The Media and John Howard P.M:  
The Canberra Press Gallery  
1996-2007

Helen Ester  
BA (Australian National University)  
DipEd (University of Sydney)  
MA (Journalism) University of Wollongong

Department of Politics and Public Policy,  
Griffith University

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of the Howard government’s media management strategies on the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) and its capacity to fulfil the quasi-institutional fourth estate role of independent over-sight of the parliament and the executive government. Although the relationship between politician and journalist in any parliamentary democracy is neither easy nor harmonious, tenets of open governance demand that, at the very least, this relationship is functional. The evidence in this thesis shows that this functionality was tested to its limits under the Howard government.

Chapter 1 begins with the development of questions about the Howard government’s media strategies, their impact on the Canberra fourth estate and the role of more intense government media management, new technologies and the co-location of executive government and press gallery in Parliament House. Answers are sought with multi-method research including historical research, documentary analysis, case studies and elite interview techniques\. Twenty-five journalists from the FPPG’s thirty-three mainstream bureaus participated in interviews and their willingness to answer open-ended questions ‘on the record’ added valuable empirical data. Chapter 1 concludes with a comprehensive review of relevant literature and a brief survey of the further chapters.

Chapter 2 is an historical analysis that explores key continuities and changes in executive-media relations across a number of Australian federal governments located in Canberra since parliament opened there in 1927 in order to identify the drivers or levers on hand when the Howard government took office in 1996. Particular attention is paid to strategies used under the Curtin, Menzies, Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke and Keating governments.

Chapters 3-5 examine issues raised by government-FPPG relations during the Howard years. ‘The Interface’ (Chapter 3) deals with the effect of increasing numbers of ministerial media staff and closer control of face-to-face fora such
as interviews, press conferences and background briefings. ‘Spinning along the Information Highway’ (Chapter 4) explores the reduction in access to political news by gallery journalists because new digital media technologies increase government control of the flow of political information, particularly by the deployment of sophisticated modern surveillance techniques. ‘News values in the New Parliament House’ (Chapter 5) examines changes in conventions arising from the new building’s architecture that facilitated the implementation of policies designed to maximise executive control of political news.

Chapter 6 provides case studies of key moments in the interaction between the government and the gallery that demonstrate the executive’s powerful capacity to manipulate a relationship based only on convention and goodwill. The first study concerns the 2003 visit of US President Bush and the unprecedented way the Australian executive overrode longstanding conventions in relation to the FPPG and the parliament. The second concerns former Treasurer Peter Costello and the ‘Dinnergate’ episode that kept public information off the record for years.

This thesis adds a fresh Australian perspective to international political communication scholarship by filling a gap in this literature where the self-reflexive views and experiences of political journalists working at the interface between the public and government have been overlooked. This study reveals the extent to which the Howard government used the executive’s latent power over media relations to maximise control over flows of information, and how its misuse can work to the detriment of parliament as well as political journalism.

This thesis concludes that the Howard years bound and constrained Australian political communication because an increasingly dominant government executive successfully exploited the Canberra fourth estate’s poorly defined role and status. Whilst this study also confirms the need for reform in government-media relations, it is equally clear that it would be politically naïve to expect any government (or opposition) to develop the political will to tamper with conventions demonstrably weighted in the executive’s favour.
However, the unpalatable media management regime of the Howard years also triggered an historic coalition of commercial and public media which conducted an independent audit of free speech in Australia (Moss 2007), and called for more explicit, legislative recognition of ‘Australia’s Right to Know’. This study argues that this presents a significant opportunity as any change for the better would not only need the pro-active goodwill of parliamentarians outside the citadels of party-executives, but also the media’s reassessment of the manner in which they resource Canberra political journalism.

This thesis concludes that apart from issues relating to an imbalance of coverage in favour of the executive and away from the parliament, there are other weighty matters relating to the status of the FPPG worthy of the media’s further consideration—such as the status of media bureaus within parliament house (now that of ‘licensees’), and the fact not only is there no constitutional basis for the ‘right to know’ in Australia but there are few if any, applicable conventions in ‘either British constitutional precepts or Australian news media practice’ (Lloyd 2001, p.1).

*Disclaimer*
I worked as a journalist in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery from 1973-1982. For the majority of this time (seven years) I was self-employed in a one-person bureau Monitor News Services—editing and writing Monitor Newsletter a publication I founded that covered policy relating to health, welfare, education, migrants, women and Indigenous people. I was also engaged as the freelance Canberra correspondent for the Far Eastern Economic Review and Nation Review. Prior to this I worked as a full-time employee—firstly with Don Whitington’s Australian Press Services bureau as the correspondent for the Northern Territory News and secondly with Fairfax Media in the Sydney Sun bureau.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Helen Ester
Acknowledgements

The development and completion of this thesis began in 2004 following the transfer of my part-time PhD candidature from Central Queensland University to the Department of Politics and Public Policy at Griffith University.

Prior to Griffith University the groundwork for historical and theoretical aspects of this research occurred during my time as a senior lecturer in the School of Contemporary Communications at Central Queensland University with research supervision from Professor Alan Knight and Professor Denis Cryle and a sadly short period of guidance from the late Professor Clem Lloyd. In the first half of 2003 I had a productive and rewarding period as a visiting scholar at the Department of Journalism at the University of Queensland where Dr Chris Lawe-Davies supported my decision to collect contemporary qualitative interview data from Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery journalists.

At Griffith University the research for this dissertation progressed at the Department of Politics and Public Policy under the supervision of Professor Patrick Weller and Associate Supervisor Dr Liz van Acker. In late 2007 Associate Professor Stephen Stockwell from the School of Humanities generously agreed to be co-principal supervisor with Professor Weller. I also acknowledge the material support provided by Heads of Department and support staff at the department of Politics and Public Policy. I am indebted to Dr Robyn Hollander who made it possible for me to write full-time from September-December 2007; and to Dr Anne Tiernan whose exemplary thesis, Ministerial Staff under the Howard Government: Problem, solution or Black Hole? (2004), provided a model for the structure, research methods and presentation for this dissertation.

At the same time this work received a great deal of support from elsewhere—and I have benefited greatly from the voluntary enthusiasm, intellectual generosity and advice of Professor Mark Pearson, Dr Jim McAllister and the off-campus supervision of Professor Denis Cryle. Acknowledgement is also due to
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Finally, this research was made possible because of the cooperation and contributions from those who provided background information and most especially those who agreed to be interviewed. I thank them all and acknowledge the importance of their candid contributions.

Work published in the course of this research and included as a part of the thesis is listed below, and I would like to acknowledge the professional support and encouragement from Dr Sarah Maddison who oversaw my chapter in Silencing Dissent (2007).


Dedication

This work is dedicated to the late Professor Clem Lloyd, Dr Julianne Schultz Professor Rodney Tiffen and Professor John Henningham for their intellectual leadership in the field of Australian political communication
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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AAP</td>
<td>Australian Associated Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABA</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Commission (30 June 1983)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Corporation (from 01 July 1983)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACMA</td>
<td>Australian Communication Media Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACTU</td>
<td>Australian Council of Trade Unions</td>
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<td>AFP</td>
<td>Australian Federal Police</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALRC</td>
<td>Australian Law Reform Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANAO</td>
<td>Australian National Audit Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPS</td>
<td>Department of Parliamentary Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECPR</td>
<td>European Consortium for Political Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>FOI</td>
<td>Freedom of Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>FPPG</td>
<td>Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMS</td>
<td>Government Members' Secretariat</td>
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<tr>
<td>GIU</td>
<td>Government Information Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEAA</td>
<td>Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMG</td>
<td>Ministerial Media Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOPS</td>
<td>Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMLS</td>
<td>National Media Liaison Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMO</td>
<td>Prime Minister’s Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBS</td>
<td>Special Broadcasting Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>Sound and Vision Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>WMD</td>
<td>Weapons of Mass Destruction</td>
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Chapter One: Introduction

The hypothesis of this study is that government media management strategies deployed from 1996-2007 negatively affected the functionality of the Canberra fourth estate, and asks if this led to an historic nadir in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery’s relationship with the governing executive? If so, how? —and what, if any, are the implications of this?

To address these questions this study draws on the descriptive-inductive research tradition, using a multi-method approach utilising historical analysis, case studies, documentary research strategies and elite interviewing techniques to build an accurate description of the relationship between the two institutions in order to identify the nature of that relationship and the factors at work during Prime Minister John Howard’s eleven-and-a-half year incumbency.

There are four parts to this introductory chapter. The first outlines the broad schema for the central research question; the second is a detailed explanation of the research approach, methodology and limitations; the third outlines the place of this thesis in international and Australian political communication literature, highlighting how this thesis helps fill important gaps in knowledge and understanding about the contemporary operation of the Canberra fourth estate. The fourth and final part provides a summary of the chapters and an overview of the thesis in its totality.

Part one: Background and Research Questions

The broad schema of this study is concerned with the interface between Australian executive governments and the fourth estate—the point where two institutions fundamental to functioning democracies meet to contest that crucial ‘line of communication’ namely to inform citizens ‘of the workings of
government and the machinations of the political system’ (Pearson and Patching 2008, p.2).

The adversarial nature of this relationship encapsulates tensions innate to the Westminster democratic tenet of transparency that was wrought from the early media’s centuries-long struggle for the right to report parliamentary proceedings and secure a separate ‘gallery’ reporting space inside the legislature (Sparrow 2003, pp.21-23). The words of renowned 19th century author and journalist Charles Dickens bring to life the daily reality of being forced to write reports standing up in the public gallery:

I have worn my feet by standing to write in a preposterous pen in the old House of Lords, where we used to be huddled together like so many sheep (Fielding 1960, p. 347).

Although the fourth estate1 has long since enjoyed a quasi-institutional status to report parliamentary proceedings from dedicated gallery benches overlooking legislative chambers, political journalists continue to work according to notions hammered out during those early battles to legitimise the media’s watchdog role on behalf of the public’s ‘right to know’. In a recent speech to launch legislative proposals to amend Australia’s twenty-seven year old Freedom of Information (FOI) law, Special Minister of State John Faulkner acknowledged that although the secrecy of parliamentary proceedings may be ‘long gone’, the idea of ‘best protecting responsible government’ by keeping information ‘as confidential as possible has been very slow to die’ [and] it is now recognised that the best safeguard against ‘ill-informed public judgement is not concealment but information’ (Faulkner 2009). In short, although the adversarial relationship between politicians and journalists is neither easy nor harmonious in parliamentary democracies, tenets of open governance demand that at the very least, this relationship is functional.

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1 Sparrow (2003, p.31) acknowledges the differing views on the origin of the term ‘fourth estate’ but argues [that] ’what matters is that “at some point reporters started to acquire a collective identity…” [and] One could pick the early nineteenth century as the moment, when the press, as an institution became a force in its own right and reporting parliament regarded as a quasi-institutional safeguard”.

During the period of study for this thesis (1996-2007) three significant incidents for Australian government-media relations signalled higher than usual levels of stress and that the problematic relationship was worthy of fresh investigation. In 2002, for the first time since the federal parliament moved to Canberra in 1927, nine gallery journalists participated in a collective protest. The action though small in scale, involved both commercial and public sector mainstream bureaus—News Ltd, Fairfax Media, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and moreover was formally endorsed by the gallery Committee—the body elected to represent and act on behalf of members of the FPPG. The action was in the form of a submission (see Appendix 3) to a Senate Committee of inquiry into ‘A Certain Maritime Incident’ (commonly known as the ‘children overboard affair’) to condemn a sustained ‘campaign of censorship and misinformation’. In their opening paragraph the protesters state ‘the campaign was conducted by the Ministries of Defence and Immigration as well as the office of the Prime Minister and:

Peaked during the Tampa\(^2\) incident and continued through the HMAS Adelaide ‘children overboard’ affair….The high level of deliberate deception—which came clearly to light in Senate Estimates committee hearings—could not have been perpetrated without the involvement of senior and junior public servants’ (Barker et al. 2002).

A second, even more strident, protest in November 2003 followed the adverse treatment of gallery journalists during the October visit of US President George W. Bush. The FPPG committee’s president and secretary, Malcolm Farr and James Grubel, delivered a letter\(^3\) to the Speaker of the House of Representatives protesting at a ‘craven capitulation of [parliamentary] sovereignty’ to the visiting US media (Farr and Grubel 2003). Unsurprisingly qualitative interview data gathered for this thesis in mid-2003 and mid-2004—before and after this event—confirm the government’s relationship with the Canberra fourth estate was in serious disrepair. The third event, in early 2007,

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\(^{2}\) A reference to the government’s decision in late 2001 to refuse a request from the captain of a Norwegian ship the MV Tampa for asylum for over 400 Afghan refugees, rescued at sea close to Australia’s territorial waters. Although there were immediate humanitarian issues, it was treated as a matter of national security and the media subjected to a range of harsh controls.

\(^{3}\) Reproduced at Appendix 7
showed these concerns had spread beyond the FPPG to the media industry generally. In March that year for the first time in Australian media history, the commercial media oligopoly joined with public sector media and the industry employees’ union (the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance) to form an industry-wide front under the banner of ‘Australia’s Right to Know, to campaign against the Howard government’s media management strategies launching a national, independently-funded audit of the *State of Free Speech in Australia* (Moss 2007).

Analysis of these public statements and of the interviews that the author completed with twenty-five journalists from the FPPG’s thirty-three mainstream bureaus produced a number of recurring themes that have been crystallised into the following research questions:

1. Did the Howard government’s media management strategies adversely affect the capacity of the FPPG to fulfil its quasi-institutional fourth estate role of independent over-sight of the parliament and the executive government?

2. To what extent did historical factors in the evolution of the Canberra parliament contribute to the Howard government’s leverage over the FPPG?

3. How did the Howard government’s large increase in numbers of ministerial media staff and closer control of face-to-face forums impact the FPPG?

4. Did new digital media technologies increase government control of the flow of political information through the use of sophisticated modern surveillance techniques?
5. Did the new Parliament House’s architecture and the on-going co-location of executive and FPPG facilitate the implementation of policies designed to maximise executive control of political news?

6. What is required to protect the FPPG’s independence and capacity to provide oversight of the executive government in the public interest?

Part two: Research methodology

The four-part multi-method research approach adopted in this thesis includes:

- Historical analysis to locate systemic issues and contextualise contemporary empirical data (Chapter 2).
- Empirical data garnered from elite interviewing techniques to build a qualitative description of the nature of the executive-Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) relationship (Chapters 3, 4 and 5)
- Documentary research strategies that draw on a diverse range of topical material from the public sphere and the federal parliament—including Senate and House of Representatives committees of inquiry where submissions, evidence and commentary yielded empirical material that would otherwise have been unavailable (Chapters 2-5).
- Case study methods that add further depth to the research by describing events to illustrate telling moments in the executive-FPPG relationship during the period of study (Chapter 6)

Historical Analysis

The tightly focused nature of this inductive descriptive study of political journalism in Canberra during the Howard years is explained earlier in this Introduction and in order to better these understand contemporary issues and practices, Chapter 2 introduces historical perspectives to this research.

Historical analysis functions to contextualise contemporary data and often reveals that modern day concerns are not new. Key factors in the FPPG’s development, from the time it was relocated from Melbourne to Canberra in
1927, are traced to reveal systemic continuities in the executive-FPPG interrelationship and to facilitate a clearer understanding of present, likely future paths and contingencies for change.

Chapter 2 describes influences in the growth and evolution of the executive-FPPG interrelationship that shaped the terms of their engagement once the federal parliament moved to Canberra, and gives perspective to many of the issues and problems articulated in the 2003-2004 interview data (Chapters 4 and 5). The contemporary viewpoints are supplemented with reference to relevant perspectives in autobiographical and biographical work—for example (in alphabetical order)—Ayers 1987; Brown 2006; Fraser, 1968; Freudenberg 1997 and 2005; Hirst 1998; Lloyd, 1992; Menzies 1943; MacCallum 2002; Macswan 1982; Weller 1989; Whittington 1977).

The historical perspectives in this study reveal three key drivers consistently at play—a high degree of direct prime ministerial involvement in media management strategies; an interrelationship characterised by ad hoc, ill-defined or ‘unwritten’ rules; and above all, the overarching influence of the built environment of parliament house itself.

The first federal parliamentary building in the purpose-built national capital was opened and occupied in a frontier-like bush town, still under construction. In this situation the transplanted urban political elite naturally clustered together in and around parliament house. It led both the executive and the media to set up offices inside the building—an unprecedented move best described as ‘permissive occupancy’. The building was officially designated as a ‘temporary’ parliament house, however it was occupied for six-decades until the new parliament house on Capital Hill was built and occupied in 1988—and embedded into its design was accommodation for the executive and media. The Australian federal executive’s and the fourth estate’s historical occupation of offices lodged squarely within the bounds of parliament house, broke a long-standing Westminster tradition that ensures the legislature is the sole-
preserve of parliamentarians and is tangibly separated from the executive arm of government and fourth estate which occupy offices located well outside the parliamentary precinct.

Chapter 2 notes the influence of these arrangements on the development of the FPPG raising issues such as comparative advantage in the executive-FPPG interrelationship. It also explores the extent to which the formative years led to the gallery’s unusual unitary structure and collective focus on the executive. This is distinctly different from Britain for instance, where a corps of press gallery journalists cover parliamentary proceedings and a separate specialist executive corps of ‘lobby’ journalists covers the executive; and likewise in Washington, where political journalists are assigned to either a legislative round or to the White House corps. Although the Canberra model of a unitary federal gallery may seem less elitist—a discernable imbalance of political news coverage in favour of the executive is discussed, as is the executive’s ability to arbitrarily select (and de-select) an inner elite.

**Documentary Research and Case Studies**

Documentary research strategies analyse topical issues raised in this thesis. Material is drawn from primary sources in the electronic media, on the internet and in print media. It includes expert commentary, academic analyses and other contributions to public discourse by political commentators and journalists (some from within the interview group) before and after the mid-2003 and mid-2004 interview period. Also included are official records such as Hansards from the House of Representative and the Senate, electronic briefs and research monographs from the federal parliamentary library.

Case studies supplement the multi-theoretic methodology in this work with two studies in Chapter 6 illustrating the systemic nature of the problems discussed in the elite interview data in Chapters 4 and 5. They recount two significant
controversies between the Howard executive and the FPPG during and after the interview period—one occurred between the two rounds of interviews (mid-2003 and mid-2004) and the other, that began in 2005, ended in the final months of Prime Minister Howard’s last term (August 2007).

Studies of low points in institutional relationships can be instructive as Weller (2001, p.220) notes, whilst ‘crises may teach bad lessons’ [they are] ‘one of the few ways’ to bring insight to the study of institutional relationships, citing as an example ‘the contemporary ministerial staffing system and the dynamics off the core executive’.

Case studies are also compatible with the descriptive-inductive tradition used in throughout this study and feature in scholarship that has been described as ‘the new institutionalism’ [where] ‘a key concern is to build an accurate description of institutions’ (Tiernan 2004 p.22; Rhodes 1997, pp.43-44) and is applied in this study to the fourth estate—a recognised quasi-institution in Westminster derived political systems.

Bent Flyvbjerg in *Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again* (2001) defines case study methodology ‘as a research strategy, an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context’ [and as] …having strategic importance in relation to the general problem’. He cautions researchers to avoid problems such as generalising ‘to a population beyond cases similar to those studied’ and to bear in mind that ‘numerous alternative theories may be consistent with data gathered from case study propositions’ (Flyyberg 2001, pp. 219-245).

Chapter 6 takes note of the strengths and weaknesses of this methodology.Whilst the case studies show government media relations in action, analysis is confined to a particular time frame and the single focus of the executive-FPPG interrelationship. Furthermore, the relevance of each real-life case is linked to the general problems raised in this thesis. Together they provide a sharpened
understanding of contemporary and systemic problems and what might become important to look at more extensively in future research.

The first case study recounts the October 2003 visit of American president George W. Bush that erupted into controversy over apparent executive contempt for the sovereignty of parliament and the Australian media and exposed a number of systemic problems discussed in this thesis. The second study is concerned with the ‘dinnergate’ affair in 2007 that thrust issues of media manipulation, trust and journalists ethics into the national limelight following revelations (dating back to 2005) of the involvement of three senior gallery journalists’ in an on-again off-again ‘off-the-record’ dinner briefing by Peter Costello, the then Treasurer and prime ministerial leadership pretender.

