



In Defence Of The Press Gallery

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This article from the [May 2013 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by Chief Opinion Editor of 'The Australian' and author of 'The Lucky Culture', Nick Cater.

In their article *Why the press gallery failed us and why they will again* in the December edition of the IPA Review, John Roskam and James Paterson lay serious charges of professional misconduct and political skulduggery against some of Australia's most senior journalists. They allege that reporters in the Canberra press gallery conspired (there is no other word) to suppress damaging information about a prime minister, and that they did so out of base political motives. They write: 'While Kevin Rudd was prime minister journalists decided not to write about his rude and vindictive treatment of his colleagues. Journalists decided not to write about his disorganised and haphazard administrative style. And journalists decided not to write about the fact that Rudd was widely hated by Labor MPs.'

There are no exemptions. The motive? 'Members of the Canberra press gallery chose not to write about 'the biggest story in Canberra' because it didn't suit their purposes.' Up to a point, Lord



Copper.

They fail to mention, for instance, *The Sunday Telegraph's* report on Kevin Rudd's drunken visit to a New York gentleman's club, a story run in the face of threats or retaliation from Rudd and his staff. They mention Rudd's tantrum over a hair dryer but give the story little weight; yet the journalist and editors published this story, with its vivid insight into Rudd's character, in the face of strong opposition from the highest political office in the land. The April 2009 story of how Rudd reduced a 23-year-old RAAF stewardess to tears was dismissed as tabloid tittle-tattle at the time; Roskam and Paterson seem equally unimpressed.

Perhaps the most grievous omission, however, is John Lyons's story, Inner Circle, (*The Weekend Australian*, 21 June, 2008), published seven months into Rudd's term of government. On page one, and in a 3000-word article inside the newspaper, Lyons delivered a forensic account of life inside the madhouse that was the then prime minister's office. He described how the head of the Air Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, and the then secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Michael L'Estrange, had been kept waiting for several hours outside the office of 'Captain Chaos'. His exhausted staff faced impossible demands and major decisions were not being made.

The story had serious consequences. Thanks to Wikileaks, we know that former United States ambassador Robert McCallum cabled Washington in November 2009 to report Rudd's 'control freak' tendencies, citing persistent criticism from 'senior civil servants, journalists, and parliamentarians'. At home, Lyons's story was one of the stories that led to the most serious breakdown in the relationship between a newspaper and a prime minister for more than 30 years. *The Australian*, and indeed the entire News Limited group, was accused by senior government ministers of trying to force 'regime change.' There were accusations of mendaciousness, bias, the pursuit of an ideological agenda and the use of editorial coverage to further the company's business interests. Complaints were lodged at the highest level of the company, and the grudge led later to the establishment of the Finklestein Inquiry into the control of the press.

In hindsight, the complaints of bias are ludicrous; the reporting was accurate and the commentary measured, yet none of it is acknowledged in the article, which claims the true story did not emerge until after Rudd was removed as leader. To do so they rely on the views of James Button and his book, *Speechless; A year in my father's business*.

The Australian went on to needle the government further with its persistent campaign against excessive and wasteful spending on home insulation and school building. As with the Lyons story, *The Australian's* Canberra bureau contributed to these stories in ways not necessarily recognised in bylines. The gathering and presentation of news is a collegiate exercise; it is a mistake to consider Canberra gallery journalists as a breed apart answerable to nobody but themselves.

To portray all Canberra gallery journalists as one-eyed ideologues ignores the calibre of journalists based in the parliamentary gallery. Overwhelmingly they are professional, hardworking reporters, competing fiercely against one another to break stories and for the most part try their best to leave their personal prejudices at home and perform their job without fear or favour. It is

one of the toughest training grounds in journalism; punishment for errors, even minor ones, is swift and harsh. Mistakes are seized on by competitors and politicians alike; reputations take years to build, but just hours to destroy.

Peer pressure can work in less helpful ways; the fear of getting things wrong can encourage timidity; strong journalists require grit and the unqualified backing of their editors. Naturally, close proximity to other journalists, fosters a strong shared culture. When former ABC chairman Maurice Newman criticised the 'groupthink' in the national broadcaster he came close to describing the shared world view which any community naturally adopts. Sociologists call it 'collective consciousness' and its effects can be insidious. A former senior executive at News Limited used to regularly suggest moving his Canberra journalists to Queanbeyan since it would both save the company money and get them away from the Parliament House bubble. He was only half joking.

Yet these biases are not hidden; they are obvious to anyone who understands human behaviour or the self-selecting cohort of graduates that makes political journalism their chosen career. They are not, by and large, practical people; few have science, engineering or business degrees, and too few these days have avoided going to university. This is a fact of life, and the best check against it is commercial competition; newspapers that drift too far from the centre ground are quickly brought into line by their readers. It is no accident that the state-funded ABC and the Fairfax metropolitan titles, cushioned until recently by their classified advertising base, are often criticised for their elitist agendas.

Roskam and Paterson are on much firmer ground in drawing attention to the proliferation of commentary in modern journalism at the expense of empirical reporting. Clearly labelled comment and analysis has an important place in journalism; it can illuminate and inform when balanced with objective reporting. The driving force of journalism, however, is the news imperative; the obligation to pass on information not widely held without fear or favour.

The first and only obligation of any reporter is to present the truth based on verifiable evidence. The journalists of influence in the gallery are those who understand that facts speak more loudly than opinions. Despite recent cutbacks, the reservoir of reporting skills in the Canberra Gallery is deep; it is the responsibility of editors to ensure it is tapped.

It was not a devastating column by Carl Bernstein, or a penetrating Tweet from Bob Woodward that brought down a president, but the expenditure of shoe leather and turning of telephone dials in the patient gathering of facts. The Canberra Gallery does far more solid reporting and breaks far more vital stories than its critics from either Left or Right, like to acknowledge.