Why the press gallery failed us, and why they will again

John Roskam and **James Paterson** argue we can no longer rely on the media to hold governments to account.

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One of the most revealing stories in modern Australian politics comes from James Button—a speechwriter for Kevin Rudd for a short time in 2009.

Button's recent and fascinating book, *Speechless: A year in my father's business*, details the now familiar story of chaos and confusion under Rudd's prime ministership. Cabinet deliberations were routinely stalled and abandoned. Bureaucrats waited to submit briefings until he went overseas and his deputy, Julia Gillard, could be trusted to make decisions. Advisers flew across the world for in-flight meetings that never eventuated. 'Around Canberra,' Button writes, 'it was widely said that Rudd's leadership style was dysfunctional.'

Nothing demonstrates the failure of Australia's journalists to tell the public the real story than these two words: 'around Canberra'. The Canberra press gallery, comfortable in their wing of parliament house, knew Kevin Rudd was mad. They knew his government was wildly spinning out of control. They traded stories among themselves; they speculated how long Rudd could keep it from falling apart.

But they didn't tell us. 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.

Button was a speech writer way back in 2009. Since then, the problems have only become worse. We face a perfect storm. First: many journalists have abandoned their traditional notions of objectivity. Second: governments and bureaucracies have built up vast armies of communications professionals, whose job is to drip feed good news stories and 'manage' the way the press covers its failures. These changes have been a long time coming. Thirdly: the Australian media has finally been hit by a long-running world-wide phenomenon: the breakdown of the news industry business model.

In other words, we have fewer journalists, those journalists have stronger and more explicit political opinions, and they face off against more professional media managers than ever before.

Journalist Chris Kenny recently attempted to explain why so many of Australia's political journalists refused to cover the story of Julia Gillard's dealings with the Australian Workers Union. What he said also applies to the coverage of Kevin Rudd's time as prime minister.

> 'The foundation of journalism is curiosity, so it is confounding to see journalists display deliberate and selective incuriosity. Paid to be stickybeaks, journalists are expected to gather information and share it with people. The entire disposition of their craft is towards transparency, inquiry and revelation. Too much information is never enough. Their primary function is as simple as it is challenging - to reveal the truth. Journalism is never so valuable, nor so testing, as when it reveals unpalatable truths. Shedding light on information others would prefer hidden, or revealing facts that make powerful figures uncomfortable, is arduous and often thankless. Yet it is the true essence of the best reportage; uninterested in consequences, just focused on pursuing the truth.'

Kevin Rudd's behaviour had real consequences. Because he had no faith in his ministers, Rudd encouraged his personal staff to make policy decisions without input from ministers and their departments. That was how the tragedy of Labor's 'pink-batts' came about. One of the reasons the National Broadband Network, the largest infrastructure project in the country's history, didn't have a cost-benefit analysis applied to it was because the policy didn't go through any sort of regular cabinet process. It was conceived only as an 'announceable'—a media stunt for the political benefit of the government.

When Rudd was deposed in June 2010 it came as a complete shock to voters. The public were mystified that someone who had led the ALP to victory against John Howard in December 2007 could be dumped the way he was. At the time Labor MPs stayed disciplined and no-one gave an explanation for what had happened. It was only when Rudd attempted a comeback earlier this year that the truth finally emerged.

This time they spoke out. Labor backbencher Steve Gibbons called Rudd a 'psychopath'. Gibbons said that Rudd had a 'chaotic and deeply offensive style of leadership'. Wayne Swan said that as PM Rudd had suffered from 'dysfunctional decision making and a deeply demeaning attitude towards other people including our caucus colleagues'. (This of course raises the question of why Swan tolerated such behaviour from Rudd as his treasurer.)

The story of chaos and confusion under Kevin Rudd:

Speechless: A year in my father's business

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In the end it wasn't the government that fell apart, it was Rudd's leadership, because of the things that Button describes. As Button makes clear what was happening was no secret. Public servants do one thing well and another thing often: they watch their ministers obsessively, and then they talk about their minister incessantly. There's no way Rudd could act the way he did without it getting out. And it did get out and it was known widely in Canberra, but it was just that the media didn't report it. While Rudd was in office one or two stories about his tantrums did appear, but they were reported as isolated incidents, not as a consistent pattern of behaviour.

In April 2009 a story did appear about Kevin Rudd yelling at a 23-year-old RAAF flight attendant who served him the wrong meal on a flight between Papua New Guinea and Australia. Rudd subsequently apologised to the flight attendant.