Interview data

Opened-ended qualitative elite interviews were conducted as a tool for ‘discerning patterns’ in the executive-media interrelationship during the Howard years, and to provide ‘information otherwise unavailable’ (Manheim et al. 2005, p.356) and the FPPG interview group met the recognised academic research definition of an elite, that classifies people in this way [if]:

They have knowledge that, for the purpose of a given research project, requires that they be given the individualized treatment of an interview [and] their elite status depends …on their access to information (Manheim et al. 2005, p.355).

Twenty-five interviews were conducted in two rounds, the first in May, June and July 2003 and the second in June 2004. Interviewees were selected from

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4 The term interrelationship is applied to describe the executive-media relationship where political journalists operate in a number of interdependencies and ‘interrelationship’ signifies there are varying degrees of autonomy operating in the power balance between the executive and the FPPG.
the ranks of senior journalists working in the thirty-three mainstream\textsuperscript{5} media bureaus located inside parliament house.

Care was taken to ensure balance and validity by taking precautions necessary to avoid data representing a ‘narrow view’ and/or ‘self-interested rationalisation’ (Manheim et al. 2005, p.356). First, respondents were selected from both electronic\textsuperscript{6} and print media and second, from bureaus that represent a cross-section of the major media ownership groups—Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, the Fairfax media, Packer and Stokes media companies, commercial wire and radio services and the public broadcasters. This range is reflected in the interview group’s profile as follows:

- Participants from FPPG-based electronic media bureaus—five television journalists, one from the two national public networks (\textit{ABCTV}), and four from the four commercial television network bureaus, \textit{Channels 7, 9 10} and \textit{SkyNews}; One each from the four national radio bureaus—the two public broadcasters (\textit{ABC}, \textit{SBS}) and two commercial networks the \textit{Southern Cross} (now \textit{Fairfax radio}) and \textit{Macquarie}. Two from the three wire services (\textit{AAP} and \textit{Reuters}); and one from an on-line/print media monitoring service \textit{Capital Monitors}.


In three cases, note taking was used to record data but in all others, responses were tape-recorded and transcribed. The twenty-five interviews averaged between 60 to 90 minutes and the transcripts varied in length from

\textsuperscript{5} In the context of this study, ‘mainstream media’ describes broadcasters and publishers that mediate political information for major Australian audiences and excludes for instance, foreign media, religious media bureaus and specialist subscription-based services. The current configuration of FPPG bureaus is discussed in more detail in chapters two and five.

\textsuperscript{6} Due to time constraints, the gallery’s only fully on-line publication \textit{Crikey.com} is not one of the electronic bureaus in the interview group—however this study’s documentary research strategy has extended the data to include all relevant input from gallery journalists/bureaus not in this group.
between one thousand to two thousand words—and totalled 39,500 words. One respondent requested anonymity whereas the other twenty-four were prepared to go ‘on the record’ by name and employer. Permission to use the data was obtained through signed Griffith University Human Ethics clearance forms. In addition each respondent received a transcript of his/her interview and an invitation to respond (or not) within a four-week time frame (Appendix 1). Seven chose to respond in order to correct spelling or misnomers.

The interviews were based on a four-part open-ended question to ascertain the nature of challenges, issues and significant changes/trends in political journalism in the FPPG news round. Interviewees were asked: *What are the most significant issues? What distinguishes them? Why/How have they emerged as issues/challenges and trends? How are they different from past issues?* A detailed analysis of the participants’ responses to the three broad topic areas is contained in chapters three, four and five.

Conducted towards the end of the Howard government’s third consecutive term the interview data provide a dense and varied first-hand insight into factors that contributed to the demise in the executive-gallery interrelationship during the period of study. They yielded a range of themes, most of which fell into three categories that are discussed separately and in detail in chapters 3-5 of this thesis. They show:

- A major demise in face-to-face fora, such as interviews, press conferences and background briefings (Chapter 3).
- Significantly reduced access to political news and information from electronic and text documents generally and particularly following a major $2m crack-down on ‘unauthorised’ leakage of information from the administration that combined with multiplication and intensification in media management and manipulation to create an ‘octopus-like’ network of controls (Walsh 2004)—extending from the prime minister's
office, through the full executive, government backbench and the administration (Chapter 4).

- That responses regarding the balance of coverage between the executive and the parliament (Chapter 5) add weight to the view that:

  It is the extent of the shift in news value from Parliament to the executive, rather than its occurrence, that [continues to be] at issue in the Australian context. It has to be asked whether the conjunction of press and executive in Australia’s Parliament House at Canberra distorted, and eventually stifled, the reporting of traditional parliamentary proceedings. In short, it is argued that the Australian press moved from predominantly reporting Parliament to overwhelmingly reporting what the executive said and did in the parliamentary building. Consequently, the Parliamentary institution diminished in prestige and newsworthiness because the executive was lodged squarely within its bounds (Lloyd 1998, p.8)

Explanatory note: Interview citations

1. Quotations from transcripts of interviews and notes from the mid-2003 and mid-2004 interviews are attributed in the following way. In each instance, the full name of the interviewee and their place of employment in the federal gallery are bracketed either at the commencement or end of the quoted material. The employment status of the interviewee and the date of the interview are provided in a complete list of interviewees at Appendix 2a.

2. Data from public discourse. Quotations and commentary by gallery journalists contributing to public discourse before and since the interview periods are referenced in the standard way—that is, an in-text attribution of the journalist’s surname and year of publication/broadcast, with a full citation in the bibliography compiled for this thesis.

Limitations

The scope of this research is limited in three significant ways. Firstly, as the literature review shows there is a need to make up for a shortage of
scholarship about FPPG journalism and this study is therefore confined to political journalism in the federal sphere. Secondly, because the current configuration of government-FPPG relations evolved after the federal parliament moved from Melbourne to Canberra in 1927, the historical overview begins from that period. Thirdly, the focus is confined on periods of governance rather than the more frequent focus on the role of political journalists during election campaigns—and this study therefore does not traverse the multiplicity of studies (both overseas and in Australia) of election campaign periods. This approach is based on the perspective that there is a need to generate discourse relating to ‘what governments actually do in office’ (Young 2007b, p.xxiv):

While elections are certainly crucial, even in Australia where election campaigns are quite frequent, they are still atypical events in the political cycle. At the federal level, for example, elections usually last between three to six weeks, and are held, on average, every 2.3 years. By contrast, if you judge that the ‘reign’ of a particular government dates from when a political party comes into office and ends when it is voted out, we have seen periods of government in Australia of up to twenty-three years [Coalition]…and thirteen years [Australian Labor Party].

In addition during periods of governance, the executive-FPPG interrelationship is substantively different from that played out in the episodic vaudeville of national elections. However this does not mean that the study overlooks the modern phenomenon of the ‘permanent campaign’ where governments use defensive partisan strategies to manipulate public debate about policy issues and initiatives. Young (2007b) documents how such ‘campaigning’ by governments often involves the partisan use of taxpayers’ funds’ and the ‘resources of office, such as media advisers and government advertising’ to plan ‘for the next election campaign, as soon as the last one is concluded’ (Young 2007b, p.xxvii)7; and as Stockwell (2005) explains, once in government ‘communications managers and press secretaries’ continue to ‘work public

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opinion...[and] the centrality of image and the ubiquitousness of spin’ (Stockwell 2005, p.189-190).

Research Methodology: Summary

The research questions, focus and multi-method research strategy outlined in this part of the chapter are derived from the descriptive-inductive research tradition, where the key concern is to build an accurate description of the way institutionalised relations evolve and interact. In this way continuities and changes in Australian federal executive-media relations can be explained across several governments in order to identify the cumulative drivers or levers, on hand when the Howard government took office in 1996.

Part three: The literature reviewed

This review of influential international and Australian literature in the field of this study commences with a definition of political journalism within the paradigm of political communication. This is followed by an overview of literature in the field of Australian political journalism that includes a review of literature directly concerned with the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery.

Political communication and journalism

McNair (1999) defines communication as ‘political’ when it is clear that the intent (my emphasis) of its senders is to ‘influence the political environment’ and when it is a:

Purposeful communication about politics and overt political discourse, conducted by politicians and other political actors and those who seek to influence them...[and encompasses] ‘communication about [emphasis original] these actors and their activities as contained in news reports, editorials and other forms of media discussion of politics’ (McNair 1999, p.2-4)8.

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McNair also points to a long-standing consensus that the purpose of political communication in ‘ideal type’ democracies is to inform and educate the public about what is going on by interpreting facts and events, and thus to provide a meaningful two-way communications platform between the public and the government. This firstly facilitates public participation in political discourse and generates public opinion, secondly it publicises the activities of governmental and political institutions, and lastly its intent is to provide the means for well-informed voting, or other public participation in democratic processes (McNair 1999, pp. 21-22).

Eric Neveu (2002, pp.27-28) defines the role of political journalism within this broad paradigm in *Four Generations of Political Journalism* and, drawing on historical data from *The Invention of Journalism* (Chalaby 1998), locates the birth of political journalism in Western democracies in the mid-nineteenth century. Neveu argues that before then, the media was partisan and class-based and a form of ‘proto-journalism’ where journalists were ‘publicists’ whose work was ‘inseparable from political action itself’ and therefore it ‘would be a fallacy’ to talk about political journalism prior to its ‘institutionalisation…as a true profession’. Neveu identifies several ‘sets of changes’ that triggered the ‘process necessary for [professional] role definition’. They were the guarantee of freedom of the press (for example, the 1881 *Press Act* in France), the advent of media markets and paying (literate) audiences and the ‘constitution of readerships’, that in turn increased the number of journalists to a point that ‘the social division of their jobs created specialisation’ (Neveu 2002, pp.26-27).

In short, political journalism evolved into its modern form when more autonomous reporting of facts and statements began to provide readerships with,

…not only a verbatim account of parliamentary debates but also the bargains and discussions happening backstage in the corridors of power and writing for audiences … [that were] no longer [primarily] defined in political terms (Neveu 2002, p.26-28).
By the 1970s political reporting had been extended to include analysis and commentary and the notion of ‘critical expertise’, and assumed a capacity to inform a ‘rational reader’ [allowing]:

The political journalist [to be] both an insider, who knows the codes and secrets of the tribe, and a critic, whose point of honour is to decipher for the audience, the secrets of their political competitor-colleagues’ (Neveu 2002, p.31).

In addition to the standard journalistic activity of selecting and packaging news, critical expertise in the political round includes the ability to decipher the ‘tricks and hidden tactics’ of politicians and expose hidden agendas (and go beyond the evaluation of political leadership or legislative activity), to exercise ‘the ‘know-how’ of the political bookmaker’, to interpret opinion polls and to juggle ‘a strained marriage between expertise and entertainment’ (Neveu 2002, pp.31-33).

**Political Journalism Literature: An Overview**

This thesis acknowledges the rich legacy from the prolific field of media studies, particularly the light it has shed on the forces at work behind the production of texts in political discourse. At the same time the research for this study confirms the need to broaden the base of political communication scholarship, to better understand and ‘flesh-out’ the role of journalists in the cast-list of political players.

A resurgent discourse from the late 1970s based on Gramsci’s (1973) theory of hegemony has had a lasting influence on political communication theories about journalism. A central notion of the discourse is that the media’s watchdog role will almost always lead to political reporters’ structural dependence on those in positions of power and authority for sources of information and therefore they, rather than journalists, act as the ‘primary definers’ of news:
The media are frequently not the ‘primary definers’ of news events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in reproducing [emphasis original] the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as ‘accredited sources’ (Hall et al. 1978, pp.58-59).

Scholars such as Boyce (1978), Curran (1978), Hall (1973) and Hall et al. (1978) also challenged earlier assumptions about the practice of political journalism and ideals germane to the fourth estate. Hall (1973) saw the dominant ideology typically inscribed as the ‘preferred reading’ in media texts. Curran (1978, p.69) added observations about structural factors—arguing that the dye was cast against a meaningful role for political journalism as early as the late Victorian era, when print technology increased the cost of production and the prime revenue source defaulted to advertising. Similarly, Boyce saw societal advances such as the advent of universal suffrage and increasingly literate populations as rendering the fourth estate into an anachronism because ‘mass democracy…robbed the press of one of its most ambitious claims…that of being part and parcel of the representation of the country when non-electors were more numerous than electors’ (Boyce 1978, p.39).

These views also held that journalists’ capacity to aid transparency and public education were always destined to be a hollow myth because the fourth estate could only ever be as ‘real’ as commerce allowed it to be. To Boyce, print media’s pursuit of these ideals was a ruse to ‘gain a place in the political system’ [and]:

The paradox of the Fourth Estate, with its head in politics and its feet in commerce, can, however, only be understood if it is a myth…Nowhere is this dualism…more apparent than in the examination of the British press at the height of its power and prestige between 1880 and 1918…Influence and power were achieved, not by their newspapers acting as a check or restraint on politicians, but, on the contrary by their papers gaining access to the political elite whose decisions they intended to shape (Boyce 1978, pp.27 and 29).

As McNair (2007) summarises:
By the late 20th century the practice of government communications came to be seen within critical theory as bound up with the ideological reproduction of capitalism itself, rather than as the universally beneficial provision of rational information about politics and public affairs (McNair 2007, p.98).

**Audience effects, captive journalists**

Other recent contributions from the field of cultural studies postulate about the flow-on effects from the source-capture of journalists to audience-capture. Ward (1995, p.41) cites an Australian study by Bell, Boehringer and Crofts (1982) that demonstrates the media’s ‘conceptual-ideological’ role in ‘defining [and] legitimating existing power structures’ and that news and current affairs programs should therefore be viewed as ideologically organised discourses.

Tiffen (1989, pp.4-8) notes theories that assume a uni-directional effect on media audiences are necessarily ‘based on the notion of a uniform ideology’ and therefore manifest in both left and right wing studies. On the one hand, left-wing studies ‘stress the ideological hegemony of the media’ to legitimise the status quo, and can be found in (for example) Tuchman (1978) and Fishman (1980), and on the other hand, right-wing analysts adapt the theory to stress how the liberal or left-wing biases of media workers ‘produce a growing crisis of legitimacy in modern government’. Ward also observed,

…the appropriation of the term ‘politics’ by cultural studies ought to be viewed suspiciously. Since power is unequally distributed in capitalist patriarchal society, so the argument goes (Fiske 1987, p.284)...hence, all things cultural are also ‘political’...But this analysis seriously dilutes the term political, conflating it with the term ideological. In particular, it loses sight of the crucial importance of institutions of the state, the machinery and processes of government. In pursuing the ‘political’ in the cultural, critics working in the field of Australian cultural studies have directed their attention towards popular (rather than ‘serious’) cultural forms (Ward 1995, p.97).
Critiques built on this theorising also examine core journalistic practices—such as the development of specialist critical expertise in news rounds, the craft of judging newsworthiness (news values) and the news writing genre itself—characteristically portraying these ‘tools of the trade’ as functions of hierarchy in a way that downplays journalists’ capacity for autonomous professional processes.

Ward (1995, p.115-116) for example, acknowledges that specialist expertise resides with ‘rounds’ journalists who are typically attached to institutions such as courts, parliament and government agencies, corporate sport, business and trade union organisations, and draws attention to the ‘sizeable number of sociologists’ who argue that the traditional routines of such newsgathering (and use of news values to gatekeep) are ‘largely reliant upon embedded frameworks or interpretation, making various tacit cultural and political assumptions’. This view necessarily de-emphasises journalists’ pro-active use of news values as a tool to assist good news judgement, and sees their use as based on (unconscious) assumptions such as ‘what the key political institutions are, what is ‘normal’ or which groups have a right to publicly voice their views’ (Ward 1995, p.101).

Related concerns have been expressed over the unique structure of news writing. Ward (1995, p.103) suggests the signature ‘inverted pyramid’ is symbolic of the ‘hierarchic nature of news organisations’. Louw (2005) also finds the pyramid-structure problematic in the way it mandates that news writing always begins according to a six-question formula (the five ‘Ws’ and an ‘H’—Who? What? When? Where? followed by Why? and How?). Whilst Louw acknowledges this is ‘an excellent shorthand method of capturing the essence of ‘immediate’ events-based stories’, he also sees it as ‘a great hindrance when trying to report on complex issues embedded in convoluted contexts (e.g. the reasons for warfare)’. In his view this creates a routine ‘process of selection, emphasis and de-emphasis’ where journalists work to a set formula that means:
Once a journalist has internalised the appropriate vision of ‘newsworthiness’…the [writing] model becomes ‘naturalized’ and ‘self-policing’. Thereafter, journalists need not confront the fact they are constructing only a partial ‘window on the world’ (Louw 2005, p.74).

The theorising discussed above is perhaps best exemplified in the enduring influence of the ‘propaganda model’ laid out and applied by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media* (1988), where the democratic notion of a reasonably well-informed electorate is neutralised by:

The ‘propaganda model’ of media operations…[that] postulates that elite media interlock with other institutional sectors in ownership, management and social circles, effectively circumscribing their ability to remain analytically detached from other dominant institutional sectors. The model argues that the net result of this is [audience] self-censorship without any significant coercion (Klaehn 2002, pp. 147–182).

The literature review thus far shows a dense and influential number of observation-based studies of political journalism that come from the field of media studies, principally grounded in the disciplines of sociology, cultural studies and political economy. However the alchemy of expert outside observers necessarily assigns a passive role to the objects of their scrutiny and firsthand perspectives from political journalists are significant for their absence. The resultant imbalance and a need to correct it was the topic of major concern at the 2001 convention of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR)#. There was a call for a fresh approach in political communication research to overcome a ‘blind spot’ and for account to be taken of the complexities in the ‘overall power balance between journalists, politicians, spin-doctors and media owners’, and that journalists should be ‘analysed back at the core of scholarship’ and enlarge the perspective that often presents political journalists as:

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# The European Consortium for Political Research is an independent, scholarly association of approximately 8,000 political scientists in over 300 institutions throughout Europe.
Trapped between the quest for audiences and weight of public opinion on the one hand and the powerful influence of professionalised political sources on the other...[seen] as victims, condemned to purely reactive strategies in the face of a combination of forces which are shrinking their professional and intellectual autonomy (Kuhn and Neveu 2002, p.2).

The presence of more complex issues at work in political journalism is also noted in Government media relations: A ‘Spin’ through the literature, a wide-ranging literature review conducted by Mark Pearson and Roger Patching (2008) who refer to:

Golding, Murdock and Schlesinger (1986) [who] looked at the professional beliefs and practices of broadcasters and how their relations to political actors and organisations shaped the flow of political communication. The writers explained that the interaction between journalists and political institutions was complex and multi-layered (Golding et al. 1986).

The literature discussed below shows a sparse amount of interview-based research in the field of political communication, particularly as it relates to political journalism.

In their outline of the significance of the work of the thirteen contributors to the ECPR compendium, editors (Kuhn and Neveu 2002) articulate a general aim to bring balance and perspective to the huge\textsuperscript{10} amount of literature that characteristically portrays journalists in a ‘Catch-22’—where on the one hand, they are seen as actively colluding with the overarching hegemony and an array of primary definers, and on the other as passive victims under the influence of professionalised media management systems. Citing major works such as Schlesinger (1990) and Morrison and Tumber (1988), they argue such predominant theories do not take enough account of the effect of shifting balances in democratic structures that by definition cannot be monolithic entities with a single united purpose. Inevitably there are a diverse range of influences at work—such as internal rivalries and factional divisions,

\textsuperscript{10} Described as so prolific that ‘just to read the articles and books published on this topic since the 1960s would in itself be a full-time job for a newcomer’ (Kuhn and Neveu 2002, pp.1-2).
leadership contests and associated instabilities—and a mirroring of these tensions amongst policy makers (Neveu and Kuhn 2002, pp.1-3).

Schlesinger (1990, p.66) sees ‘no infallible logic’ in the primary definer proposition that content from official sources ‘necessarily secures strategic advantages’ and conversely that ‘counter definitions’ from non-government sources ‘can never dislodge [emphasis original] the primary definition’. The field is replete with sociological studies that have adapted the participant/observer ethnographic model for investigating groups, whereby observers log and assess journalists’ gate-keeping activities, and make notes on ‘what kinds of people they are’ (Gans 1979, p.xii)—and applied it to newsrooms. American scholar James Carey (Columbia University) sees a major problem in a research trend that favours analyses ‘conducted from the outside rather than from within’ that results in journalists analysed and ‘seen through the lens of social science, not through the lens of journalism’ (Carey 2000, pp. 17-22).

