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.

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...

But they didn’t tell us.

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 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.)
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 not happening without a backdrop, that Rudd’s prime ministership didn’t report it. While Rudd was in office one or two stories about his tantrums did appear. 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 perhaps tells us something about 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 the ABC’s Frank 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.’

Kelly is also a regular panelist 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 on with it!’

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Kelly and his colleagues have known for years there’s us who work and live in Parliament House are not so dumb to work. In a recent profile for 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 project 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.

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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. The Australian Taxation Office has employed by the federal government. The number of public relations staff this year revealed the extraordinary investigation in government departments. An expansion of media handlers and worrying trend is the massive journalists were actually ghost-written for many prominent critics of 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. 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 shrinking newsroom budgets make it easier for these PR teams to influence the media. 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 shrinking newsroom budgets make it easier for these PR teams to influence the media.

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