The opposition's Julie Bishop said 'this kind of bullying that reduced her to tears and ended up in an incident being filed… would not be accepted in any workplace across Australia.' In the light of what he was to say a year later, Wayne Swan's defence of Rudd is ironic. 'Everything that the Opposition does at the moment is completely over the top, hyper-exaggerated and really irresponsible.' The reality is of course that Rudd's treatment of the flight attendant is exactly why Swan said Rudd was unsuited to be prime minister. At the time then Coalition senator Nick Minchin talked about what the media wanted to ignore. 'Those of us who work and live in Parliament House have known for years there's two sides to Kevin Rudd, and that behind closed doors he's prone to temper tantrums and this sort of belittling and very bad behaviour with his own staff.' What Minchin said is exactly what any Labor MP could have said about Rudd—and subsequently did.

Button writes that it was only after Rudd was on the backbench that the details of his behaviour emerged.

> 'But this story [of Rudd's dysfunction and rudeness] did not hit the papers until much later, after Rudd had gone. It was strange to me, a former journalist. Were the media so out of touch they couldn't spot the biggest story in Canberra, how the whole functioning and fate of the government seemed to hinge on the psychology of one man? In hindsight, I think it would have been better if this story had come to light. It might have forced others to force Rudd to change before it was too late. On the other side now, I saw how my old profession was both all-powerful and curiously irrelevant.'

The story of Rudd's prime ministership didn't hit the papers because of anything the media did. It was Rudd's colleagues—who publicly campaigned against him by revealing the details of his personal behaviour when he challenged Julia Gillard for the Labor leadership—who broke the story.

According to Button, the explanation of the media's failure to report what was common knowledge in Canberra about Rudd was that media budgets were being tightened at the same time as the government was spending ever greater amounts of money to influence the media and public opinion. 'The government ran a media machine, better staffed than most media outlets, which bombarded the press with daily announceables.'

The explanation that it was because of budget cuts that the Canberra press gallery didn't tell the nation about the reality of Kevin Rudd's prime ministership doesn't give the media enough credit. The members of the press gallery in Parliament House are not so dumb that they missed, in Button's words, 'the biggest story in Canberra.' Members of the press gallery simply chose not to write about 'the biggest story in Canberra' because it didn't suit their purposes. Journalists were too busy cheering for the apology, action on climate change, and Kevin Rudd saving Australia from the global financial crisis.

Many journalists and news outlets now barrack for one side or the other. Long gone are the days when the vast majority of journalists attempted a degree of objectivity in their reporting of politics. Of course journalists have opinions, and they've always had opinions. But never before have personal opinions and partisan prejudices been so obvious. Nor have those prejudices been so unanimous as they are today, particularly when it comes to issues like climate change. The personal prejudices of journalists are revealed in any number of ways, but particularly by their decisions on what to write about and what not to write about.

No political journalist better highlights this tendency than the ABC's Fran Kelly. Kelly is perhaps one of the most revered journalists in Australia, at least among other journalists. That respect brings influence: her *Breakfast* show on Radio National sets the tone for the day ahead. *Breakfast* is perfectly timed for print journalists on their way to work. In a recent profile for the *Crikey* website, *The Power Index*, her journalist listeners gushed with praise.

'Fran is like the Madonna of the journalism world. You don't even need to say her surname. It's just Fran,' said ABC colleague Sally Neighbour. Fairfax columnist Ross Gittins says her radio program is 'unmissable for serious followers of politics'. *Crikey* described her regular segment with *The Age*'s political editor Michelle Grattan as 'appointment listening for the political class.'

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Kelly is also a regular panellist on *Insiders*, the ABC's flagship program for discussing conventional political wisdom. It was on the *Insiders* couch that Kelly made an unintentionally revealing comment and exposed what she really believed. Appearing on the program on June last year, Kelly expressed her frustration at the delays in passing the carbon tax.

'Bring on the certainty I say, get the thing voted in', she said, adding 'I'm firmly of the view that a price on carbon is the way forward. The Shergold Report convinced me that that's the most effective way for this country to prepare for a low carbon economy. We have to get into this.'

Kelly is entitled to her view. But such open barracking for a controversial policy by a journalist is an unwise move, particularly one whose salary is funded by taxpayers and who should be expected to remain impartial.

Yet it was hardly surprising. You don't have to listen to many of Kelly's interviews to guess her political leanings. *Crikey* describes her background prior to becoming a journalist: 'Kelly…was involved in the feminist movement and marched in anti-nuclear, environmental and Aboriginal rights rallies in her youth.' Indeed, in March this year while being interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* for a profile, she admitted 'what I am, really am, is an activist'.

Ironically, in a previous interview with *Crikey*, Kelly accused *The Australian* newspaper of being 'completely skewed on issues like climate change and the NBN'.

But one journalist's biases on its own don't prove the press gallery is flawed. But that Kelly continues to hold such a prominent post at the ABC, and the obvious admiration of her colleagues, following her admissions speaks volumes about the culture of journalism in Australia.