Australian scholars Bowman and McIlwaine (2004) regard the influential primary definer theory as insufficient ‘to explain the apparent pluralism of approach to some [political news] stories’ because there is an absence of ‘more searching examination(s) of the constitution of journalism professional practice’, and further that:

Contemporary debates on the role of journalism in society are continuing the tradition of downplaying the role of proactive journalism—generally situated under the catchphrase of the Fourth Estate—in public policy making…[and] that critiques that downplay the potential of this form of journalism are flawed and overly deterministic (Bowman and McIlwaine 2004, pp.121 and 123).

Other more specific aspects of political communications theory discussed above—such as the media effects on audiences and the deterministic nature of core journalistic practices—have not gone unchallenged.
Tiffen (1989, pp.4-6) notes that the uni-directional assumption in media effects theory dissolves ‘institutions and relationships, conflicts and processes’ into ‘a disembodied ideology’ and downplays the political impact of the diverse and unpredictable nature of news content. Ward (1995, p.118) points out that even though there is evidence to show that ‘in general’, journalistic practice can promote the interests of authoritative sources, he agrees with Schlesinger (1990) that granting an institutional advantage to sources as ‘primary definers’ may be more problematic than it seems.

To begin with it sits uncomfortably with evidence that source-journalist relations involve an element of exchange. Moreover, the assumption that there is one primary definition [or primary definer] is questionable (Ward 1995, p.118).

Further, and perhaps in response to the predominant discourse, journals such as Australian Journalism Review (AJR), Australian Studies in Journalism (ASIJ) and Media Information Australia (MIA) can be seen as part of an axis of research and ‘interest in the study of journalism…in several countries including Germany, France, the UK and the USA’ (ECPR 2001-2002, p.2).

Competing viewpoints in Australian discourse appeared in the 1998 anthology edited by Myles Breen, Journalism: Theory and Practice. This work contains a range of views from seventeen teachers of journalism at Australian and New Zealand universities, with experience in the US, Britain and Asia Pacific (Breen 1998, p.1-2). Their contributions traverse five areas: The Place of theory; Theories of news; The Application of theory to journalistic practice; Theory and technology; and The Formation of journalism: Theory and practice.

Journalists’ standpoints and theorising most relevant to this thesis can be found in the five chapters that constitute Part one: The Place of theory (Breen 1998, pp.15-83)—authored by Breen, Windschuttle, Granato, Morgan and Meadows and in the opening chapter of Part Two: Theories of news (Breen 1998, pp.83-139) and in the work by Masterton (1998).
Keith Windschuttle’s contribution ‘Cultural studies versus journalism’ (pp.17-36) illustrates the contested nature of the 1970s primary definer theory, and challenges primary definer-based viewpoints in influential text by Cunningham and Turner (eds.), *The Media in Australia: Industries, texts, audiences* (1993).

Granato’s modelling in ‘The Chain-link model of the news process’ (Granato, 1998, pp.37-51) anticipates the need later identified by Kuhn and Neveu (2002, p.5) for media scholarship to identify ‘the web of complex relationships’. Granato describes his work as ‘intended to provide a blue-print for empirical research projects’ that explains the news process ‘by examining any [of a range of] variables, not just the message’ (Granato 1998, p.49).

Frank Morgan’s ‘What is journalism?’ (Morgan 1998, pp.52-66) revisits the fabled 1920s debate between American scholars Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion* (Lippmann 1922) and John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 1927). Morgan supports Dewey’s argument against the notions of passive journalism and gullible publics and in support of his views cites contemporary scholars such as Carey’s *Communication as Culture* (1989) and Scruton’s *Dictionary of Political Thought* (1982). Morgan (1998, p.59-60) shows that journalism has the capacity to tell a story and activate audience—and in Carey’s words, act ‘as an agency [for] the conversation of our culture’ (Carey 1989, p.82 cited in Morgan 1998, p. 60). Scruton (1982) captures its integral but proactive role:

> Journalism, in all its cultural and technological forms, is inextricable from national and international politics—the way people resolve conflict in their societies, both within and among nations. It might be collaborative with governments, especially in young nation states. It might perform a surveillance role, in the Australian vernacular, ‘to keep the bastards (in government and big business) honest’. It might facilitate [emphasis original] social and political processes, from within in the spirit of the public debate that Dewey saw as central to the ‘conversation’ of each nation’s culture. It might even adopt a more radical position …confronting the political assumptions and premises of a society, and provoking debate about, rather than within, its prevailing political order. Whichever it chooses however, journalism will do so only with the sanction of the state, and the
media will remain integral to its political system (Scruton 1982 cited in Morgan1998, p.63).

Michael Meadows (1998) chapter ‘Journalism as a cultural resource’ (pp.67-82) adds balance and context to this part of the anthology, by revisiting the positive legacies of cultural studies that flowed from ‘ways of thinking about journalism as a set of cultural practices’ and by basing his chapter on a ‘range of theoretical approaches’ [is],

…in keeping with my belief that cultural studies, with its radically contextual framework, offers the most flexible pathway to understanding the theoretical and practical dimensions of media process and practices. I plan to focus on the work of Antonio Gramsci … in arguing that journalism is a cultural resource that plays a key leadership role in the process of consensus formation in society (Meadows 1998, p.67).

In the first chapter of Part Two: Theories of news (Breen 1998, p.83-139) Murray Masterton’s contribution ‘A Theory of news’ (pp.85-103) presents empirical data that challenges some of the deterministic notions in the field of cultural studies, in particular the industry practice of news judgement (or the application of news values).

Masterton’s research shows that whilst journalists will draw from a uniform umbrella group of news values, in practice they produce a diversity of media content, because the variant lies with audience needs and perceptions, not with the newsmakers themselves. For example whenever and wherever leadership struggles occur—whether in the hierarchy of a local regional bowling club, or at a national level in a federal political party—journalists apply the fixed news values of ‘consequence’ ‘prominence’ and ‘conflict’ (as a raison-d’etre), because the story will have impact on readers/listeners/viewers who have a stake in information about prominent public figures in their local or national community.

Masterton reveals the way uniform news values are likely to produce diverse content using findings from a major quantitative survey. Conducted in several
countries and across different cultures, this work garnered a 20 per cent response rate from one thousand five hundred questionnaires distributed to journalists and editors (empowered to make independent decisions) in newspapers, agency and broadcast newsrooms, in one hundred and fifty-one different countries (Masterton 1998, pp.87-88).

Respondents ranked the influence of individual news values from a list of eight (Masterton 1998, p.89). The outcome showed—in addition to the given need for news to be ‘new’ (timeliness/currency)—that there were six universally shared values for hard\(^{11}\) news stories. These are consequence (or impact)\(^{12}\), proximity, conflict and prominence, followed by the ‘soft’ news values of human interest and novelty. These six were ‘so far ahead of any other in acceptance level that the rest don’t count’ (Masterton 1998, pp.87-92). Hirst (1998, p.328) also cites the ‘exceptional in Masterton’s rankings (below) where there was ‘only a handful of ‘votes’ in the decision to rank the list in the order chosen’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total points</th>
<th>Level of acceptance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consequence</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Interest</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novelty</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prominence</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The consensus in Masterton’s data suggests a significant level of proactive professionalism in journalists’ judgements about the newsworthiness of information that runs counter to theories based on their passive acceptance of prevailing orthodoxies

There are also alternate views in Australian scholarship in relation to the role of news writing and its inverted pyramid structure. Rather than seeing this as

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\(^{11}\) It should be noted that hard and soft are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however it is rare for instance, that information with impact is founded on novelty, and vice versa

\(^{12}\) The industry-wide names given to each news value can vary. The terms used by Masterton are explained and listed in Appendix 4.
part of a process of co-option (Ward 1995, p.103; Louw 2005 p.74), Avieson (1991) and Lloyd (2002) argue that the news writing style is neither deterministic nor hierarchical, but an effective journalistic tool that has stood the test of time.

For Avieson (1991, pp.15-22), the formulaic genre continues to be applied because it is a proven means of reaching a mass audience; it is a successful technique for distilling complex information into common sense, whereby otherwise inaccessible information is transformed into ‘brief, simple language’. Lloyd (2002) shows the ancient origin of news writing techniques, linking it to the advent of the European printing press and subsequent emergence of mass audiences. Lloyd cites a remarkable seventeenth century doctoral thesis by Tobias Peucer, a scholar from University of Leipzig discovered by Roy A. Atwood and Arnold S. de Beer in 1999 and made public in a paper titled The Roots of Academic News Research: Tobias Peucer's, “De relationibus novellis” (1690) and presented to a convention held in America (Lloyd 2002, p.2)13. In a personal discussion (with this author) about Atwood and De Beer’s 1999 convention paper, Lloyd explained the ancient Peucer document was:

Written in Latin, as was the scholarly custom of the day, Peucer's short dissertation of approximately 6,000 words was divided into 29 statements. It presented an historical overview and analysis of the forms, motivations and methods of news reporting (Lloyd 2001).

In their paper, Atwood and De Beer write:

Remarkably, [Peucer’s] six elements correspond directly to [today’s] “Five-Ws-and-an-H” approach to news writing that was institutionalised with the rise of commercial newspapers and in journalism training in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Character (or who?), Events (or what?), Cause (or why?), Manner (or how?), Place (or where?), Time (or when?) Peucer (1690 p. XXII) argued that the “diction or style” of news should not be poetic or rhetorical... Three hundred years later journalism teachers would tell their students that the poetic form is not suitable for news reports, because journalistic accounts should strive to give the essential elements of the story.

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by using clear, denotative language, such as that prescribed by the 5-W-and-an-H, as well as the inverted pyramid form (Atwood and De Beer 1999, pp.485-496).

Although written over three centuries ago ‘Peucer’s fascinating scholarship is ‘strikingly contemporary’ (Lloyd 2002, p.2), and proof that an effective writing technique can weather massive change in communication technologies.

The FPPG and political communication literature

In 2008 Mark Pearson and Roger Patching released a groundbreaking review of literature on government media relations. The 40,000-word document is a dense resource that collates and cross-references a large range of national and international source material. In line with the overseas trends noted in the first part of this chapter, Pearson and Patching note that the media relations ‘industry within Australian government and politics’ is a ‘large but under-researched field (s1.1, p.2). Their introduction points to the disappointing fact that this shortfall persists, in spite of the Australian High Court’s historic introduction of an ‘implied constitutional freedom of communication on matters of politics and government’ through its series of decisions in the 1990s that ‘underscored’ the importance of government media relations at ‘the interface between the executive and journalism’ [and are]:

Two of the fundamental institutions in a modern democratic society, [and] that line of communication is crucial if citizens are to be kept informed of the workings of government and the machinations of the political system (Pearson and Patching 2008, p.2).

The FPPG as a major topic

In the eighty-one years since the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) moved to Canberra, only four books feature the Canberra FPPG as a main topic (Lloyd 1988; Parker 1991; Payne 1999; Simons, 1999).
Clem Lloyd’s *The Parliament and the Press* (1988) stands alone. It is the first and only scholarly text to trace ‘how the press got into the Australian Parliament and to account for its subsequent relationship with the Parliament’. In this work research is concentrated within the following parameters (pp.2-3):

This [book] is neither comprehensive nor definitive; in no sense should it be regarded as either a history of Australian political journalism or of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery. Nor has it been conceived as a sociological study of political journalists and their milieu or as a contemporary analysis of how a Press Gallery system works. *Parliament and the Press* has been designed to fulfil three simple objectives:

1. to explain how the press got into the Australian Parliament,
2. to account for its subsequent relationship with the Parliament, and
3. to give some explanation albeit limited, of what is done there

Derek Parker’s *The Courtesans* (1991) contributes a hard-edged critique of Canberra press gallery journalists from 1983 to 1991, during the period when the Australian Labor Party was in government under the leadership of Prime Minister Bob Hawke. Parker’s scrutiny of key issues is an outsider’s probe into the work of seven high-profile gallery columnists, and an overly subjective approach adapts the ethnographic model (discussed earlier in this chapter) to emphasise the ‘kinds of people’ in the Canberra gallery, their status, political preferences, allegiances and professional pretension. Parker’s markedly hostile observations were also made from his perspective as a consultant to the shadow executive in the office of opposition leaders, John Howard and Andrew Peacock.

Although Parker adopts a serious research approach, he uses a wry construct to portray the federal gallery’s relationship with the executive as a love affair, fully consummated at the election victory of 1983. Parker describes this as a time that ‘marked the start of great benefits to both partners. Everybody wins…except the larger community and the principles of democracy’ (Parker 1991, p.14-15). His sweeping view is that the FPPG’s collective ‘love affair’
with the Hawke government forever destroyed its reputation for objectivity and credibility, and that:

The question is not whether a government seeks to use and control the media, including the Press Gallery; it is the nature of governments (and indeed, all those involved in the political contest) to do so, albeit with varying techniques. Historically, the Gallery has mainly resisted attempts, especially by governments, to incorporate it into partisan strategies. That pattern has ended with the Hawke Government (Parker 1991, p.4).

Parker concludes with a stinging indictment of the Australian fourth estate:

It is hard to believe that the end of the Gallery should it come about would be detrimental to Australian politics. In the end it does more harm than good: in its basic lack of even-handedness, in its disdain for the principles of democracy and in its narrowing of the range of political options. It is an institution which has grown too powerful for the system in which it exists (Parker 1991, p.180).

The Courtesans is a colourful exposition of the perennial frustration of trying to sway the news agenda from the opposition benches. Many in the gallery found his perspective lacked balance—Michelle Grattan (Age newspaper) for example, described Parker’s book as ‘excessively framed by his own ideological spectacles’ and his suggested removal of the FPPG as sour grapes, written by a conservative as a ‘gross overreaction’ to a nation-wide decline in conservatism during the 1980s’ (Grattan 1991, pp.8-10).

The Canberra Press Gallery and the Backbench of the 38th Parliament 1996-98 by Trish Payne (1999) makes a new and significant contribution to knowledge about the political media’s relationship to sources of information outside the government executive. It provides a fascinating snap shot of the early days of Prime Minister Howard’s long stewardship. Payne’s research was carried out in his first term, after the controversy surrounding rebel backbencher Pauline Hanson triggered policies for a stricter regime to ensure backbench discipline. The interview data in this thesis suggests that by the mid-2000’s measures in place had effectively cut journalists off from these (normally) useful sources of political information. The impact of this is apparent in the interview data discussed in chapters four and five of this thesis, and elsewhere in analysis of Howard’s command and control strategies over backbench dissent (Uhr 2005; Evans 2007).
Payne conducted this research as an Australian Parliamentary Fellow, from February to June 1997, and describes her work as:

[An] examination of present attitudes and practice that characterise the relationship between the gallery and the House of Representatives backbench...based primarily on the practitioners' own assessments. The analysis covers all backbenchers although some examples of the reportage are obviously confined to Coalition backbenchers. While the examination of the Tuesday Government Party Room briefing relates specifically to Coalition backbenchers there is some journalist comment relevant to the broader context of backbench communication with the gallery (Payne 1999, p.1).

The study is concerned with national media coverage of parliamentarians and includes ‘observation and analysis and interviews with backbenchers and gallery journalists... [as well as] monitoring of selected political coverage’ (Payne 1999, p.3). The interviews with journalists contain the insights of senior journalists in gallery bureaus with audiences in the major metropolitan centres in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania and Western Australia. Payne also includes journalists from the three main national print bureaus, the Australian Financial Review, The Australian and the Bulletin magazine—and the national wire service Australian Associated Press. In contrast with the self-reflective views of journalists in Edgar (1979), the aim and emphasis of this work is to highlight the outsiders’ perspective of incoming backbench MPs (Payne 1999, p.10).

Margaret Simons’ Fit to Print (1999) adopts the sociological style of Gans (1979). It is conceived as a view from the outside—where data is collected by a participant/observer. Simons spent several weeks of fieldwork inside The Australian newspaper’s press gallery bureau. It is a personal, accessible narrative by a journalist about other journalists, and divided into four self-referential chapters: Watching; Telling; Feeling; Seeing. Simons eschews Carey’s (2001) ‘lens of professional journalistic practice’, explaining that she was there to watch...these people [who] are watching for us, for those of us on the outside’ (Simons 1999, p.4-6).
*Fit to Print* is a valuable thumb nail sketch of several high-profile FPPG print journalists, three from the Fairfax group and one from News Ltd. (*The Sydney Morning Herald, Australian Financial Review, The Age, and The Australian*, respectively) and a selection from television bureaus. The writing style favours accessibility and informality. When contested issues arise—for example in Chapter two, where the gallery pack mentality is on display—the author adopts a theatrical style. Gallery journalists in pursuit of the same political news are portrayed ‘not as a pack of slavering wolves, but more a pack of over excited puppy dogs, twisting and turning, chasing each other and their own tails’.

Simons’ approach did not attract good press from the observees including from the bureau that hosted her fieldwork. In a review of the book published in *The Weekend Australian* on 15 July 1999, Dennis Shanahan wrote:

*Fit to Print* fails to tell us what the press gallery is exactly…and ignores the majority of its members. Instead it concentrates on a few television correspondents and the political teams of the big four papers…There is a floating population in the press gallery of around 200 members…Simons also ignores the vast output of the wire services, the work of correspondents for the popular tabloids that actually serve the majority of newspaper readers and the impact of commercial radio (Shanahan 1999).

**The FPPG in wider studies**

Five major works include the FPPG as part of a wider study of political communication. Two (Edgar 1979; Tiffen 1989) are significantly based on qualitative interview data and the other three (Schultz 1998; Ward 1995; Tiffen 1999) include the FPPG as a significant topic.

Edgar (1979) in *The Politics of the Press* presents a two-pronged analysis of political communication based on a content analysis of Victorian-based newspaper coverage of the highly charged post-dismissal federal election of 1975. As prelude to the latter, there is a separate chapter on the Canberra
gallery (Chapter 4). This is a dense source of empirical data drawn from (largely anonymous)\textsuperscript{14} in-depth interviews with political journalists, their managers and editors during prime ministership of Malcolm Fraser. Edgar reproduces the interview material as ‘fully as possible [in order to] develop a case through quoting extensively and allowing arguments to emerge through the interviews themselves’ (Edgar 1979, p.vii). The journalists:

\begin{quote}
describe their conditions of work, how they work, the groups in the Gallery, the changes over the years…Why political journalists do the work they do and what effect they think they have on political process is part of this discussion…All except two of the journalists who were interviewed are anonymous. Some forty journalists, who have either worked in the Canberra Press Gallery or do currently, were involved in the interviews and the discussion that follows… This is a study of political mass communicators, their environment and influence on the political process (Edgar 1979, pp.82-83).
\end{quote}

The themes and viewpoints in this data enhance the historical perspectives discussed in the next chapter of this thesis, and together with similar data gathered by Tiffen (1989) a decade later, provide invaluable continuity for several of the key themes in the contemporary interview data that underpin the analysis in later chapters of this thesis.

Tiffen’s \textit{News and Power} (1989) found journalists a ‘rich vein of interview data’. His is the most extensive work of its kind, containing data and analysis based on qualitative interviews from over two hundred journalists in five principal roles—editors, federal and state political reporters as well as industrial, business or economic correspondents (Tiffen 1989, p.8). The import of Tiffen’s interview data, combined with a ‘comparative case study approach’ is noted in Pearson and Patching (2008, p.3), who describe \textit{News and Power} as ‘Australia’s first significant research project on the relationship between news and politics’.

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{14} Of the forty journalist-participants, two agreed to reveal their identities and employers—Alan Reid (\textit{Daily Telegraph}) and Peter Samuel (\textit{Bulletin} magazine) (Edgar 1979, p.83).
\end{footnote}
Tiffen names interview participants but does not identify their employment positions—however it is possible to calculate that around a third were located in the federal gallery round. It differs in approach to Edgar (1979) in so far as the aim was ‘not to use the data to give a descriptive outline of the views or experiences of individual journalists’ [but],

…rather the data are used as evidence and illustration for the arguments advanced. Individual responses have been aggregated and contrasted to test impressions and ideas. Sometimes individual quotations are given, mainly anonymously except when identifying an individual helps to understand what was said, or where an observation deserves acknowledgement (Tiffen 1989, p.9).

