Laws in NSW, Greyhound Welfare and Integrity Commission, Use of primates and other animals in medical research in NSW, Animal Welfare policy in NSW and Use of Battery Cages for Hens in the Egg Production Industry.⁴⁵ The establishment of these inquiries show animal welfare is an issue being considered by politicians in NSW.

While animal welfare does not typically feature in election campaigning by the major parties, it was important to enough to people to elect two members of the Animal Justice Party, whose objective is to address animal welfare issues into the NSW Legislative Council. The Greens NSW, with six seats in the NSW Parliament hold an animal welfare policy supporting the rights and wellbeing of animals⁴⁶ and Independent Member for Sydney Alex Greenwich openly advocates for animals and was part of establishing the NSW Parliamentary Friends of Animals.⁴⁷ And while this

⁴³ Parliament of New South Wales, 'Petition calling for animals not to be sold in pet shops', presented by Mr Alex Greenwich MP, 4 June 2019. Accessed at:

<<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/75947/Petition%20under%20500%20signatures%20-%20opposing%20pet%20shop%20animal%20sales.pdf>>.

⁴⁴ Parliament of New South Wales, Joint Select Committee on Companion Animal Breeding Practices in New South Wales, August 2015 and Select Committee on Puppy Farming in New South Wales, 2022.

⁴⁵ Parliament of New South Wales, *Committee Inquiries*, Website, 2022, Accessed at <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/pages/inquiries.aspx>>.

⁴⁶ The Greens New South Wales, 'Animal Welfare'. Accessed at: <<https://greens.org.au/nsw/policies/animal-welfare>> .

⁴⁷ Alex Greenwich, 'Friends of Animals', 29 June 2020. Accessed at <https://www.alexgreenwich.com/friends_of_animals>.

illustrates how the community want their representatives to address animal welfare in Parliament it should be noted that the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party were elected to represent five seats.

These recent petitions will show future readers and researchers the evolving view of pets as valued family members who should have easier access to be part of our lifestyles and growing attention to their welfare were important issues to the NSW population in the early 21st Century.

THE VALUE OF PETITIONS TODAY

While the lack of petitions being used as a resource by academia is covered in other writings⁴⁸ their value in providing material and evidence not found elsewhere should be considered. Petitions give a first-hand account from people living at a particular period of time and how they view issues taking place and how they see it impacting on them. Petitions provide a rare opportunity to hear from those who are not typically in control of the narrative and therefore offer a different source and perspective. While it can be easily found online today, it is rare to have such an abundance of primary viewpoints and evidence from previous times that is offered in petitions.

It is important to keep in mind that the arguments being made in a petitioner's request are likely to be one sided to present the case as most favourable to themselves. Readers should consider what could be missing in the story and where it could be found, or review petitions with an opposing argument for balance.

History is opening up to hearing and considering different viewpoints to allow for a more shared history. Accessing petitions as a source of social history allows us to hear a viewpoint to either confirm or challenge assumptions of the time. They provide an alternative source to textbooks or the traditional narrative and we can be enriched by hearing from those who did not leave many records such as migrants who wanted to assimilate quickly.

⁴⁸ See Niamh Corbett, 'Parliamentary petitions: an untapped library resource'. *The Australian Library Journal*, 60(3), 2011, pp. 218-230; Jessie Kratz, 'Recovering the People's Voice: Unpublished Petitions and Their Impact on Publications, Legislation and History'. *Documents to the People*, 36 (1), 2008, pp.31-37.

Petitions can also be valuable today with the growing interest in family genealogy. People researching their ancestor's story can have their understanding of a particular region or community, the values and environment, migration patterns and existing prejudices enhanced by access petitions. Similarly, as post-European settlement Australia starts celebrating anniversaries (e.g. the Sydney Harbour Bridge or establishment of a regional town) petitions can be used with other historical documents to contribute to that story and reveal information not found in other resources.

CONCLUSION

As petitions are typically written in response to the issues taking place at the time, they are a valuable primary tool for understanding the social history of the people and places in NSW. The very first petition was the voice of an early settler who revealed the Sydney town boundaries, location of his abattoir and neighbour's steam engine and the early industry and beef being a food source in the Colony at this time. Examination of the Bill Brook was making his case against showed cattle stealing was a big enough issue in the Colony for the new government to address it.

Together these documents build a story of early NSW. The petitions of the late 1970s and 1980s demonstrate social history at a point in time where support for the rights of homosexual people existed but was greatly outnumbered by those speaking out against giving rights. However as seen in this example, if we limited ourselves to examining just one event or period of time, we fail to see a bigger, more complete picture. The final case studies in this article show the value of animals in our society today. Residents of NSW are asking for an easing up or removal of restrictions placed on renting and travelling with pets, reflecting the increasing role of pets as valued family members. Petitioning the parliament on animals extends to their welfare, as demonstrated in the call to stop the selling of animals in pet shops. Increasing concern for animal wellbeing has been reflected politically in NSW with the election of politicians speaking for animals and the establishment of various committee inquiries to look at concerns on their treatment. While there are increasing ways for NSW citizens to voice their complaints such as ICAC, Fair Trading NSW and the Health Care Complaints Commission and the large audience available via the explosion of social media, the tradition of citizens petitioning the powerful continues.

Next time you are asked to sign a petition, consider it adding your voice to speak on an issue that future generations and historians can look back on to see what was important to you.