

Switzerland is a direct democracy. Anyone can draw up a petition and collect signatures. If there are enough, a referendum will be held, giving people the opportunity to vote on the proposition. At times, this has led to results which some might consider odd, and not necessarily "progressive".

British democracy leaves decisions to elected representatives and their permanent advisers in the Civil Service. The view is that governments are concerned with matters of such a specialist and technical nature that they cannot be dealt with by the man in the street. Referendums are permitted by the UK parliament but they are not binding and the only one put to the entire country was about EU membership, in 1975.

Petitions are another means by which people can express their view outside the usual democratic process. Usually, they are about local matters such as pedestrian crossings and the signatures are collected on sheets of paper, but petitions have long been sent to the Prime Minister by post or delivered to the door of the Prime Minister's house at 10 Downing Street in person. An innovation in this age of the Internet is that it is now possible to both create and sign petitions on [the Prime Minister's website](#), giving people the opportunity to reach a potentially wider audience and to deliver their petition directly to Downing Street. The format of the petition is a short text preceded by "We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to...", followed by an explanatory statement of "details", the whole limited to 1000 characters. If the petition attracts more than 500 signatures, those who signed it are sent a response from the Government by email.

My experience of signing one was that it produced a defensive response explaining why the government's existing policy was the best one possible. Nevertheless, it was not a wasted effort. A couple of years later, there was a reversal, and the government adopted the proposals advocated in the petition.

But the subject of that particular petition was of little political import. Whether the petition process ever comes to gain real influence remains to be seen. British government policy evolves very slowly, mostly within a small circle, meeting in informal social situations. Many in this circle are influential and personally known to each other, often since their days at school or university.

What has this to do with land value taxation? What if a petition advocating land value taxation were placed on the No 10 website? It might run somewhat as follows

*We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to... "replace taxes on earnings, goods and services by a charge on the unearned rental value of land. This is to raise public revenue in accordance with natural justice; to reduce inequality and harm to the economy; and to prevent booms and busts."*

*Details "Taxes are a burden on working people. They are complicated, add to the cost of everything, cripple enterprise; encourage tax avoidance; distort markets; keep people poor; and make them dependent on benefits."*

*"Governments should not impose harmful taxes or borrow to pay for current expenses.*

*"There is an ample source of public revenue: the rental value of land, its location value. It is created and sustained by the presence and activities of the community. It must be captured for society so that taxes on work, and government borrowing, can be phased out. Government should levy instead a charge on the rental value of land, based on up-to-date valuations."*

Would it even receive the 500 signatures needed for a reply? Would the number be so small as to actually damage the credibility of the land value tax movement? What precisely would it, or could it, achieve?

Realistically, the best outcome would be useful publicity, but then perhaps the text should be more strident and claim more. How much more? How about saying "slash taxes" or "Abolish Income Tax and VAT"? "Slash taxes" has a vulgar ring to it. To petition for tax abolition would invite dismissal as a lunatic fringe. One of our core arguments, dating back to the French Physiocrats, that all taxes are ultimately at the expense of land value, cannot be explained in a couple of hundred words. If the point is not made, then one of the old arguments pops up: that LVT cannot raise sufficient revenue. Yet we need to say something radical in order to attract the attention of the press.

With a clear idea of what the purpose of a petition really was, it should be possible to devise a form of words to wring the most out of the opportunity the No10 website presents.