Tiffen’s focus is on three key areas of the political news desk—the institutional process of ‘news making’, the news media’s centrality in the political arena that makes ‘news as a strategic arena’ and the political ‘impact’ of news (Tiffen 1989, p.52-69). Using this approach the work reveals interrelationships that defy the boundaries of the influential primary definer theory in so far as his research finds the most challenging aspect of political journalism lies in more complex notions of journalists’ relations with sources. Tiffen describes the mixture of dependence with a mandate to be a ‘watchdog’ requires cultivating a closeness that is in constant ‘tension with the need for an adversarial scepticism’; and that where there are ‘diverse sources’ with a strong ‘stake in publicity’ as well as an expectation of accountability, then ‘journalists’ power and news quality are greater’.

In addition, whilst Tiffen acknowledged ‘it may well be true that in journalist-source relations, ‘different standards of evidence are applied before high-level sources are criticised’ and there is a commensurate unwillingness to risk source ‘displeasure on minor stories…as far as major stories based on hard evidence were concerned’, Tiffen nonetheless found less ‘evidence of self-censorship in order to maintain success’ (Tiffen 1989, p.44).

The qualitative interview material in Edgar (1979), Tiffen (1989), Payne (1999), demonstrates the value of such data in providing extra insights into the
complexities at work in the political journalist-source relations. Future researchers could draw on the deep and as yet largely untapped reservoir of first-hand accounts and viewpoints of the fourth estate’s role in Canberra not only from the numerous autobiographies and biographies of federal gallery journalists and politicians, but also from the National Library of Australia’s oral history collection where there are over one-hundred audio recordings from journalists alone, dating back to the early 1960s.\footnote{At: <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/>. Subject: key words Journalists  Australia. Field: Audio.}

As mentioned above, although interview data are not a major factor, the FPPG is a significant topic in Schultz 1998; Ward, 1995; and Tiffen, 1999.

Julianne Schultz’s Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, accountability and the media (1998) is a well-recognised, seminal work that delivered the first comprehensive Australian-based analysis of the evolution, theories and practice of the fourth estate in Westminster-derived democracies. Its focus is the functioning of the fourth estate in the last decade of the twentieth century and examines its ‘continued legitimacy’ and identifies:

[The] five central elements that needed to be satisfied within the wide range of definitions of the ideal—political purpose and independence, commercial priorities, understanding of public opinion, diversity and accountability. I constructed each of these as a contest and considered whether they could be sustained from the perspective of the news media as an industry, and from the perspective of the journalists surveyed for this study (Schultz 1998, p.236).

Two of Schultz’s chapters (six and seven) make a significant contribution to knowledge about the attitudes of Australian political journalists drawn from data gathered from the substantial 1992 Media and Democracy survey. In this survey, two hundred and eighty-six Australian journalists responded to an identical questionnaire also administered in five other countries—‘one of the most ambitious cross-national studies of journalists ever undertaken’ (Schultz 1998, p.239). Australia’s 41 per cent response rate was high when compared with Britain (30) and the USA (40), and respectable in relation to a 50 per cent
rate in Italy, Germany and Sweden. Unlike in Henningham’s (1995) survey there is no specific category of FPPG journalists but the methodology Schultz applied to the selection of the survey’s six hundred respondents means it is feasible to read the findings as a general measure of FPPG sentiment. Schultz explains that ‘By concentrating on news journalists, especially those working for the leading national media and the most significant state news media’,

…the sample was shaped to represent those centrally concerned with politics and public affairs [and Schultz was confident] that the sample selected is representative of the attitudes, values [and] socio-demographics of the most important group of journalists in Australia (Schultz 1998, p.241).

In addition results were enhanced by data from a second round survey that targeted an ‘opinion leading group’ of fifty individuals on ‘the basis of their journalism’, made up of editors, producers, researchers and (investigative) reporters (Schultz 1998, p.241).

In Politics and the Media, Ian Ward (1995) explores a broad suite of twentieth century theorising. This work contains a thoroughgoing account of the main themes in public discourse drawn from semiotics and cultural studies in general and their relationship with public affairs. Federal gallery journalism is assessed in a complex tapestry that demonstrates how journalists working in any round face the ‘inherent danger’ of being captured by their sources. Ward (1995, p. 115) notes that parliamentary gallery rounds are best known for their ‘close contact [that] can result in reporters and sources sharing organisational cultures’.

Tiffen’s (1999) Scandals, Media Politics and Corruption in Contemporary Australia is a study of the ‘interplay between news media and political processes’ in reporting scandals from Australian public life, intended to examine how ‘scandals emerge in the news’ (Tiffen 1999, pp.12-13). An account of the role of political journalism appears in Chapter 8 titled ‘Lapdog, watchdog, wolf’ that examines the role of the fourth estate in exposing
corruption, as well as the limitations and constraints of journalism in the parliamentary round.

**The FPPG in unpublished works**

Two unpublished works are relevant to this research. Firstly, survey and qualitative interviews are combined in Richard Phillipps' PhD thesis *Media Advisers: Shadow players in political communication* (2002). Canberra-based personnel are included in sixty-five interviews held in most capital cities. It contains information regarding FPPG journalists’ interaction with media minders, from the vantage point of ‘the back-room staff often labeled spin-doctors or minders’ [including] their relationships with their political bosses and the media’, as well as examining ‘cases where the advisers’ media strategies appeared to work and others where they backfired badly’ (Pearson and Patching 2008, p.6). Secondly, Martin Hirst’s scholarship yielded two sources of rich data. In the first instance, complete transcripts of Hirst’s extensive qualitative interviews with federal parliamentary press gallery journalists at the time of the 1998 Constitutional Convention in Canberra were generously made available for this thesis; and in the second, Hirst’s dense theoretical analysis in his PhD thesis, *Grey Collar Journalism: The social relations of news production* (2002), draws on core aspects of these data (Hirst 1998; Hirst 2002, pp.219-260).

**The FPPG in Anthologies**

Pearson and Patching (2008, p.5.) note that several authors have undertaken commentary and analysis on government-FPPG relations as part of a larger study of politics. Examples included here are: *Not Just Another Business* (Schultz 1994), *Government Communication in Australia* (Young 2007a) and *Silencing Dissent* (Hamilton and Maddison 2007).
In Schultz (ed. 1994) two chapters relate directly to the role and processes of national political journalism—*Media Convergence and the Fourth Estate* (Schultz 1994, pp.15-33) and *Media and Democracy: Reclaiming an intellectual agenda* (Tiffen 1994, pp.53-67).

Three chapters in Young (ed. 2007a) traverse issues relating to the federal gallery—*Televising Parliament: Broadcasting, webcasting and public access* (Schultz 2007a, pp.65-92); *Politicians, Journalists and ‘Spin’* (Savage and Tiffen 2007, pp.79-92); *Theories of Government Communication: Trends in the UK* (McNair 2007, pp.93-109).


**The FPPG in Educational Texts**

Federal political journalism in Australia and elsewhere is a significant point of reference in tertiary texts designed for media and politics studies. One such text is Eric Louw’s *The Media and Political Process* (2005), aspects of which are discussed earlier in this chapter. Overall, this work explores the relationship between the media and politics in contemporary Western democracies and ‘aims to introduce undergraduates to a range of themes associated with ‘hype making’ (described as a particular kind of image making) that has ‘grown into a central feature of the political process’.

Federal gallery journalism sits at the margins in Margaret Simons’ (2007) *The Contentmakers: Understanding the media in Australia*, the aim of which is to explore the ‘state of play’ in the Australian media generally.
Simons explains her work as ‘partly a personal journey—the story of my own love-and-hate affair with the profession of journalism’ that seeks to find ‘a good way forward at a time of great change in the media’. To find this, she argues ‘we need to distinguish between the content of media and the business of media’.

This is a thoroughly researched, reference resource divided into five categories: (I) a broad historical tour of ‘our key media organisations arranged according to their business models’, (II) an examination of ‘the culture of the content makers’ as it is ‘they who will have to shape up to the challenges of the present and the future’ [in order to] find ‘a good way forward’, (III) updated information on media ownership in Australia, (IV) and (V) contemporary data on federal laws relating to ownership and other media regulation implemented by the Howard government during 2006, and (VI) an epilogue where the author contemplates the most likely future directions in the Australian media, and journalism in particular (Simons 2007, pp.xiii –xvi).

Descriptions of the role and function of the gallery are a natural inclusion in Wayne Errington’s and Narelle Miragliotta’s Media and Politics: An Introduction (2007) an educational text designed to ‘critically examine dominant assumptions of the role of the media in a liberal democracy like Australia’ (Errington and Miragliotta 2007, p. vii). Reference to the journalist-politician relationship can be found in particular in The Politics of spin (Chapter 5) and New media and the prospects for democracy (Chapter 10). Each of the eleven chapters concludes with an update of current Debates and controversies in the topic area.

**Literature review: Summary**

This examination of the place of federal political journalism in Australian literature shows that it is predominantly descriptive, and with the exception of
Edgar (1979), Tiffen (1989) and Payne (1999) there is a scarcity of scholarship with an in-depth focus on the particularities of the federal political journalism round.

In general the literature demonstrates the two blind spots identified by European scholars (Kuhn and Neveu 2002, pp.1-3) namely the lack of long-term historical analyses of the development of political journalism over time and a shortfall of research that takes into account political journalist viewpoints of the practical realities and complexities involved in their relationships with sources.

To date there has been limited scholarly analysis of three significant issues—the origins and evolution of conventions unique to Canberra’s style of management, the impact of major structural changes in the configuration and make-up of the FPPG, and lastly the extent to which ‘media minders’ became part of the phenomenon identified by Tiernan (2004, p.15) of ministerial staff adopting practices perceived as the ‘exercise of executive authority’. These three factors are addressed in subsequent chapters in this thesis.

**Part four: Overview of the thesis**

In its entirety this thesis represents an important original contribution to literature on federal political journalism in the broader field of Australian political communication. It fills a gap in literature where there is a shortfall in scholarly analyses that includes the standpoint of journalists working in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG). Moreover, the extensive literature review undertaken by Pearson and Patching (2008, p.2.) noted ‘no recent research project has been undertaken to discover and theorise upon empirical data on the interface between government and the media in Australia’.

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16 The resource is 40,000 words in length
The new research in this thesis analyses empirical interview data from FPPG journalists to discover and theorise on major aspects of the executive-gallery interface during a specific period of governance. A multi-method research approach combines elite interviewing techniques with documentary research strategies and case studies. Together they build a descriptive account of the executive-journalist interrelationship and show that it reached an historic nadir during the period of the Howard government (1996-2007).

Overarching this study is the confluence of circumstance and leadership—where a prime minister from the strong-leader mould (Brett 2007) skilfully harnessed the media technologies of that time and built on long-standing conventions in government-media relations, to deliver the executive hitherto unrealised levels of control and ascendency.

**Chapter summary**

*Chapter One—‘Introduction’*. This chapter introduces the research topic and research questions and describes the study’s multi-method research approach. It reviews the place of this thesis in Australian political communication literature and discourse, noting that there is a common international scarcity in knowledge based studies from the standpoint of political journalists. It describes the way this study contributes to filling a significant gap in analysis of reporting from the FPPG during periods of governance.

*Chapter Two—‘Lasting legacies’*. The historical overview in this chapter discusses the unique formative years in Canberra and the lasting impact of the circumstances that led the Australian parliament to step back from a tradition of the physical separation of parliament from the executive and the media. Unlike comparative parliaments elsewhere ministerial and media bureau have continued to inhabit parliament house. Key effects of this unusual arrangement on the evolution of government-FPPG relations are noted in a

Chapters Three, Four and Five address the research question with a three-part analysis of the qualitative data drawn from interviews conducted in mid-2003 and mid-2004. Twenty-five journalists from the FPPG’s thirty-three mainstream broadcast and print bureaus agreed to participate and their overall willingness to answer open-ended questions ‘on the record’ added valuable contextual information to a dense amount of empirical data that in turn, generated a range of themes. The most predominant themes fell into the three main categories that are discussed separately in these chapters. The Interface (Chapter 3) deals with developments in relation to face-to-face fora such as interviews, press conferences and background briefings. Spinning along the Information Highway (Chapter 4) explores gallery journalists’ reduced access to political news from electronic and text documents arising from an increase in government strategies to control the flow of political information, including the deployment of sophisticated modern surveillance techniques made possible by new digital media technologies. News values in the New Parliament House (Chapter 5), examines changes in conventions surrounding the relative news values of political information generated by the executive and the parliament, and the extent to which the new building’s architecture facilitated the implementation of policies designed to maximise executive control of political news.

Chapter Six—‘Case Studies’.
The case studies in this chapter describe events that illustrate different aspects of the extent of structural and conventional change in executive-media relations during Howard’s prime ministership. The first concerns an event in October 2003, when the Prime Minister was at his zenith as a strong
leader, in particular in his role as high-profile support for the post 9/11 global ‘war on terrorism’. The backdrop is the visit of U.S. President George W. Bush to Canberra and his address to a joint sitting of both houses of the Australian parliament. The study shows this 48-hour whirlwind visit left in its wake a number of major and challenging issues relating to the sovereignty of Australian parliament and FPPG’s quasi-institutional fourth estate role.

The second case serves to illustrate the way an unregulated relationship based on ad hoc privileging will inevitably play into divisive leadership rivalry and further the journalistic dilemma when ministers outsource this arbitrary favouritism to their media minders or spin-doctors. The case adds to examples of the need to create an overt agreement between parliament, the executive and the media.

Chapter Seven—‘Conclusion and future implications’ This concluding chapter summarises the main findings of this thesis, and explores their implication for the future functioning of a healthy Australian fourth estate as it faces the challenges of the increasingly diverse and demanding media landscape of 21st century new digital and internet technologies.
Chapter Two: Lasting legacies

Introduction

This chapter configures historical data to frame the research questions raised in this thesis. The database for this task reflects the significant shortfall in scholarship relating to the main focus of the study. The previous chapter identified a sparse field of major literature directly relating to the workings of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) and its relationship with the executive during periods of governance. However, the late Professor Clem Lloyd published an extensive body of work over two decades from 1979 to 1998 (Lloyd 1979; 1980; 1992; 1998; 2002). The Parliament and the Press (1988) is notable for being the only significant scholarly work to document the foundation and development of the FPPG. Although this chapter necessarily draws heavily from Lloyd’s rich legacy, it is counterbalanced with a fresh approach, original analysis, reference to complementary scholarship and documentary research to verify and extend themes relevant to this thesis.

The chapter describes key events from the FPPG’s foundation years in Canberra, following the relocation of the federal parliament and administration from Melbourne to the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in 1927. It explains the factors at work that led the national parliament to break away from Westminster conventions to physically include office space for both the executive and the media inside the parliament and its precincts.

This unique arrangement is recognised as a contributing factor to the executive’s capacity to prevail over the legislature (Macintyre 2008; Chalmers and Davis 2000-2001). However, there has not been a commensurate examination of the way it has reinforced government control over media
relations and moreover, increased the centrality of the office of Prime Minister. Both became hallmarks of the Howard years.

This chapter aims to redress this by exploring government-media relations under six prime ministers whose management strategies had lasting impacts that contributed to the landscape inherited by Prime Minister Howard in 1996. The prime ministers date back to John Curtin (1941-1945)—in office during the conflagration of World War II, the record sixteen year post-war incumbency of Robert Menzies (1949-1966), the short robust, reformist prime ministership of Gough Whitlam (1972-1975), and the three consecutive post-Whitlam and pre-Howard prime ministers, Malcolm Fraser (1975-1983), Bob Hawke (1983-1991) and Paul Keating (1991-1996).

Canberra precedents

After the Australian states federated in 1901 sessions of the federal parliament were located in Melbourne for twenty-six years until the hotly debated site for a national capital was resolved. During this time parliamentary conventions adhered to the Westminster model, including the location of media bureaus outside the parliamentary precinct. In Lloyd’s view it was during this time that:

Perhaps the closest Australia has ever come to a genuinely political press, in the sense of a press ethos and practice largely shaped by its political coverage, particularly of Parliament, emerged through the combination of a strong and increasingly assertive Victorian state governance with powerful, politically oriented newspapers. By the time of federation the Melbourne press—particularly the *Age* and the *Argus*—exerted an influence which they were able to sustain, even enhance, in the new national Parliament (Lloyd 1998, pp.3-4).

However when the national government moved to Canberra in 1927, the co-location of offices for the executive and the media steered government-media

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17 With one short-lived exception: The first federal legislature occupied the building of the former Victorian colonial parliament, and for a time, until a separate gallery space was created the FPPG reported from a space on the floor of the House of Representatives (Lloyd 1998, p.3).
relations into unknown territory, setting precedents paralleled in no other Westminster-model (Fewtrell 1985, pp.324-325; Lloyd 1988, p.255; Steketee 1996, p.195; Macintyre 2008, p.13). At that time in the purpose-built Australian Capital Territory, apart from the parliament house, most administrative buildings were under construction and ill-prepared for the arrival of government business when ‘the red mud of unmade roads deterred access’. During these frontier-like days the executive occupied one wing of the parliament based on the (false) assumption ‘it would eventually move into department (sic) offices as the public service trickled into Canberra’ (Lloyd 1988, p.81) and consequently:

Ministers grew accustomed to administering their departments from Parliament House
… Departmental officers took their files and paper to Parliament House…[and] the Cabinet room was moved to the Prime Minister’s parliamentary suite, with the Prime Minister directing the government from Parliament House.

[Thus],
…accommodation provided to ministers as parliamentarians was appropriated for executive purposes. Inevitably, the basic offices consumed additional space for public servants and staff. Most ministers had no departmental offices and the few that did found them inconvenient to use (Lloyd 1998, p.5).

A second Westminster practice—to limit media presence inside the parliament to a dedicated gallery space above each chamber and a common ‘writing up’ room—was practised for a short period by the fledgling federal parliament in Melbourne, where accommodation for media bureaus was located in the commercial sector well beyond the parliament. In Canberra although plans were in place for proprietors to rent bureaus in the new township Canberra, construction was slow and the common ‘writing up’ area inside the federal parliament was divided into separate and competing commercial media bureaus for a ‘peppercorn’ rent. It was occupied ‘in a manner not dissimilar to the British land enclosures’ and when ‘the administration came to parliament house…so did the press’, and they came to stay (Lloyd 1998, p.5)18.

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Once ensconced, the media’s status and freedom within the building came under the purview of parliament through the Speaker of the House of Representatives and President of the Senate. They controlled journalists’ access through a system of media passes that could be withdrawn for breaches of privilege (or contempt) if their reporting was deemed to undermine the dignity and authority of the parliament. However Westminster’s majoritarian system with its distinctive tendency ‘to concentrate executive power’ (Patapan and Weller 2005, p.253; Lovell 1994, p.121) is a circumscription on the independence of presiding officers who are effectively appointed by the governing, partisan executive. Although governments rarely secure majority control in the Senate and technically the Senate President could counterbalance the de-facto power of his colleague in the House, Lloyd found that up until the reforms of the 1970s the Senate was more often than not, ‘moribund’ and it is only true in theory to say that the ‘executive has no power to regulate the press gallery except through parliament’. In those days the Senate was,

...very much a subordinate arm of a constitutional government with the press gallery mesmerised by the exhibition of power by the executive government daily, in the House of Representatives chamber (Lloyd 1998, p.1).

**Roundsmen and ad hoc elitism**

In another break with tradition in Canberra, the federal political media also eschewed the Westminster practice of an open, formal recognition of a division of labour between specialist political journalists covering the executive (‘the Lobby’) and political journalists covering the parliament\(^\text{19}\). As a result, in Australian there is no equivalent of Washington’s dedicated corps of journalists to cover the Congress, nor of the UK ‘press gallery’ (or parliamentary round) in Westminster. Instead the FPPG as a whole grew into

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\(^{19}\) The practice of a tangible separation of executive and legislature reporters is at its most overt in Washington, where political journalists are assigned either to the executive round as members of White House press corps, or to legislative round as members of the Congressional and/or Senate rounds.
an unwieldy unitary corps akin to the executive (White House) round in the US, and the executive or ‘Lobby’ round in the UK.

