
Parliament and the Press Gallery

by Robert Vaive

The press gallery is an essential part of the democratic system. It is instrumental in helping Parliament perform its primary function in making government accountable for its actions. The public observes events through the eyes of the collective reporters who make up the press gallery. When Parliament is not adequately covered, the democratic process suffers. This article looks at a few of the issues surrounding the operation of the press gallery.

Half a century before Confederation the legislatures of British North America provided space for journalists covering the proceedings. In fact press reports were the best official reports available until Hansard was introduced in the mid-1870s. This was an era of partisan press with journalists having close ties with politicians they supported. Press gallery members were not only observers of politics, they were very active participants. This changed with the establishment of the Canadian Press in 1917. It served a number of newspapers with different political outlooks and journalism gradually became distinct from the partisan political process.

Another milestone was the introduction of television in the House which introduced a new dimension in the relationship between the press gallery and Parliament. Electronic Hansard enables the public to bypass the filtering and sometimes excesses of the print reporters. TV in the House, therefore, created a greater public awareness and interest in Parliament, but also enhanced the importance of the press gallery as interpreters rather than reporters of what was taking place.

The press gallery is technically under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons. By tradition it is forbidden to take notes from any of the parliamentary galleries (lest the proceedings be reported to the

Monarch). In theory the press gallery is not exempt from this prohibition but since it is situated directly above and behind the Speaker's chair, it was "out of sight, out of mind" as far as note-taking was concerned.

In fact, the Speaker delegates to the gallery self-governing functions including the important responsibility of accreditation of its members. The gallery's constitution outlines how it is to be governed, its membership and accreditation criteria, and its self-disciplinary measures for unethical or unbecoming conduct. Memberships vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In British Columbia the membership is about 50, in Ottawa it is closer to 100.

Until the late 1950s, in Ottawa at least, broadcast journalists were not allowed in the press gallery. It was thought that print journalists monopolized radio and TV and they moonlighted, as well, to earn extra income as panellists on radio and TV, so they kept an exclusive control in that respect. But in 1959, broadcast journalists were allowed in the press gallery.

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Parliament has always been loathe to discipline the press gallery for its actions. There was a case in British Columbia in 1952 when the House defeated a motion to call an editor before the bar of the House because he had written a questionable editorial.

Members of the press gallery benefit from numerous advantages including free office space in the Parliament buildings in most jurisdictions. In many jurisdictions, the gallery enjoys free stationary, free photocopying, free fax machines, free government publications, free parking, access to the parliamentary dining room. They enjoy other special facilities that enable them to do their job such as facilities for holding news conferences, lock-ups where they may examine the budget or other important documents prior to their tabling in Parliament.

The press gallery has evolved over the years from faithful verbatim note-taking to reporting on key issues. Members have also come to focus more and more on question period. They seem to feel it is the blood and guts of their job. Virtually all of their stories grow out of question period. It provides essential elements of the news because of its immediacy, brevity, and conflict between identifiable individuals as well as its potential significance for future reference. Critics say that such emphasis on question period coverage provides little in-depth argument and very little long-term perspective.

The press gallery also tends to focus on government activity although there is clear competition between government and opposition parties to get press gallery attention. As government continues to grow in size and complexity, the press gallery will spend more time covering various ministries. Press gallery concentration on government has some consequences for the House, i.e. a perceived disproportion of power between executive and legislative. It is also perceived reinforcement of a notion of executive dominance over the parliamentary system. This may not be true, but the perception is there nevertheless. If the press gallery has turned away from the House it may be partly the fault of the House itself for not implementing reforms to enhance the profile of Members and of the House.

Press scrums have become common place in Canadian legislatures. They usually occur right after the question period. In British Columbia scrums tend to take place in the Speaker's corridor immediately behind the chamber, thereby obstructing passageways. They can be disruptive to the general workings of the Assembly.

Politicians and the press gallery

Members of Parliament and Members of the Press Gallery form an uneasy but durable alliance. Politicians want ink or air time and reporters want a story, a quote or a film clip. The press gallery often has been instrumental in making or breaking political careers. Former Prime Minister Joe Clark, for example, initially received a very negative image due to the press. Another former Prime Minister, John Turner generally benefitted from a very positive image from the press.

There may be times when conflict characterizes the relationship between the press gallery and Parliament. "When the press adopts the US idea that they are adversaries of government — that is, opponents or even enemies - they are aligning themselves with one side of the debate; the opposition. Instead of being reporters, they become critics seeking to discredit the government. That is not to say reporters have no investigative function. It is their business to find out as much as they can about the inner workings of government and indeed of the opposition parties. But they need to do so with responsibility and restraint, and not with a missionary zeal to throw the rascals out."¹

Mackenzie King once described the press gallery as an adjunct of Parliament itself.

Some members of the Press Gallery develop too close relationships with politicians. Standards vary in different jurisdictions but a misunderstanding of what is acceptable can be disastrous for both journalist and politician. For example in 1991 a member of the British Columbia press gallery was advising a Minister on speeches and on other media-related matters. Conversations were leaked and the case was widely publicized with the help of opposition Members. The discomfort of the press gallery in dealing with the matter was quite obvious. The reporter withdrew from the press gallery and the Minister resigned.

Press comments indicated that the reporter had crossed the line, but there was no articulation of what that line should actually be. In the long run, it is unlikely that there will ever be a code of conduct for members of the press gallery to guide their relationships and discipline.

Two recent cases in Westminster demonstrate the same point. One involves the editor of the *Guardian* newspaper arranging to have a Minister's hotel bill sent to his office, though he sent the request on House of Commons letterhead and pretended to be asking on behalf of the Minister. With respect to this case, there has been criticism both in the press and during debate on the motion to refer the matter to the Privileges Committee.

Another case occurred in July 1994. The *Sunday Times* lured two MPs into accepting an offer of \$2,000 to ask a parliamentary question; a clear case of cash for questions. The matter was referred to the British House of Commons Committee on Privileges in October 1994.² Such incidents raise the question of what disciplinary powers parliamentarians should wield vis-à-vis the press. Is the power to discipline the press completely passe? Is the press gallery too powerful?

Governments also have not been above abusing and exploiting the members of the press gallery. They can and often do leak proposed policy changes to obtain public reaction. It is manipulation since the press has no choice but to play in government's hand in polling public reaction. Another government trick is to bypass critical press gallery reporters and communicate directly with local reporters. There is a recent example in 1986. The federal Conservative government implemented a dial-a-Minister scheme, whereby regional media outlets could call a Minister directly rather than rely on national

reports in Ottawa. This has the effect, of course, of bringing politics closer to the people, but also may detract from the importance of Parliament.

Notes

1. Anthony Westhall, *The Pundits*, p. 160.
2. On April 20, 1995, the House accepted the findings of its Committee of Privileges, reprimanded the two Members and suspended them for ten and twenty days respectively.