Sadly, there's no reason to think it will improve. Alongside this trend of journalists as advocates is an ever-increasing army of media management on the government payroll. Government ministers and members of parliament continue to retain numerous media advisers, as they have done for many years. Governments at every level and of every political stripe continue to finance elaborate advertising campaigns to support their policies, with barely concealed party-political benefit. The Gillard government's shameless 'Household Assistance Package' campaign—introduced to compensate for the carbon tax, but which never mentions it—is just the latest in a long history of misusing taxpayers' money.

Media advisers employed by governments across Australia

1,600
Federal government
(source: *The Australian*, August 2012)

822
Victoria
(source: *Herald Sun*, October 2010)

156
NSW
(source: *Herald Sun*, October 2010)

401
Queensland
(source: *Herald Sun*, October 2010)

265
Western Australia
(source: *Herald Sun*, October 2010)

228
SA
(source: *Herald Sun*, October 2010)

123
Tasmania
(source: *Herald Sun*, October 2010)

> ALREADY, IT WAS CLEAR THAT TAXPAYERS' FUNDS WERE BEING MISSPENT. **SUPPOSEDLY IMPARTIAL PUBLIC SERVANTS SHOULD NOT BE PRODUCING PROPAGANDA SELLING THE VIRTUES OF GOVERNMENT POLICY**

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But perhaps the most recent and worrying trend is the massive expansion of media handlers and communications experts employed within government departments. An investigation in *The Australian* earlier this year revealed the extraordinary number of public relations staff employed by the federal government. The Australian Taxation Office has 271. The Health Department? 72. AusAid? 38. All up, more than 1,600 public relations related roles exist in the federal government, alone. The number of professional media managers looks certain to swamp the media itself: 600 journalists were axed from News Limited and Fairfax this year alone. In the states, that milestone has long gone. Ministerial press secretaries alone far outnumber the press.

Thanks to a recent incident, we now have an insight into what these taxpayer funded staff do each day.

In September this year a 'Senior Communications Adviser' within the 'Media and Public Affairs' division of Stephen Conroy's Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy got in touch with the IPA.

He wondered if the IPA was interested in publishing an article he had written for the *IPA Review*. The topic was the National Broadband Network, and how its implementation would be beneficial, particularly to women. Given the IPA has been one of many prominent critics of the NBN, and given this information is no further than a Google search away, we were curious as to why we had been offered the article.

Already, it was clear that taxpayers' funds were being misspent. Supposedly impartial public servants should not be producing propaganda selling the virtues of government policy for external publication. If a minister wants to sell their policies, they and their staff should do it themselves.

But subsequent emails revealed even more. After we asked how the article should be credited, assuming we agreed to publish it, we were told 'I have no problem with you by-lining it from your team.' In other words, we should feel free to pretend that this pro-government propaganda was not written by the government at all, but instead was the work of an independent writer.

Of course, Stephen Conroy's office purported to be horrified that such a practice was taking place, and assured us that this was an isolated incident. But in truth we have no idea how many articles praising government policy from supposedly independent journalists were actually ghost-written by government spin doctors. And we are only aware of the practice because one departmental media adviser failed to Google the IPA before submitting his article.

Undoubtedly, this lavishly (taxpayer) funded enterprise affects news coverage. Entire teams of public servants exist to ensure that the government of the day is presented in a positive light. And Button is partially right when he argues that shrinking newsroom budgets make it easier for these PR teams to influence the media.

It is no coincidence that the department exposed for underhand efforts to influence the press is also the department of the minister most enthusiastic about regulating the media: Stephen Conroy's.

This media management trend occurs at the same time as the most overt media intimidation seen in Australian history. On a routine basis, government ministers not only attack individual media outlets for alleged bias, but promise to use the force of law to correct that bias. At the time of writing it still remains unclear what extra regulation the Gillard government intends to subject the media to in its quest for more favourable coverage, but proposed measures have included statutory media regulators to enforce balance. Despite the massive failings of the media to expose the ALP's dysfunctional first term in office, the current federal government wants to ensure that the media will fail us again.

If these curbs on media freedom are implemented, we can expect more journalists and news outlets to pull their punches when reporting on the government. Even if recommendations from the likes of the Finkelstein inquiry into the media are left to languish, the implied threat of government regulation might be enough to scare media proprietors into avoiding pursuing some stories.

The odds are firmly stacked against the press faithfully fulfilling its role of informing the public and holding governments to account—particularly those of the left. Far too many journalists allow their ideological preferences to cloud their news judgement. The failure to report on the widely known failings of the Rudd government is just one spectacular example of this shortcoming. Issues in which elite opinion is basically uniform—like the need for Australia to take action to address climate change—also suffer from a lack of balance, and probably always will. And we can expect things to get much worse before they get any better, with the ceaseless expansion of the spin-state and the threat of draconian media regulation hanging over the press. There's only one thing we can be confident of: the press failed us, and they will again. R