On the surface, Canberra’s adoption of a unitary gallery model (conveniently) housed inside the federal parliament may have seemed a more egalitarian notion. In practice it allowed the executive to privilege at its discretion, an ad hoc, arbitrary and innately elitist two-track system of specialist or executive ‘roundsmen’ and parliamentary reporting was left to a transient corps of lower status journalist-stenographers. Like so much else in the formative days of the federal capital matters of convenience often developed into convention.

In the first two decades an estimated\textsuperscript{20} ten to twelve newspaper roundsmen (from most metropolitan media) were permanently posted to bureaus inside the Canberra parliament, and their Lobby-like work was made all the more comfortable by the close proximity of the executive. General handouts such as press releases or briefing notes were rare and non-attributable, briefings were part of a procedure where federal roundsmen met near the prime minister’s office, and went as a group to see members of the ministry and heads of government departments. The media assigned coverage of parliamentary proceedings to a transient interstate workforce of ‘lower ranking, less-experienced journalists’ despatched to Canberra only when the federal parliament was in session. Twelve years after its formation in 1939 the Canberra FPPG consisted of a permanent corps of ten to twelve journalists and was more than outnumbered by the back-up squad of around twenty parliamentary reporters (Lloyd 1979, pp.37-38).

\textit{Ramshackle rules}

Amongst the political journalists assigned to the Canberra FPPG there was a marked absence of an institutionalised division of labour. They could drift into

\textsuperscript{20} There is no official record of the gallery’s size and composition between 1927-1950. Lloyd based this estimate on data collected from ‘the recollections of men who served in the gallery’ (Lloyd 1979, pp.36-37).
the lobbies, corridors and members rooms pick up gossip, amplify what happened in the chamber and glean factional information from party informants. But they were ultimately dependent on the executive for their main source of political news. This de-facto form of lobby journalism devoid of formal rules or guidelines, emerged from the unusual circumstances in Canberra and an environment of ‘arbitrary and ramshackle’ regulation became a defining feature of Australian political journalism. (Lloyd 1980, p.101; Lloyd 1988, p.31, p.206, p.184 and p.231; Lloyd 1992, p.123 and p.136).

Without the compass of Westminster precedents key aspects of the media’s interrelationship with the executive and the parliament evolved through trial and error. On the one hand Canberra political journalists enjoyed the unparalleled freedom of a workplace within the precincts of the parliamentary building uniquely co-occupied by the executive. Their media passes permitted freedom of movement well beyond their bureaus and to the lobbies, to the members’ hall, the library, the gardens, dining rooms and bar. On the other hand it challenged the executive to assert its primacy over the FPPG and in 1931, barely five years after the move from Melbourne, the gallery-executive interrelationship was in turmoil.

Labor Prime Minister James Scullin (1929-1932) and Speaker of the House of Representatives, Norman Makin created uproar by withdrawing the media pass of a respected and influential journalist, Joe Alexander from Keith Murdoch’s Melbourne Herald bureau. Alexander attracted government wrath for writing a news story based on leaked cables between the prime minister and other members of the incumbent Labor party. Although the story provided no new information it contained evidence of dissention in the Labor cabinet and caucus. Scullin’s Attorney General ordered the Commonwealth police to start criminal inquiries. The Speaker ‘demanded to know how (the documents) had come into his possession’. Alexander predictably stuck to the journalistic imperative to protect confidentiality, and refused to reveal the identity of his source—but he also defiantly pointed out that the documents were not
parliamentary papers but dealt with internal party matters within the executive government. At the same time he drew attention to the fact that it was unprecedented ‘for the Speaker to act as an instrument of the Executive Government in awarding punishment of an offence or alleged offence’. Even so, Alexander’s media pass was removed and he was banished from reporting the House of Representatives for five months (Lloyd 1988, pp.94-103).

This precedent-setting confrontation did not prompt Scullin to produce clear written guidelines for the conduct of relations between the media and the executive, and instead he opted to speak to the parliament in vague and moralistic terms enjoining journalists to be ‘gentlemen and men of honour’ not to ‘surreptitiously acquire information’ and:

If there are pressmen who insist upon a lower standard, and who would adopt no better role of conduct than that of the eavesdropper, it becomes necessary to protect the public interest and public confidence (Scullin 1931, p.1-3).

Alexander’s pass was re-instated only after protracted correspondence between the Australian Journalists’ Association and the parliament’s presiding officers and an ambiguous reassurance from Alexander that he ‘came by the information’ in ‘an honourable and legitimate way’ (Lloyd 1979, p.27). The Alexander case shows there was no executive will to resolve the underlying need for formal, open rules of engagement. This suggests Scullin was doubtless cognisant of the advantages of uncertainty outlined by (Lloyd 1988, p.104):

Taking the Alexander case to its limit, the Presiding Officers might exclude all journalists from a particular newspaper, or strike hard at journalists from newspapers opposed to the government.

The incident can be seen as the first definitive example of the way ad hoc arrangements primarily work in favour of the executive’s media management. It was an early lesson for Canberra’s nascent close-knit but inevitably competitive media. It demonstrated that without formal status the executive through the partisan approved parliamentary officers, had the innate capacity.
to keep political journalists on unpredictable ground and their rights of access to political information, subject to political whim. This, in turn, also helps explain the executive and parliament’s long-standing resistance to any form of institutional recognition of the Canberra fourth estate—broad guidelines did not appear until the late 1960s, after the FPPG had become larger, more diverse and more unwieldy. The guidelines were not however, a step towards the constitutional concordat mooted by Speaker Archie Cameron in the early 1950s (discussed in more detail below) but rather a guide to the ‘rules of engagement’. They continue to be a product of a reactive process overseen by the parliament’s Procedure Committee and since the 1970s new rulings have largely been in response to developments in media technology. The result is a large number of defensively detailed guidelines to control journalists’ audio, photographic and television coverage of parliamentary proceedings. Examples range from an on-going ban on tape/digital audio recording and detailed restrictions on audiovisual images from still photography and television (House of Representatives Procedure Committee 2004, pp. 11-19).

Prime ministerial legacies

The six prime ministers selected for this study have been chosen because their media management strategies had lasting impacts on the executive-media relations landscape, still discernible during the period under study (1996-2007) The prime ministers date back to John Curtin (1941-1945), the record sixteen year post-war incumbency of Robert Menzies (1949-1966), the short robust, reformist prime-ministership of Gough Whitlam (1972-1975), and the three consecutive post-Whitlam and pre-Howard prime ministers, Malcolm Fraser (1975-1983), Bob Hawke (1983-1991) and Paul Keating (1991-1996).
John Curtin (1941-1945)

The crisis of World War II revealed the latent potency of executive management over media relations and strategies adopted by Labor Prime Minister John Curtin would subsequently be refined and strengthened, particularly during the long 17-year Cold War incumbency of Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies (1949-1966).

The Canberra media’s two-tier practice of permanent political journalists and temporary teams of parliamentary reporters established a hierarchy that was refined by Curtin to create a third layer of selectively privileged journalists from among the elite roundsmen and introduce the distribution of media releases and statements (or ‘handouts’) for those outside his inner circle.

Curtin restricted press conferences to bureau heads as a group of trusted senior journalists. The group travelled with the Prime Minister throughout the war and Curtin would ‘jocularly [refer to them] as his travelling circus’ (Lloyd, 1979, p.44; 1980, p.104). They and their employers were secret beneficiaries of twice daily, non-attributable background briefings that extended to travelling with the Prime Minister to Melbourne and Sydney for War Cabinet meetings (Fraser 1968). In short:

Curtin filtered an immense amount of confidential information about the conduct of the war to these journalists, and this in turn was conveyed to newspaper officers, not for publication but so that senior management and editors could interpret the war in an accurate context (Lloyd 1980, p.104).

Although it is usual for media in Westminster democracies to suspend or soften many of the robust traditions of the fourth estate to accommodate the heightened responsibility of national security during wartime, it was taken to great lengths in Canberra. Long-time gallery member Don Whittington observed that most journalists scrupulously observed Curtin’s confidence and

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21 Fraser, A.D. Unpublished Interview. Fraser worked as a Canberra Federal roundsman for the *Sydney Sun* and *Daily Mirror* from 1929 to 1943.
were in ‘awe at the enormity of the trust he [Curtin] reposed in them’ (Whittington 1977, pp. 57 and 77). Significantly, their compliance was in addition to the executive’s heavy\textsuperscript{22} strictures on reporting imposed through the Commonwealth Chief Censor.

Moreover, gallery journalists did not complain about the suspension of their freedom of movement around parliament and its precincts when they were banned from lobbies while party meetings were held or refused access to the library. As the Melbourne *Herald* bureau’s veteran journalist Joe Alexander noted (in private correspondence) gallery journalists ‘acquiesced in, virtually without objection’ even though their access to ministers was being ‘whittled down to hand-outs’ (Alexander 1966).

It seems likely that this tendency towards timidity was underscored by events in 1942 when gallery journalists and media proprietors alike were reminded of the perilous nature of their access. In June that year, the Curtin government became embroiled in a controversial Senate decision to remove *Sunday Telegraph* journalist, Richard Hughes’ media pass as punishment for an article headlined ‘Those meddlesome old men of the Senate’. In spite of the fact that the offending article only referred to Senators, House of Representatives speaker W.M. Nairn made the arbitrary decision to also deny access to the House and for good measure, extended the punishment to invalidate the media passes of all Hughes’ colleagues—all fellow employees of the media magnate Frank Packer, working in the gallery’s *Sunday* and *Daily Telegraph* bureau.

This sweeping and manifestly unjust, action is a stark illustration of the power of ad hoc, selective privileging to divide groups of competitive individuals. Hughes’ gallery colleagues did not protest on his behalf, limiting their solidarity to a request that Hughes’ fellow employees be spared\textsuperscript{23}. The Packer bureau

\textsuperscript{22} Described as a ‘staggering range of proscriptions’ (Lloyd 1988, pp.131-132).

\textsuperscript{23} Hughes biographer Norman Macswan (1983), records that a few individuals broke ranks and risked their media passes to secretly supply the exiled journalists with information.
was effectively closed for business for four months, and media passes restored only after the proprietor reluctantly agreed to give a personal, written reassurance to both presiding officers that any offence was unintentional (Lloyd 1988, p.152). The gallery’s feeble acceptance is a telling contrast with its united and robust support for Alexander in the nascent days of 1931, and suggests that ten years of ill-defined rules and an executive favouritism diminished their capacity for collective action.

**The post-Curtin years**

In the aftermath of Curtin’s prime ministership and two decades into the life of the Canberra-based Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery—in the mid-1940s—a process based largely on trial and error produced a number of discernable patterns that, in retrospect, laid the groundwork for future conventions in executive-gallery relations. Lloyd 1992, p.115 provides a useful summary of practices that by 1945 had ‘acquired a certain stability’:

1. Prime Ministers accepted the principal responsibility for the presentation of the federal government in the media and for the conduct of formal relations with the media. The prime ministers did not however invariably accept an overriding responsibility for co-ordination of media strategy and presentation.
2. Prime Ministers also accepted the principal responsibility for the presentation of party policy through the media, particularly during election campaigns.
3. The principal media institution involved in the prime minister’s relations with the media was the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery.
4. Prime Ministers appointed press secretaries24 and established a press officer within their personal offices to facilitate their media relations.
5. Prime Ministers’ press conferences provided a formal, albeit irregular conduit between prime ministers and media.
6. The media increasingly (sic) recognised the likelihood that prime ministers or their delegates would increasingly try to manage or manipulate them (Lloyd 1992, p.115).

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24 In Australia, ‘press secretary’ as the political job description [was later] replaced by the term ‘media adviser’ in recognition that broadcast media (radio and TV [and] internet and sites like MySpace and YouTube) ...to flag the fact that they required a different set of skills from the press secretaries of [the print era] (Pearson and Patching 2008, p.10).
Points 4 to 6 suggest the roots of today’s corps of partisan media minders or ‘spin-doctors’ dates back to the late 1940s. The frustration of the second-tier gallery journalists permanently based in the FPPG was summed up by an anonymous journalist and by the journalists’ union newspaper *The Journalist*:

A ‘cyclostyled’ substitute for a personal interview between pressmen and politicians or [the] executive, and subsidiary to the collection of news by interview… [and] Suspect from before its birth until after its burial in the wastepaper basket (Australian Journalists’ Association 1948, p.3).

The next part of this chapter turns to the legacies of another five prime ministers, selected because each significantly expanded or altered the course of executive-gallery relations. In different ways and extents, Prime Ministers Robert Menzies (Liberal Party), Gough Whitlam (Labor Party), Malcolm Fraser (Liberal Party), Bob Hawke (Labor Party) and Paul Keating (Labor Party), refined Curtin’s legacy with strategies to enhance executive ascendancy, or to add new dimensions to the (perennially) unwritten ‘terms of engagement’ with gallery journalists.

**Robert Menzies (1949-1966)**

The first official list of gallery members was published at the beginning of Menzies’ long incumbency in 1950. It reveals the number of journalists permanently based in Canberra had grown to thirty-six (from eighteen news organizations), outnumbering the estimated twenty sessional reinforcements whose numbers included ‘a team of five or six journalists assigned by newspapers subscribing to *Australian Associated Press*’ (Lloyd1979, pp.39-40).

Twelve years later in 1962, the numbers were much the same. Wire service and radio broadcasts of parliament were yet to occupy permanent bureaus but public radio in particular had made its mark in the gallery. The ABC (then called Australian Broadcasting Commission) bureau first established with one
journalist in 1939 had expanded to five full-time radio journalists by 1962, including an inaugural diplomatic correspondent. These numbers put the broadcaster on a par with major print newspaper bureaus such as the Sydney morning papers that had four journalists each, and the Melbourne Age had three (Bennetts 1962, p.9). Although the make up of the gallery had diversified from its print-only origins, the stasis in journalists permanently stationed in Canberra was a cause for concern and compared unfavourably with Britain and America where ‘enough journalists’ were permanently employed ‘to permit a high degree of specialization’:

In London and Washington one finds [permanent, legislative] gallery reporters, lobby correspondents, men who specialize in covering particular departments and groups of departments, science correspondents, diplomatic correspondents, defence correspondents and so on. In Canberra, no newspaper maintains a large enough staff to permit much specialization (Bennetts 1962, pp.5-6).

The Cold War overarched Menzies’ record 17-year prime ministership and as was the case during the Second World War, national security continued to leaven the government’s relations with the media. Throughout Menzies’ (second) prime ministership repeated international crises threatened to escalate into world war—the Berlin Blockade (1948–1949), the Korean War (1950–53), the Vietnam War (1959–1975) and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962).

On the home front, Menzies’ ascendency was all but unchallengeable as the international ideological divide tore apart the opposition Labor Party. In this context Menzies skilfully consolidated and extended close communication with media proprietors and like Curtin before him, privileged a senior clique of political journalists for background policy briefings from ministers and bureaucrats, whilst simultaneously restricting broader gallery access. Wallace Brown, the Queensland Courier-Mail’s longest serving member of the gallery, recalled that on his arrival mid-way through Menzies’s lengthy incumbency:

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25 Menzies first term as Prime Minister was as leader of the United Australia Party from April 1939 to August 1941.
In 1961 I came here relatively young, I was about 31 when I came here and worked for the Herald Weekly Times group and then the Courier-Mail...there were a lot of veteran people in the gallery then who sort of handed down their wisdom. This was pre-television, we're talking newspapers now, the newspaper correspondents at the time were part of the establishment really, they were feted almost by diplomats and the town was full of pollies [politicians] and ministers and it was all pretty small and clubby for that reason (Brown 1988; cited in Hirst 1998, p.2).

In the first year of Menzies’ post-war prime ministership, the executive-approved presiding officer in the House, Speaker Archie Cameron, expressed concern that ‘no attempt had ever been made to examine the relationship of the press to this Parliament’ and floated the notion that a committee be set up to examine whether the informal arrangements could be replaced by ‘some sort of concordat to put the press-parliamentary relationship on a constitutional basis’ (Cameron 1951, p.1645). This seemingly practical proposal floundered amongst the executive advantages of an unregulated relationship. Ironically, several years later in 1954, Cameron would argue it was imperative that the media’s status inside the parliament be subject to the vagaries of executive government ‘grace and favour’. In a speech to parliament in support of a decision to abolish the 1/- peppercorn rent charged to media proprietors occupying media bureaus inside parliament, he stressed the ‘press is here by grace and not by right’ warning ‘if people pay rental they have tenant rights’ (Cameron 1954, p.2783).

Cameron’s term as Speaker came to be characterised by the meting out ad hoc oral and written punishments. Journalists were variously banned from the library and the internal gardens for ‘eavesdropping’, or because they criticised politicians’ behaviour. In 1951 for instance, the entire gallery was temporarily confined to its quarters and banned from the parliamentary precincts for two days, after a newspaper article criticised parliamentarians’ use of the members’ bar and other amenities (Lloyd 1979, p.29).
In parliament itself, a tame backbench, a less than robust Senate and a splintered opposition all strengthened prime ministerial control of media relations. ‘Handouts’ developed into a major news system for gallery journalists, distributed through a wall of media boxes26 (or pigeon holes) in the press gallery precinct. Press conferences were few and far between, largely because Menzies adopted the view that important issues must first be conveyed to the parliament and the media should wait its turn. Lloyd describes this as a ‘hoary, and somewhat dubious, tradition [and] was applied when Parliament wasn’t sitting’ (Lloyd 1998, p.7). Journalists assigned to cover Menzies’ official overseas visits were similarly stonewalled as the following quote from former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (in Weller 1989, p.194) shows. Fraser’s witness account describes a press conference at the Australian Ambassador’s residence in Washington where Menzies asked the assembled media:

‘Now what do you fellows think you want to know? ‘Sir, you’ve just had confidential discussions with the President. Can you tell us about them?’ ‘Young man, you’ve answered your own question’… ‘Didn’t you call those discussions confidential?’ ‘Do you expect me to advise you of their substance before I’ve spoken to my colleagues in Australia?’ ‘Sir, is there any particular purpose in your being in the US at this time?’ Do you expect me to tell you that before I’ve informed the Australian parliament?’ ‘Right, is there anything [more] you fellows want to learn?’

Menzies’ record-long prime ministership (1949-1966) bestrode the two great technological innovations of his era and he was very much a ‘man of his time’. In opposition Menzies developed an intimate and expert understanding of radio technology, appreciative of its revolutionary capacity to deliver a direct line of communication into every household. From the opposition benches and to assist in the foundation of the Liberal party, Menzies made 105 national broadcasts between January 1942 and April 1944 (Richardson 2002, p.176) and in 1943, published a book based on transcripts from those broadcasts

26 The boxes can be seen as a physical manifestation of the notion of a unitary gallery. With the assistance of a buzzer linked to all media bureaus they continue to give equal and simultaneous access to information the executive and parliamentarians deem appropriate for general distribution.
(Menzies 1943). As well, Menzies was an infamously prolific home moviemaker and honed a suite of audio-visual skills from cinema news broadcasts. Thus he was more than ready for the onset of television in 1956:

In the latter years of [Menzies] Prime Ministership...the press conferences became television spectacles, with the Prime Minister as compere and star performer, and members of the gallery as 'extras'...The Prime Minister spoke only for attribution ...Because he was in sight and hearing of the electorate, Menzies obviously felt constrained to discourage questioning about sensitive and controversial issues [and] senior members of the gallery saved their best questions for more discreet encounters with other members of the Government, rather than risk being rebuffed or ridiculed publicly by the Prime Minister (Lloyd 1979, p.55-56).

A spectacular event in 1955 at once demonstrated the power of the executive over the media, and its capacity to undermine journalists’ solidarity. The incident involved the notorious humiliation and jailing of two relatively minor players in federal political journalism, Brian Fitzpatrick from the Sydney suburban newspaper, the Bankstown Observer and Frank Browne, a freelance journalist who produced an independent newsletter The Things I Hear. The executive-approved Privileges Committee found Browne guilty of a serious breach for writing a scathing article about a Liberal backbencher, and when the Bankstown Observer criticised this decision Fitzpatrick was likewise charged with contempt. In an act reminiscent of the autocratic actions against journalists and editors during the colonial rule of British Governors in the 19th Century, Browne and Fitzpatrick were jailed.

Lloyd’s account (1988, pp.199-201 and p.258) is a significant illustration of the executive’s latent authoritarianism with respect to principles of transparency and freedom of the media:

[Menzies] virtually acted as judge advocate to put a powerful case to the parliament for punitive action against Browne and Fitzpatrick...This meant the arraignment of the offenders before the House and the imposition of a gaol sentence...Browne and Fitzpatrick were brought to the Bar of the House, and without benefit of counsel, addressed it...and the two were gaoled for three months.

[and as was the case during the Hughes case under Curtin],
…showed the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery as evincing callousness to the fundamental rights of individuals who were entitled to be recognised as press colleagues in an invidious predicament. The Gallery was more concerned with protecting its collective hide and distancing itself from two miscreants, than sounding any call for press rights.

**The post-Menzies years**

A major focus of this chapter is the exploration of prime ministerial strategies that effected major shifts in the executive-media relationship during periods of governance. The relatively short period of five-and-a-half years between Menzies’ retirement and the coalition government’s defeat in 1972 was not conducive to major and sustained shifts in media management. During this time, the prime ministership changed hands four times (Harold Holt, John McEwan (Country Party), John Gorton and William McMahon) as a result of the leadership turmoil that followed the extraordinary and sudden disappearance (and presumed death) of Harold Holt the year after he was sworn in as Prime Minister. Throughout that time the Coalition government was on the precipice of splitting; and after only just surviving the 1969 election, changed leaders for the fourth time in less than six years, in the pre-election atmosphere of 1971 (ABCTV documentaries 2008).

**Gough Whitlam (1972-1975)**

The brief, stormy years of Whitlam Labor government heralded a generational change that resonated in the FPPG. *Canberra Times* editor-at-large, Jack Waterford started his career in the gallery in 1973, recalling:

The gallery had reported pretty conventionally and pretty deferentially right through the 60’s, by the end of the 60’s there were (sic) this new generation who were sort of bouncing against walls. By 1974 when Gough [Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam] had been in power for two years there were only about a dozen journalists who had been there before Gough came in. Not only were these people new and young but they had all sorts of non-deferential ways of reporting things…They reported from a perspective of a new generation, they were more likely to question accepted and
conventional wisdoms... [in terms of senior journalists] say, by 1974, there were probably only four political correspondents who were of the old school (Waterford 1998, p.7).

Sources of news abounded. The Senate was re-invigorated through the establishment of an effective system of Committees of Enquiry. Access to the prime minister and ministers was opened up, as were broad-based background briefings. Politics moved at an almost frenetic pace as the Whitlam government immediately and vigorously began the pursuit of a headline grabbing reform agenda and rose to a crescendo in the lead up to its dismissal in 1975.

Unsurprisingly, journalists in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) thrived in an environment where access to alternate sources of information proliferated—from a restless bureaucracy in the administration, to a recalcitrant Senate and a loosely controlled backbench, all of which coincided with an expansion in radio and television news and current affairs. The longstanding two-tier division of labour between permanent lobby-like journalists (or Canberra roundsmen) and a transient group of ‘journalists-stenographers’ effectively ended in the early 1970s, once the Australian Associated Press (AAP) wire service bureau became a full-fledged member of the gallery.

The presence of female political journalists removed ‘roundsmen’ from the lexicon and the pioneering finance and economic journalism of the Australian Financial Review began to flourish throughout the media (Schultz 1998, p.184). The gallery expanded to one hundred and twenty members (a number not far behind the number of members in the House of Representatives). When Nation magazine merged with Sunday Review in 1972 to become Nation Review, iconoclasm and satire also entered as new dialects in the national political discourse (Schultz 1998, p.176).
Whitlam largely honoured an election campaign promise to hold weekly press conferences in Canberra and reduce the institutionalised ‘unattributable selective briefings’. Regular weekly ‘all-in’ conferences reduced previous controls over questions and were limited only by a requirement of one question per media outlet, and follow-up questions when time allowed. These moves exceeded the freer media environment ushered in by Menzies’ successors Harold Holt and John Gorton. However the frequency and openness of press conferences changed with the times, and dropped to a trickle when relations soured during Whitlam’s second term, particularly in the disastrous lead up to the Governor General’s highly-contested sacking of the Prime Minister and dismissal of his government in November 1975.

The executive-gallery relationship during the Whitlam years was at its most porous, and due in large part to the ‘appointment numbers of former FPPG journalists to positions in an enlarged corps of press secretaries, re-named media advisers and public relations officers for ministers’ (Schultz 1998, p.185). Ironically, they joined a poorly regulated corps of partisan ministerial staff—the beachhead for a subsequent vast expansion in advisers and spin-doctors, who are now the bane of the FPPG.

The ‘rat-pack’

Whilst history shows that Whitlam significantly loosened the executive’s grip on information flows, this did not extend to foregoing the advantages of favouritism and selectively privileging some journalists who were dubbed ‘the rat-pack’27. Edgar traces the origins of this to the leader of the opposition Bill Snedden, who complained of their influence during the 1974 Federal election (Edgar 1979, p. 98). In an interview with Edgar (1979) gallery journalist Peter Samuel (Bulletin magazine) described the way a group of ‘articulate, witty

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27 The term ‘rat pack’ came to be used in a less specific way in public discourse, particularly when it was coined by influential conservative Gerard Henderson (Henderson 1987) to convey the notion of a ‘herd’ mentality in the whole the FPPG.
journalists emerged’ at a time when ‘the old timers were disappearing one by one’ and ‘the new group set the tone’:

That’s the way the rat pack’ developed I suppose. It wasn’t quite as unrelentingly partisan and anti-Snedden, as Snedden used to picture it, [but] it did tend to congregate very much around Whitlam’s office…Whitlam’s people played it very well, there was a great deal of joie de vivre around [and] Whitlam’s staff attempted to be a great deal of help to that particular part of the Press Gallery…they would get a lot of breaks on things he [Whitlam] was going to say or going to announce and the different tactics he was going to use in Parliament (Samuel 1979, cited in Edgar 1979, p.99).

Nonetheless Lloyd (1998, p.9 and p.15) describes the Whitlam years in the Canberra gallery as a ‘superb place for journalists to operate in terms of covering the national executive’ and a time ‘remembered for its exuberant tempo of generational change [and] easy proximity to the greats of the executive, and a relatively benign, even licentious, administration’. This also explains why twenty years on during the interviews for this thesis, there was a palpable sense of nostalgia for the old parliament house.

**Malcolm Fraser (1975-1983)**

Following Labor’s defeat in the post-dismissal 1975 federal election the incoming Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, famously vowed to put sport back on (and take politics off) the front pages of the media. His task was made daunting by the media momentum of the 1970s when there was a measurable rise in public ‘engagement with Australian politics’. Political journalism captivated media agendas (Aitkin 1982, p.249). By 1977, commercial television audience surveys had news programs consistently out-rating popular entertainment such as ‘soap operas’ and,

…the discovery by television managers of the rating potential of news and current affairs was instrumental in raising the public standing of [television] journalism (Schultz 1998, pp.189-193).
In the early years of the Fraser government, an unstable Senate provided political journalists with opportunities for unusually diverse sources of political information. Although the Fraser government held a majority in both houses from 1975-1981 (perhaps sheltering in a safety of numbers), backbenchers in the Senate championed the primacy of parliament and defied the executive by crossing the floor to defeat elements of the government’s legislative program. Fraser gradually reasserted control after a showdown in 1978 when he defeated an attempt by the Senate backbench to usurp the executive’s power to appoint the Senate President (Weller 1989, p.181).

In government-media relations Fraser turned to the tried and true techniques of divide and rule to bolster executive ascendency. Face-to-face access to ministers was restricted to the practice of selective privileging handpicked journalists for non-attributable briefings. This was in line with chief of staff, Tony Eggleton’s advice that the best way to establish a ‘rapport with the gallery’ was through Curtin-style ‘non-attributable briefings for heads of bureaus’ and actively maintaining good relations with media proprietors (Weller 1989, p.185 and p.195). Australia’s media oligopoly—and their editors—were regularly entertained at the prime minister’s Canberra residence (the Lodge)—something Whitlam had largely avoided.

‘All-in’ formal press conferences faded from the agenda. Even though Eggleton warned Fraser it was ‘undesirable to get a reputation for refusing to hold Canberra news conferences’ they were few and far between, and none were held in Fraser’s first year of office (Weller 1989, p.186). In their place the prime minister used the more controlled ‘door-stop’ conferences—a divisive tactic that allowed him to ration questions and at the same time divisively favour the instantaneous needs of electronic journalists at the expense of print media:

Fraser elevated this ad hoc process to a virtual formal status with the adoption of regular times and places for door-stops and the monitoring and distribution of his comments in print format (Lloyd 1992, pp.124-125).
Fraser introduced monitoring, recording and provision of transcripts from door-stop and other conferences to the gallery as well as the media in general. Biographer Philip Ayers notes that Fraser’s relations with the ‘majority of journalists was never very good’ and that this was in large part due to his preference for ‘kerb side interviews rather than longer, more formal interviews’ (Ayers 1987, p.430). ABC head of bureau Ken Begg told media scholar Rodney Tiffen, he found door-stops too one-sided and:

I felt like the Strasbourg duck with microphones open and waiting to be fed. I objected to being used and manipulated in that fashion. The door-stops are conducted in such a way that it’s very difficult to ask further questions or to seek elucidation (Tiffen 1989, p.90).

Fraser’s moves to re-establish executive control over the national political media agenda in Canberra met with mixed success and include the memorable leaking of the entire 1980 federal budget to gallery journalist, Laurie Oakes (*Melbourne Sun*), a tactic which ‘stands as one of the most dramatic news breaks of recent times’ (Grattan 1996, p.233). Elsewhere the significant revival of the fourth estate that started in the 1970s established a significant momentum by the early 1980s. Schultz (1998) shows a pendulum swing towards ‘editorial autonomy and critical journalism’ and ‘significantly strong attempts by Australian journalists to win charters of (editorial) independence’ (Schultz 1998, p.6). The exposure of official corruption and links between police, politicians and business petered out but in its wake were created ‘arguably the most substantial and far-reaching body of watchdog journalism ever produced in Australia’, including:

Articles published during the 1980s particularly by the *National Times*, *Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Bulletin* and *Courier-Mail*, and broadcast by *Four Corners* (ABC) and *60 minutes* (TV Network 9) built on what had been reported before but took it to new levels of significance [citing]:
1980 *Bulletin* magazine, Ian Richards (freelance) - 4-part series on illegal activities of the Federated Ships, Painters and Dockers Union and involvement with the government owned Australian National line
1980 *Bulletin* magazine, Bob Bottom - NSW illegal police phone taps
1981 *National Times*, David Hickie - alleged criminal links of NSW Premier Sir Robert Askin
1982 *National Times*, Marian Wilkinson - alleged mafia links of transport magnate, Sir Peter Abeles
1983 *National Times*, Brian Toohey - leaked high-level intelligence documents – the AUSTEO papers (security documents for Australian Eyes Only)

In Fraser’s last term in office in 1982, potentially one of the most significant advances for Australian political journalism occurred with the historic Commonwealth Freedom of Information (FOI) law—the first of its kind in comparable democracies. It was a grand, if belated, response to early advice from the prime minister’s chief of staff Tony Eggleton, who stressed ‘it is a political liability for a government to be stuck with a reputation for undue secretiveness’ (cited Weller 1989, p.183).²⁸


The Hawke government increasingly countered the multiplication of new media platforms and the pressures of a twenty-four hour news cycle by employing greater numbers of professional media managers (or media ‘minders’). In the Hawke-Keating era, ‘spin-doctor’ was already part of the political communication lexicon²⁹. Bob Hawke strengthened the government’s media management through wider strategies and more personnel. Public funds were used to expand Fraser’s Government Information Unit (GIU), set up to distribute government information at a coordinated national level and provide

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²⁹ The term ‘spin doctor’ has been dated back to 1984 when it was widely used during the US presidential election (Bannerman 2004).

The first was the Ministerial Media Group (MMG) – a pool arrangement providing media advice to the Ministry as a whole, except for the Prime Minister who retained his own media staff...The second was the National Media Liaison Service...The third was the Prime Minister’s Press Office [although] primarily concerned with Hawke’s media image... With the two other units reporting direction to the Prime Minister’s Press Office...the demarcation was less clear (Tiernan 2004, pp. 65-66).

The National Media Liaison Service (NMLS) employed a significant number of former political journalists and developed strategies to monitor and manage gallery journalists who came to refer to the group as the ‘aNiMaLS’. Hawke’s media skills had been honed outside parliament as Federal President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), and he was adept at directly appealing to the public through the electronic media, particularly television. Unlike Fraser, Hawke was renowned for his popularity amongst media professionals—so much so that Derek Parker’s account of the press gallery during the Hawke years is constructed as a love story (Parker 1991).

In the early years of his prime ministership Hawke fulfilled an election undertaking to re-invigorate press conferences and hold more of them, but fell short of promising a frequent, regular time and reserved the right to restrict the number of topics—an approach eventually abandoned as ‘unworkable’:

Essentially, Hawke’s media practice combined relatively frequent on-the-record press conferences with a development of ‘door-stopping’ into virtual mini-press conferences [that were] monitored and quickly distributed in print form...Hawke used saturation television and radio exposure to exploit major policy announcements (Lloyd 1992, p.125).

A reported action by Prime Minister Bob Hawke in the early 1980s shows an executive confident that the best way to manage media relations is at close range. Former head of the Australian Financial Review gallery bureau, Anne
Summers recounts in the 1997 Senate Occasional Lectures series, that during preparations for the move from the first parliament house to the new permanent building the Prime Minister went to great lengths to keep the media quartered within the parliament:

The Presiding Officers briefly entertained the notion of either evicting the media, or moving them to new temporary offices outside the main Parliament House building in order to house [a higher than anticipated influx of] new MPs. When the Government got wind of this proposal, the Prime Minister—Bob Hawke—made very clear (in typical salty language, I understand) that he believed such an action would so alienate the media it could cost the government the next election. So, the new members of Parliament were put into the temporary offices—and the Press Gallery stayed put (Summers 1997, p.4).

In Lloyd’s view (1998, p.9) this ‘widely accepted version’ of the incident holds that Hawke stopped the move because he believed it would disadvantage the government. The government also abandoned long-held fears that rent may embolden the media by bestowing them with tenants’ rights and re-introduced rent (in Miltonian terms, ironically called a licence fee) for the bureaus in parliament house. Although not at the former ‘peppercorn’ rate they are nonetheless set at what appear to be below market rates. For example in 2007 the budget papers record sixty-two media bureaus paying a total of $1.174m \(^{30}\) (DPS 2007, p.20 and p.36).

During the last three years of Hawke’s term as prime minister contested accommodation arrangements for the grand new permanent parliament house were resolved by the time the building was occupied in May 1998. The new building is as massive as it is salubrious. It was built to accommodate an estimated three thousand occupants in a structure spread over an area of approximately eight hectares. There are 4,500 rooms in 240,000 square metres of enclosed space, interlinked by kilometres of corridors. Outside

there is a further 103,000 square metres of grass and the granite slabs of the outer walls, if placed end to end would ‘stretch forty-six kilometres’ (Fitzgerald 2008, p.105; Oakeshott 2008, p.1). The move utterly changed Australian political journalism’s workplace milieu. The new building could not replicate a political culture developed over sixty-years in the first parliament house that in Lloyd’s words, ‘embraced all who worked in Parliament House’, as a ‘fulcrum of political news’ as well as ‘a principal place of entertainment and social activity’. Perhaps this explains why a decade after vacating the ‘decaying and increasingly unworkable monument’ where ‘sustained use and overcrowding’ made it a place of ‘public squalor’, Lloyd detected a palpable sentimentality amongst journalists (particularly those who started in the mid-1970s) and the old building ‘etched in public memory as the landmark of a great period of Australian government, particularly for the news media’ (Lloyd 1988, p.8 and p.11).

Two years after moving into the new building, Hawke was embroiled in a bitter year-long leadership struggle with his Treasurer, Paul Keating. Internal leadership struggles are grist for the political journalism mill, and replete with newsworthiness (Morrison and Tumber 1988; Deacon and Golding 1994) and Hawke’s increasing disillusion with the media was commensurate with the rise in gallery and public support for his rival.


When Keating took over from Hawke in 1991 the size of the FPPG had already grown into the hundreds. To counter this unwieldy environment the new prime minister enlarged the media monitoring role of the National Media Liaison Service (NMLS) and also developed it into an unabashed publicity arm for government in general and the executive in particular (Richardson 2002, p.178). Keating also added his personal touch of verbally abusing gallery journalists either face to face or on the telephone—colloquially known as ‘the spray. Michelle Grattan (The Age) recalls that:
Keating's spin came with the classic technique of promises and threats. Buy it and you would be “on the drip”, reject it and no drip, and probably a lot of abuse (Grattan 1998, p.43).

The longest serving member of the gallery Rob Chalmers (*Inside Canberra*), interviewed on ABC TV’s *LateLine* program, confirmed the prevalence of the technique of selective privileging, background briefing (and strategic leaking) to senior journalists:

> If you’re not on the drip-feed from the Prime Minister’s office when the big stories are coming, if you’re offside with the Government...your editor is going to ask you: ‘Well why aren’t you getting those stories?’ (Chalmers 1998),

New digital media technologies were harnessed to embellish media management and manipulation through the three centralised structures established by Hawke: the Ministerial Media Group, the National Media Liaison Service and oversight by the Prime Minister’s Press Office. Significantly partisan spin-doctors joined the ranks of a major growth in the corps of ministerial staffers employed not under the Public Service Act or regulations but under the ill-defined Members of Parliament (staff) Act 1984 (MOPS)—part of a process during the Hawke/Keating years whereby:

> Gradually and cumulatively problems of accountability, conduct, management [became evident] as the staff grew out of the minimalist framework approved by the MOP(S) Act (Tiernan 2004, p.90)

The Keating era was also notable for press conferences that were few and far between (Grattan 1996, p.233) and a sophisticated innovation that elevated the controlled environment of the door-stop conference to a venue at the doorway into the prime minister’s office in the executive courtyard. Seen as presidential-style affairs, their format made the selection of questioners and conference duration of the Prime Minister’s choosing. The oddly named ‘Blue Room’ in the new parliament house allocated for formal press conferences was replaced by this venue. Senior gallery journalist Alan Ramsey (*Sydney Morning Herald*) in his 23 December 2006 column described how Keating’s ‘presidential’ door-stops became standard practice:
[The Prime Minister] walks out the external door of his office suite's lounge room and stands on the steps, bringing his podium and his Australian flag with him. This allows him to cut off proceedings whenever he chooses, simply by turning around and walking back into his office (Ramsey 2006).

Howard’s inheritance

The final part of this chapter constructs a backdrop for the interview data by highlighting relevant aspects of the media relations inherited by Prime Minister Howard from his Labor predecessors Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. They bequeathed a sophisticated structure of centralised control and the attachment of large numbers of professional media minders/spin doctors to the executive, the deployment of others throughout the public service and the consolidation of a partisan, quasi-official media office within the parliament. The full extent of the latent power of the historical legacies outlined earlier in this chapter was realised during Howard’s incumbency.

The Prime Minister had a rich store of experience to draw on from his twenty-two year parliamentary career that stretched back to 1974. Howard had an intimate understanding of the gallery’s strengths and weaknesses that began with his experience of the media exuberance of the Whitlam years. In later years he had fought a divisive leadership battle with his colleague Andrew Peacock and made aware of the interplay between party factions and the political media. In government during the Fraser years he was acutely aware of the strategies journalists deploy to get around information log jams, by diversifying access to policy issues through sources in the public service administration and the opposition (particularly through the Senate committee system).

When Howard led the coalition government into office in late 1996 prime ministerial control was already an embedded part of the conduct of media relations—practiced according to conventions developed and refined over fifty
years, and set in place most notably by Prime Ministers Curtin and Menzies. He also inherited the executive’s long-standing and pragmatic use of the strategic advantage inherent in an unregulated system of ‘grace and favour’—where informal rules of engagement had left prime ministers free to develop their own ways of dealing with the press gallery (Lloyd 1992, p.123) and maximise executive advantages derived from the media’s co-location inside parliament house (Cameron 1954, p. 2783; Lloyd 1988, p.180; Lloyd 1992, p.123).

By the second year of the first term in government, media relations were firmly under the command of Howard’s office where a large cohort of media professionals successfully established the Prime Minister in the mould of a ‘strong leader’ (Brett 2007, pp.7-9) or a ‘man of steel’ (a description coined by US President Bush). There was also an intensification in strategic moves to avoid the critical expertise of the FPPG by holding ‘more television and radio interviews and fewer press conferences, that made Howard simultaneously over-exposed and under-available’ (Grattan 1998, p.38).

Howard dismantled the unpopular Hawke/Keating National Media Liaison Service (aNiMaLS) in name only and transferred its functions to a backbench support service, the Government Members Secretariat or GMS (van Onselen and Errington 2004, p.8):

The most interesting observation about the GMS is that as a taxpayer funded arm of Government, it offers highly partisan training and co-ordination regarding database usage. Its role, not advertised, is similar to the previous Labor Government’s Media Liaison Unit…. This unit was heavily attacked by the then Coalition Opposition prior to the 1996 election, with a promise to abolish it if elected. …Whilst they did abolish it, they also formed a new body prescribed similar duties, including database management duties.

Over the next decade a hallmark of the Howard years would see a double-barrelled intensification of media management that simultaneously involved an increased centralisation of control in the prime minister's office and a massive
expansion in tactics and personnel to blind side gallery journalists’ access political information. Fitzgerald (2008) estimates that at the end of his eleven and half-year incumbency there were,

…over 660 media advisers, staffers and press secretaries working for the Federal Executive’ [and]…in 2007 there were 1,056 communications/public affairs officers spread across 100 Government agencies (Fitzgerald 2008, p.17 and p.176).

Conclusion

The main body of this chapter traced the systemic impact of historical factors on the development and practice of political journalism in Canberra. It highlighted how the frontier-like conditions in the new national capital led the federal parliament to depart from Westminster conventions and accommodate the cabinet, ministers and journalists reporting the activities of the legislative and executive branches of government within its precincts. It is argued that the arrangement extended the natural advantages of majoritarianism and enhanced the executive’s capacity for direct bargaining over the news agenda,

…the Australian press moved from predominantly reporting Parliament to overwhelmingly reporting what the executive said and did in the parliamentary building. Consequently, the Parliamentary institution diminished in prestige and newsworthiness because the executive was lodged squarely within its bounds (Lloyd 1998, p.6).

It is also apparent that under these arrangements and during the formative first five decades in Canberra, prime ministerial control came to personify government-media relations and that this was accompanied by a distinctive pattern of selectively privileging individual journalists, and/or competing media outlets. The conventions that flowed from this gave an early, relative advantage to the government that relied on loosely defined rules of engagement such as ‘oral agreements, publicised by word of mouth, flexibly administered, enforced and ignored according to whims and circumstances’ (Lloyd 1979, p.32). Although a mutually agreed concordat to create overt rules
of engagement and recognise the quasi-institutional role of the fourth estate was first mooted in the early 1950s, to date there has been no serious or sustained attempt by governments or the media to revive this notion. The 1982 Freedom of Information (FOI) law may have formed a basis for this; however, the intent of this law has not been honoured and successive high-level recommendations to improve it, have been ignored.

In these circumstances, securing a collective advantage has largely eluded the gallery as it juggled with strategies that fostered individualism and elitism, and there have been damning instances where injustices experienced by colleagues were either ignored or condoned—as noted above, most notably in the cases of Browne and Fitzpatrick, and Richard Hughes. In fact the only record of Australian gallery solidarity significantly pre-dates the gallery’s co-location from Melbourne to Canberra’s parliament house, when in 1914, political journalists countered threats to their rights of access by compiling a ‘lousy list’ of politicians they would refuse to report (Lloyd 1979, p.30). Commenting in 1996 on the gallery’s ‘lack of fight’, Michelle Grattan (The Age) points to a sense of defeat, media technology and less robust staff structures in media bureaus [where there was]:

A feeling that the ‘system’, in the shape of the Government, had won the battle and was likely to do so. The agitation for news conferences that periodically broke out under Fraser and Hawke largely disappeared under Keating. The different requirements of electronic and print media were one reason. The decline of a cohesive group of heads of bureau was another (Grattan 1996, p.233).

This sharply contrasts (for instance) with the collective defiance displayed by the Canadian press gallery journalists who immediately boycotted all prime ministerial press conferences when incoming conservative Prime Minister Harper attempted to apply the same sort of restrictive presidential-style press conferences (Reynolds 2006):

[Harper’s] first press conference, was held in the usual room and in the usual way…at the press conference there were a group of journalists standing in a line at the side of the room, which is what they’ve always done, waiting in line for the microphone, when
they go up to the microphone and ask their questions. But Mr Harper started off by pointing to a journalist sitting down in the middle of the audience and asking him to present a question, and the journalists who'd been waiting in line got quite irate, to put it mildly, and said 'What about us?' and there was a bit of a fairly polite yelling match between the two sides for two or three minutes until it was decided that OK, we'll go with the journalists off at the side (ABC Radio National, *Media Report*. Interview with R. Reynolds, Ottawa correspondent.)

For Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) journalists their shared co-location inside the parliament has always been a two-edged sword that at once provides access to the most powerful source of news in a majoritarian system but also exposes them to sharper levels of manipulation. It is true to say, as Lloyd does, that even if the executive and media had maintained their physical separation ‘of course, there would have been executive manipulation of the press even (with a) proprietary executive press corps’—however:

This would have provided a basically fairer contest because the power of the executive would not have been reinforced by the traditional privileges of the parliamentary institution. Thus, the advantage that the executive already possesses is, in the Australian context, accentuated by the ancient privileges and conventions of the Parliament (Lloyd 1998, p.7).

Interestingly, Lloyd found that in the mid-1960s Sir Keith Murdoch successfully canvassed the advantages of a separate building (called ‘Newspaper House’) with other media proprietors. The idea of a media building outside the parliamentary precinct was apparently withdrawn after a decidedly lukewarm response from the Menzies government (1949-1966). However, the government did express an interest in a separate media building within the parliamentary precinct (Lloyd 1988, pp.186-187). As Chapter 5 shows, over two decades later, this prescient concept would be incorporated in the lay out of the new, permanent parliament house where both the gallery and the executive are corralled within citadel-like, separate wings inside the massive building.

History also shows that FPPG journalists have worked across the spectrum from compliance to defiance. Whilst there are instances when they all but
surrendered to the government’s primary definer role, particularly during the national crises such as the Second World War and points of conflict during the Cold War, at other times they have pursued more robust media-driven agendas particularly after communication technologies diversified from print into electronic broadcast mediums significantly boosted the size and diversity of the FPPG.

From the late 1970s the number of political journalists grew exponentially with the flourishing of radio and television news and current affairs programs. Governments in Canberra and elsewhere responded by expanding their deployment of media professionals attached to the executive. By the 1990s they had grown to legion-like proportions in response to new digital media technology, the accompanying massive diversification in web-based media platforms and the advent of the twenty-four hour news cycle.

However, in contrast with previous responses to new technologies, the media industry did not respond with noticeable increases in either federal news/current affairs output, or staffing levels. This was evidenced in interviews in 2003. For instance, Louise Dodson, gallery Head of Bureau for the Age newspaper, commented that compared with the 1980s, one of the major issues was the ‘increasing lack of resources, considering the amount of [extra] work covered’ (Dodson 2003). The problem was also being felt in television bureaus as Glenn Milne (Network TV7, 2003) explained:

There’s a lot less money in commercial television nowadays because of the competition from other [new] forms of media. The result is that revenues are down and as part of the across the board cost cutting, newsgathering has been affected, [for example]—There’s more pooling arrangements and an increasing tendency for networks to swap tapes. If we don’t have enough crews in Sydney to get to a John Howard press conference, there’ll be an arrangement where the ABC shoots it and we take what they give us—so there’s increasingly fewer journalists [for such events].

On-going issues associated with new media technologies are explored in detail in chapter four.
The historical themes and issues discussed in this chapter both frame and resonate through the interview data contained in the next three chapters of this thesis. The next chapter commences the exploration of FPPG journalists’ experiences and views during the mid-2003 and mid-2004 with an examination of issues relating to media platforms that involve face-to-face interaction.
Chapter three: Views from the gallery: Part one: The Interface

Introduction: The interview setting

This chapter commences with an analysis of the qualitative interview data gathered from a significant proportion of senior political journalists working in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) in mid-2003 and mid-2004. During this period national politics was dominated by issues related to Australia’s participation in the US-led ‘war on terror’.

The first round of interviews was conducted three months after the Howard Government’s momentous and controversial March 2003 decision to commit Australian troops to the pre-emptive invasion of Iraq; and the second round was conducted in mid-2004. At this time the long shadow of the Iraq war was playing havoc amongst the Labor opposition, three months before the October 2004 Federal election that would secure Howard a fourth term and the rare triumph of a majority in both houses of parliament.

Soon after the government achieved the twin majority, additions to its ‘raft of anti-terror legislation’ caused a high degree of concern amongst journalists. The Media Arts and Entertainment Alliance (MEAA) report Turning Up The Heat: The decline of press freedom in Australia 2001-2005 noted that although the Anti-Terrorism Bill (No. 2) 2004 could ‘impede journalists reporting on terror groups, it was most alarmed at amendments to the Telecommunications (Interception) Amendment (Stored Communications) Bill 2004:

31 Note in-text citations: Interview data in chapters three, four and five: Quotations from interviews conducted for this thesis are attributed with the full name of the interviewee, the year and the name of their FPPG bureau in brackets. Further details of their status and date of interview are listed in Appendix 2a. Quotations and commentary by FPPG and other journalists, from public discourse are referenced in the standard way—surname and year of publication/broadcast with a full citation in the Bibliography.

32 The first government majority in the Senate since 1981
Most concerning to journalists…is [that] this Bill allows for the Government to obtain a warrant to access stored communications, including sms, mms (multimedia messages), email, and voicemail messages. This poses a serious threat to the anonymity of journalists’ sources —a fundamental ethical ideal which safeguards journalistic integrity in the eyes of the public. Exposing a journalists’ electronic communications with a banned organisation may not only undermine the anonymity of their sources, but it may also expose that journalist to prison time for ‘associating with a terrorist organisation’. (Warren et al. 2005, s2.2 p.6)

The interview data garnered at this time are analysed over the next three chapters. Participants’ responses are divided into three broad topic areas. Firstly this chapter explores the role of face-to-face fora in the executive-gallery interrelationship. The next chapter (four) is concerned with flows of information to the media and chapter five examines the physical location of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) and structural issues relating to its relationship to both the executive and the parliament.

At the interface

The focus of this chapter is on participants’ responses regarding face-to-face fora such as interviews, press conferences and background briefings in the context of the research questions about changes, challenges and trends in media management strategies just over mid-way through the eleven and half-year incumbency of Prime Minister John Howard. The participants’ views are buttressed with contributions to public discourse from other senior political journalists, before and since the mid-2003-mid-2004 interview period. This chapter contributes to a cumulative description of the political journalism of that time and is designed to be read in conjunction with the next chapter.

Face-to-face encounters in executive-gallery relations occur in a range of ways—at press conferences (both formal and the faux informal ‘door-stops’) and more intimately in behind the scenes background briefings and one-on-one broadcast interviews on television and radio. Of particular importance for
journalists are restraints on the elementary journalistic practice ‘to have that physical contact [and] to interview’ (Louise Dodson, The Age, 2003). Participants saw changes as most manifest in the following four areas: media conferences [including door-stop]; background briefings; greater privileging of commercial talkback radio; and a decline in informal and social contact.

‘All-in’ media and door-stop conferences

All-in conferences allow representatives from any (or each of) the gallery media bureaus to question politicians until questions are exhausted. This core arena of government-media relations is principally the province of the prime minister and the executive and their opposition counterparts. They are a crucial measure of the willingness (or otherwise) of political leaders to factor in regular public encounters with the critical expertise of the gallery and face the unpredictability of questioning with no specified limits on topics or opportunities to follow-up on information. However with the exception of Labor Prime Ministers Ben Chifley (1945-1949) and Gough Whitlam (1972-1975), ‘all other prime ministers have called press conferences at times of their own choosing and with a large measure of control over the topics for discussion (Lloyd 1992, pp.129-130). Gough Whitlam temporarily revived the role of this forum when he fulfilled an election promise ‘that his door would always be open to the press’ and undertook to hold weekly full-scale media conferences during parliamentary sessions (Freudenberg 2005, p.141). A decade later Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1983-1991) encouraged similar expectations, particularly in the lead-up to the move to Canberra’s new, permanent parliament house, when much store was placed on a dedicated space for regular full-scale media conferences, enigmatically named the Blue Room. However, as noted in the previous chapter, the Hawke years did not fulfil their early promise and instead informal ad hoc doorstop encounters developed into virtual mini-press conferences. Anne Summers, who headed the Australian Financial Review in the 1980s, observed that doorstops declined after 1988 and ‘although the media still shared the same building’:
The notorious and undignified ‘doorstop’ interviews occur mainly because the various entrance doors to the [new, permanent] Parliament House are the only sanctioned places where ministers and members can be bailed up and asked questions. Apart from that, permission must be obtained for filming or tape-recording to take place inside the House unless at press conferences or inside the media’s own studios (Summers 1997, p.6).

Hawke’s successor, Paul Keating (1991-1996) eschewed tradition and chose his own doorstop venue inside the parliamentary precinct and elevated the practice to the executive courtyard entrance door of the prime ministerial suite. John Howard refined this presidential-style media conference into the norm, effectively nullifying any major forum for open-ended questioning by the gallery. In 2003 Glenn Milne (TV Network 7, 2003) said he was ‘hard put remembering the last full scale Howard press conference’ and expressed the gallery’s general frustration of being unable to ask free ranging questions:

Howard’s strategy is to bypass the gallery and he’s been able to do so very successfully. We still have to report what he says, but the point being we’re not asking the questions that frame the news. We’re reporting it and we’re interpreting it but we’re not asking… we’re not putting the questions – it’s just a matter of government by announcement.

Others commented they could not recall a time when Howard used the purpose-built Blue Room—a factor highlighted in December 2006 when Coalition Treasurer (and rival prime ministerial contender) Peter Costello surprised the gallery by holding an old-style conference in the Blue Room to release the Treasury’s mid-financial year report. During this one-off occasion Costello fielded fifty-six answers for almost an hour until all questions were exhausted. Louise Dodson (The Age, 2003) thought shorter media conferences had been made worse by also being ‘held at the spur of the moment’ giving journalists little time to prepare and research questions. Jim Middleton (ABC TV, 2003) and Louise Yaxley (ABC radio, 2004) agreed that fewer and shorter conferences rendered them generally unhelpful fora for political journalists. Karen Middleton (West Australian, 2003) described what she called an over-staged ‘launch-release-unveil formula’ where everything
(including selection of questioners) ‘is organised in advance’. The longest serving member of the gallery Rob Chalmers (*Inside Canberra*, 2003) noted an increase in frustrating tactics to side-step important issues—such as placing limits on the number of questions, giving ‘soft answers’ and often changing the subject by picking out journalists ‘who clearly want to ask something entirely different’.

Most found the brevity of Howard’s press conferences an overt form of media manipulation particularly at times of major import such as the revelation that the Australian Wheat Board (AWB) had paid $300million in alleged bribes to President Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi government beyond the United Nations food for oil sanctions program, to include the period when Australia was a part of the American-led invasion by the ‘coalition of the willing’. A palpable expression of gallery frustration can be found in Alan Ramsey’s *Sydney Morning Herald* opinion column on 23 December 2006:

> [This was]…one of the great scandals involving official behaviour in this country’s history…[Howard’s media conference] was exactly 15 minutes - 15 minutes to give a public defence, under media questioning [of] the government’s lack of awareness of what the Australian Wheat Board had been doing before shutting it down…Then [the Prime Minister] turned and walked back into his office (Ramsey 2006).

In an interview broadcast on 11 August 2005 by ABC *Radio National*, editor-at-large for the *Canberra Times*, Jack Waterford said he thought the gallery had bought ‘a pathetic bargain…in terms of things like the [sound] grab’ or the ‘pic facts’ - where the Prime Minister ‘will stride up in front of a lectern, say about five or six sentences and then walk away, answering no [real] questions whatever, or giving only trivial answers to them’ (Waterford 2005).

Elsewhere ministers, backbenchers and opposition parties continued to provide fodder for the twenty-four hour news cycle at the main entrance doors to parliament house—where the once informal encounters had grown into a carefully orchestrated source of political news. Thus manufactured images of casual *faux* spontaneity endure and inevitably produce short pre-prepared
sound and vision ‘grabs’ largely bereft of solid political information and hard questions are easily avoided by politicians simply entering the building. Alison Carabine (*2UE/Southern Cross Network radio*, 2004) summed up the most common frustration:

First of all you get the same old suspects day in, day out, and the ones you really want to talk to don't make themselves available, Secondly, you don't get new stories as you are simply getting reaction. We've got bulletins every hour, every half-hour in breakfast shows and in so much [of our] content we are forever filing reaction.

The ‘door-stop’ is a more disorderly version of the larger orchestrated press conferences, and both formats disadvantage the media by removing the uncertainties associated with traditional press conferences where politicians used to field questions in an uncertain arena subject to the critical expertise of members of the FPPG. The interview data show the press conference as a ‘formal, albeit irregular conduit between prime ministers and media’ (Lloyd (1992, p.115) continues, however ritual has largely overtaken substance. In the past two decades, the vagaries of modern electronic media and a plethora of multi-media platforms put an end to the days when leaders were willing to go face-to-face with the fourth estate at large press conferences with no limitations on time and subject matter.

*Travelling with the executive*

Christian Kerr pointed out on a 19 March 2007 online posting at the *Crikey.com* website that up until the Howard period, Australian journalists like their counterparts in Britain, America and Canada, routinely travelled on government aircraft when the prime minister or other members of the executive went overseas on official business (Kerr, 2007). However by 2003 the gallery was surprised to find new restrictions on the number of media seats on official aircraft. Glenn Milne (*TV Network 7*, 2003) linked the selective restriction of the number of journalists on official aircraft to ‘a deliberate’ decision to choose aircraft designed to limit passenger numbers and reduce or ‘elude media scrutiny’, and added:
We [no longer] follow the Prime Minister around, like the White House press corps follows the President. Howard has very effectively made sure that doesn't happen—the new generation of official aeroplanes designed to accommodate representatives from all the major press gallery bureaus was scrapped…Howard deliberately bought [aircraft] too small to do that.

Milne’s claim was reinforced in material posted on 17 July 2007 at Crikey.com by an anonymous tipster who asked ‘Why has nobody commented on the controversial purchase of the Government VIP aircraft from Boeing when all advisers recommended Airbus?’ In a follow-up comment at the Crikey.com website on 13 July 2007 aviation expert Ben Sandilands wrote:

The PM’s memory continued to fail him this morning on radio when he forgot that his office had spent $100,000 increasing the baggage space on one of his Boeing BBJ jets…It is surprising Howard hasn’t actually spent more on his BBJs. He personally intervened in the original specifications, insisting the aircraft not be luxuriously outfitted to avoid being seen as a waste of taxpayer money. The result was two of the most uncomfortable BBJs ever delivered. Only a jockey-sized PM could ever sleep comfortably in the old fashioned reclining chairs in the private office near the front of the cabin. The media and public servant seats on the jets struggle to reach the premium economy standards of a Star Class seat on a Jetstar A330…An extra A330 could replace the BBJ for international missions, fly much further than the current smaller jet, and provide enough space for a full entourage of staff and media.

(Sandilands 2007).

These postings followed a crescendo of criticism that erupted in March 2007 following a commercial airline tragedy in Indonesia. Among the many dead and injured were two members of the travelling press covering an official visit by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. An online report from Kerr on Crikey.com on March 16 claimed anger over the tragedy spread to the top echelons 'of our major media organisations’ and observed that for several years most of the political media had been fed up with the government ‘playing favourites' and making others ‘play catch-up’ on commercial aircraft and ‘scramble in politicians’ wakes on commercial flights – often with dodgy carriers':
[PM Howard] and his ministers play favourites about who’s allowed to travel with them. They want coverage, but want to ensure that it’s favourable, so journalists get bumped, sometimes in favour of other journalists (Kerr 2007).

The scale and tragedy of the 2007 incident tended to overshadow the way other changes in the preceding years had negatively impacted on the quality of the media’s coverage of overseas issues. Denis Atkins (Courier-Mail, 2003) expressed the view that in general access to information and briefings on overseas assignments had reached ‘appalling’ low levels:

All you get is pretty much just the press conferences. Under previous governments you would get briefings by senior staff members who would tell you, off the record information and give you some [useful] background…now it’s all aimed at pictures.

Although these views relate to the specific instance of official overseas visits they form part of a negative trend discernable elsewhere in the data, that shows a cumulative de-valuing of the notion that a well-informed corps of political journalists is good for participatory democracy.

**Top-down Talkback radio**

In the 1980s the Hawke Labor government relaxed media regulations to allow large-scale syndication and aggregation of radio stations. In Canberra gallery bureaus this resulted in two large national radio networks—Macquarie Media Radio and Southern Cross Radio—replacing eighteen outlets in an area that had been dubbed ‘radio alley’. This anti-competitive framework laid the groundwork for the rise and eventual predominance of interstate commercial radio talk shows in political communication. Its advent and influence was unwelcome in the gallery. Louise Dodson (The Age, 2003) pointed to the political communication shortcoming of talkback radio culture and format is that it excludes the key journalistic ‘Why’ questions that probe for the policy reasoning behind controversial issues’. She cited contemporary examples such as the decision for Australia to join the 2002 American-led invasion of Iraq, and the treatment of refugees. In her view, broadcast sessions with
talkback hosts are soft avenues for ‘prime ministers, ministers, leaders of the opposition and opposition frontbenchers alike’ to reach a mass audience without facing ‘more difficult questions, or less convenient questions on the national agenda’, adding that:

A very good example of that are issues like refugees and asylum seekers. The questions about ‘Why?’ haven’t been there, and it’s the same with [questions about] more evidence, or proper evidence, for ‘weapons of mass destruction’, and the reasons for going into Iraq—those sorts of “Why” questions don’t particularly suit [talkback] radio and [its] audiences. In reality, politicians can avoid those questions by talking to radio personalities.

Like most of her colleagues, Karen Middleton (West Australian, 2003) realistically acknowledged politicians will always favour talkback radio for its capacity to deliver ‘unfiltered answers to questions from radio hosts’ whose style and ‘time frames militate against tough questioning’. Ross Peake (Canberra Times, 2003) saw what he termed ‘press conference by radio’ as the ‘most significant development’ in contemporary political journalism. For Glenn Milne (TV Network 7, 2003) adding a TV camera into the talkback radio mix was ‘one of the biggest shifts’ in gallery journalism:

The radio station gets a good amount of visual publicity out of this—and it’s the prime minister’s and the opposition leader’s way of getting the message out onto the 6 o’clock (TV) news - and again, without facing any full scale press conferences.

‘Sound grabs’ are blended with TV ‘pic grabs’ and new media digital technologies value-add computer voice-ware that can instantly transform broadcast quality sound into print transcripts. At the same time, digital earphones have improved visual television footage of studio sessions. To make better use of the camera’s presence, politicians can now use new barely visible earphones and discard the less sightly ‘Mickey-mouse’ headphones. The same technology enabled Prime Minister Howard to adapt his hearing aid and equip it with earphone capacity.
Alison Carabine (Southern Cross, 2004) outlined the ‘savvy’ way the ‘three in one’ strategy can fulfil most media obligations in one half-hour interview with Southern Cross 3AW radio host Neil Mitchell:

A television crew always records the session, and the radio audio is transcribed. Print and radio all feed off the one interview, as does TV [and] as the interview goes to air live, there is no editing.

The capacity for web-based internet platforms to instantly broadcast text, vision (still and moving) and audio, adds a fourth arm to the strategy. It is hard to argue with the efficiency of this four-in-one media product, and its value was apparent in the following anecdote from Alison Carabine (Southern Cross Radio, 2004).

One day when I was setting the PM [Howard] up in the studio for the interview [with talkback radio host Neil Mitchell] something exploded in the panel and smoke wafted up. Now my immediate reaction was that we should get out of the studio, and do the interview on the phone. But the prime minister disagreed. He just wanted to go ahead. The reason why he was so determined is because these interviews are always filmed by Channel 9 and get beamed out to the rest of the gallery, the prime minister's press office produces a transcript so everyone in the gallery gets it—and from there everyone in the entire country accesses this interview. The prime minister knew that if he didn't do it on camera that day, he would have to hold a press conference and [all] the television bureaus would be able to cover it… In other circumstances, to get television cover you would have to do a press conference or a doorstop.

Ross Peake (Canberra Times, 2003) also pointed to the ubiquity of these sessions in the Prime Minister’s weekly schedule:

Two or three times a week around the country…either from a little studio at the Lodge or from the studio here [in the press gallery], the prime minister or a minister will go on talkback radio …and only then the transcript is delivered to gallery journalists.

Malcolm Farr (Daily Telegraph, 2003) agreed that time given over to talkback radio was one of the most significant trends in recent times:

The main difference under Howard has been the proportion of time given to the gallery. Howard's [talkback radio] routine is to cover all bases, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne Adelaide and Perth. This avoids the informed receptors of the press gallery…It is awful
to see journalists captive to transcripts. Journalists shouldn't be waiting around for transcripts…the PM should be reacting to journalists, not the other way round.

There was also outspoken resentment over the issue of ‘handing-out’ transcripts from talkback sessions. Distribution of transcripts from the electronic media was by no means new and had been, for instance, a hallmark of Prime Minister Fraser’s doorstop conferences in the early 1980s, and standard practice with his Labor successor Bob Hawke, when recordings were ‘ monitored and quickly distributed in print form’ (Lloyd 1992, p.124). However by mid-way through the Howard government’s first decade the executive had a new strategy firmly in place to refuse to answer follow-up or clarifying questions from gallery journalists. Ross Peake (Canberra Times, 2003) found that efforts to seek clarification or further questions were a waste of time ‘I am told to [re]read the transcript—and was never able to get replies’. Ian McPhedran (News Ltd., 2003) confirmed that ‘on any given day gallery journalists might get four of five interview transcripts' but attempts to ask further questions always ‘hit a dead end with ministerial press officers directing you back to the transcript'.

Tony Wright (The Bulletin magazine, 2004) described the distribution of transcripts as one of the ‘most appalling developments’ in gallery journalism:

> Whilst they [the transcripts] may free you from having to have perfect shorthand, if you sit around waiting for the prime minister's staff to write or compile the transcript, it puts the subject in the box seat. …Throwing into print great slabs of transcript is in my view, not the way journalism works.

Rob Chalmers (Inside Canberra, 2003) saw the transcripts as ‘neither news nor journalism’ and the style of one of the talkback hosts, John Laws (2UE, Sydney), as ‘hopeless’:

> Because he’s not a journalist and he doesn't understand the issues. In fact he has said, 'I'm not a journalist, I'm an entertainer'. One-to-one, any decent politician can defeat some bloke that's running a talkback show.

Howard was adept at reaching the Macquarie Network’s mass audience via Sydney-based radio host Alan Jones who, as a radio host/entertainer, could also safely avoid the journalists’ code of ethics and make no secret of his
support for Howard’s Liberal/National coalition. During the closely fought 2001 election Jones’s unauthorised biographer Chris Masters re-tells stories about ‘Jones walking the network’s corridors loudly proclaiming ‘Thank God for John Howard’ (Masters 2006, p.411). Howard’s overtly productive relationship with Sydney-based Jones was facilitated by radio studios outside parliament house, custom made for the prime minister’s residences, especially in Sydney. However, in order to reach commercial audiences tuned in to the other half of the commercial radio duopoly, the prime minister used the federal gallery bureau studio of Southern Cross network for sessions with Melbourne-based 3AW talk show host Neil Mitchell. It presents a compelling image of national political news being filmed, recorded and transcribed from a talkback session in one small gallery studio, whilst up to 200 senior political journalists cool their heels in adjacent corridors.

The findings of a four-year survey of Australian talkback radio released by media scholar Graeme Turner (University of Queensland) in 2007 enhance the Canberra gallery’s views and experiences. In an interview broadcast on 22 March 2007 on ABC Radio National’s Media Report, Turner noted that Jones, unlike other talkback radio hosts, seemed ‘to pursue political influence as an objective’. The study found that up to 64 per cent of stories on Jones’ program were ‘from a partisan point of view’—a proportion that is 13-14 per cent higher than his counterparts, including Jones’ Sydney based national rival 2UE talkback host John Laws. Turner explained:

One of the things we did was look to see how many times stories that [Jones] dealt with, or issues that he dealt with, were dealt with in such a way you could say he was actually taking a partisan point of view, that he was pushing a particular line in relation to it. I’m not saying its left or right, but he did have a line that he was trying to argue. Now that's actually not all that common amongst talkback hosts, it would be under 50 % in most cases. Well for him it's close to 63%, 64% of the issues that he dealt with, he took a partisan point of view. So he is actually politically engaged in what he says; he is trying to convince people to think a particular way, and he uses a whole range of methods to do that (Turner 2007).
Turner found the greater privileging of commercial talkback radio had given it untoward ascendancy in Australia, and a significantly greater place in political communication than in other comparable democracies. Unlike Britain for instance, ‘Australian talkback’ [had] ‘become an absolutely embedded part of the political process’ (Turner 2007). In related research posted on 20 April 2007 at the website Online Opinion, communications scholar Sally Young from Melbourne University found that Howard’s media preference has ‘changed political reporting’ and the shift is important because it demonstrates a significant trend towards verbal sources of political information and away from sources based on policy documents (Young 2007c). Veteran political analyst, Murray Goot (Macquarie University), in an interview with David Uren from The Australian on 30 May 2007, attributed much of the Howard government’s decade long hold on power to the prime minister’s successful centralisation of media strategies through talkback radio (Goot 2007).

In a speech on July 31 2007 to mark forty years of talkback radio, the Prime Minister agreed:

To me, talkback radio has been the best way of saying things to the Australian public...When something very significant happens the opportunity is given to you through the medium of talking to that (sic) host. I’ve found over the last eleven years I had unrivalled opportunities of actually talking directly to the public about my feelings on an issue. There is no doubt in my mind that talk radio has a greater influence in public affairs in Australia than any comparable country in the world... In Britain for example [it] has very little influence on political affairs... Of course the US is famous for its shock jocks. But it is an incredibly fragmented radio market and radio generally has not anywhere the impact on politics in that country as it does in Australia (Howard 2007, p.15).

Talk-radio combined with pooled vision and print transcripts moved to front-of-stage in the prime ministerial suite of media management techniques. Howard’s skilful use of this aspect of new digital technology showed he was—like his avowed role model Robert Menzies forty years before him—‘a man of his time’.
Political journalism in other broadcast media

Whilst talkback radio and ‘infotainment’ commercial television current affairs programs provide politicians with a welcome number of easy, journalist-free avenues into public discourse they have not engulfed the airwaves. Tenets of free speech and transparency continue to thrive in robust on-air encounters between politicians and journalists elsewhere in the political communication spectrum, and have been a feature of Canberra-based journalism since the 1970s. Unlike door-stop press conferences for instance, there is no ready escape route from a broadcast studio and the only relief from unwelcome questions is the short time frame inherent to the broadcast medium. In a predictable response, media training has become part of contemporary public life, and politicians routinely learn the art of filibustering and other techniques to handle tough or controversial questions and how to ‘have the discipline to follow a script [and] only to give ‘appropriate’ answers to journalists’ (Louw 2005, p.166).

At the same time the 24-hour news cycle spawned more proactive strategies whereby the executive increasingly uses broadcast interviews for ‘intra-elite communication’—a process33 whereby a political leader (within the government and opposition executives and party-based factions) signals a preferred media line or angle on major issues of contention, and informs powerful non-government and commercial interests with a stake in policy shifts and the political game-play. The critical expertise of FPPG journalists is essential to the success of an intra-elite communication process (Davis 2003, p.673). However over the last two decades robust interview encounters in the commercial broadcast sector have been increasingly consigned to the ratings bleaches, well outside peak audience hours. For example: Meet The Press, Channel 10, (Sundays, 8-8.30am) is anchored by Canberra bureau head Paul Bongiorno, and a panel of two gallery journalists (from other bureaus); the

'Riley Diaries’ on Channel 7 ‘Sunday Sunrise' features Canberra’s Mike Riley at 8.30am and; Channel 9 (Sunday program) scheduled a regular spot between 8.30am-9am for one-on-one interviews with the powerful political editor, Laurie Oakes.

There is a greater mix in the public broadcast sector. In line with its legislated responsibility to educate and inform a broad-based audience, political journalists with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) supply interviews and analysis for news current affairs programs scheduled at peak audience hours: Weekdays on radio and via internet pod casts—AM (6am, 7am, 8am) The World Today (midday) and PM (5pm and 6pm); Weeknights on television and via internet video-casts the 7.30 Report (7.30pm); Outside peak viewing hours ABCTV matches the intra-elite programming of commercial television with robust interviewing on Lateline (week-nights, 10.30pm) and the Insiders (Sunday, 9am) program regularly includes a FPPG member on its 3-person discussion/interview panel.

Targeting the ABC

Ownership of Australian commercial media is renowned for concentration into a media oligopoly and largely because of this, the test of a government’s attitude to media freedom has largely defaulted to its treatment of the ABC. It is the largest national public broadcaster and its robust political journalism has a high-level of citizen support to the extent that the healthy functioning of the ABC is widely regarded as bellwether for free speech (Warren et al. 2005, p.11). This makes it a challenge for government media-management strategists but three other factors further compound their difficulties:

Firstly, the ABC has a formidable audience reach with four national radio networks, three internet-based music services, nine metropolitan and fifty-one regional radio stations, a national television service – digital and analogue, a

33Ceased broadcasting 10 August 2008.
free-to-air digital TV channel, a national internet site and international radio and television service (Simons 2007, p.176-179).

Secondly, there is an equally formidable agenda-setting reach into all other media. As discussed in chapter one of this thesis, the fable and necessity of a free press in representative democracies rests on a fulcrum between appearance and reality and as censorship is an odious option, once information gets out, the balance necessarily swings towards reality—thus the ABC’s capacity for agenda setting is a force to be reckoned with. A measure of the extent of influence is apparent in the findings in the landmark survey of sources of news and current affairs authored by Mark Pearson and Jeffrey Brand in 2001. Commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA)\textsuperscript{35}, agenda-setting is addressed in Stage One which found:

Stage one concluded that:

Political interviews and announcements on morning radio, particularly on the ABC’s AM program and the commercial radio talkback programs...[are] now seen as an agenda-setter, news breaker, and a yardstick of community opinion (Pearson and Brand 2001, p.131).

FPPG journalists’ experiences recorded for this thesis confirm the findings in Pearson and Brand (2001). Many noted this need for the ABC radio’s beachhead role in political communication. Rob Chalmers (\textit{Inside Canberra}, 2003) commented that ‘ABC radio will run pieces that would never [normally]...'}

\textsuperscript{35} The Australian Broadcasting Authority has since been named the Australian Commercial Media Authority (ACMA)
make it on commercial TV’ but once such stories are on the news agenda ‘if you tune into Channel 9 for instance—the biggest rating commercial station on any parliamentary sitting day—then you’ll ‘note that they’ve run it [as well]’. Jim Middleton (ABCTV, 2003) described the dual influence in ABC radio as the communication channel for mass audiences as well for intra-elite communication:

The advantage of the AM [morning current affairs program] for a politician is that it can broadcast a message not only to voters but also to the politicians. So that if the prime minister, say, goes on AM, then all his own members of parliament know what he’s thinking and they can then tune their reaction, should they so wish, to what he’s been saying.

The third reason for executive discomfort is the significant degree of protection afforded to editorial independence through the ABC’s legislated charter which significantly blunts governments’ capacity for overt manipulation.

The charter spells out three mandatory functions: (1) ‘to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard as part of the Australian broadcasting system consisting of national, commercial and public sectors’; (2) ‘to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment’; and (3) ‘to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia’. The charter underpins this framework with an editorial policy of ‘independence and accountability’ (ABC 2007):

The ABC Act guarantees the independence of the Corporation. The ABC holds its power to make decisions on its content and services on behalf of the people of Australia. By law and convention neither the Government nor Parliament seeks to intervene in those decisions. The ABC is also independent of any private interest and control. The ABC exercises complete editorial control over all its content decisions (s3.5.1).

To reinforce the ABC’s independence, the ABC Act states:

Except as provided by this Section [relating to the Minister’s power to direct the broadcast of matter in the national interest], or as expressly provided by a provision of another Act, the Corporation is not subject to direction by or on behalf of the

36 Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act, 1983.
Governments must at least be seen to pay respect to these legislated principles, but at best it is grudgingly done. The exercise of power and control of information are as indivisible to each other, as they are to the contest with the fourth estate for ascendancy. In Canberra this is most clearly manifest in the executive’s antipathy towards the ABC where incoming governments almost as a matter of routine, cut the national broadcaster’s budget and make partisan appointments to its governing board of directors—it is the degree of antipathy that is at issue here.

Interestingly, Schultz’s (1998, p.5) work shows there was a healthy if ‘uneasy truce’, between the government and the ABC from the 1970s to the mid-1990s. During this time the ABC weathered cost-cutting and self-serving board appointments to assert and win ‘increasing autonomy over content’. In addition, the 1989 federal budget included a three-year funding cycle that ended the year-by-year financial uncertainty. A ‘hands-off’ approach to editorial independence also prevailed but was breached once in 1991 during the Gulf War when Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke intervened to try to cut the amount of airtime given to war critic and Middle East expert Robert Springborg (Schultz 1998, p.86; Dempster 2005, p.108).

**Howard and the ABC**

The first sign that this longstanding ‘uneasy truce’ might face trouble under a Howard-led government surfaced two years before the change of government during a 1994 Senate Inquiry chaired by then opposition senator and former president of the Victorian Liberal party, Richard Alston. Schultz (2007, p.2) recalls:
The dissenting report from Labor government senators captured some of the bitterness that engulfed the inquiry. They concluded Alston had created the forum to ‘vent hostility’ and revealed a ‘willingness to interfere with the statutory independence of the ABC’.

During the 1996 federal election campaign, Howard as opposition leader campaigned heavily against ‘political correctness’ in ABC programming on issues such ‘multiculturalism, reconciliation, anti-discrimination and environmentalism’ (Schultz 1998, p.6). Once in office, a 10 per cent budget cut was accompanied by a swift end to the security of triennial funding in July 1996, and the commencement of an ‘inquiry to refocus the national broadcaster onto core activities’ headed by former chief of the commercial Telco Optus Bob Mansfield. This move provoked over five thousand ABC staff to go on strike for twenty-four hours – the first nation-wide strike for a decade (Kirkpatrick 1997, p. 141). Mansfield was widely expected to recommend crippling funding cuts, but during the five-month enquiry eleven thousand submissions from the public in support of the ABC almost overwhelmed the inquiry, and Simons asserts ‘by the end of his review he (Mansfield) was converted’:

He had been deluged with public submissions. He had never seen such ‘brand loyalty’ as that enjoyed by the national broadcaster. ‘Most private companies would envy the passion and loyalty which characterises the relationship’, he said. He [also] rejected suggestions that the ABC should narrow its role (Simons 2007, p.177-80).

Nonetheless the government sustained its hostile approach ignoring Mansfield’s recommendation that the move to annual funding be abandoned and ‘flatly rejecting the ABC Board’s triennial funding submissions in 1997, 2000 and 2003’ (Warren et al. 2005, p.11). In an extraordinarily aggressive move instead of formally responding to the enquiry it commissioned, the government,

…forced an organisational restructure, the loss of nearly a thousand jobs, a dozen programs and much of Radio Australia. Staff morale was shattered and relations between the management, the board and the minister corroded. The atmosphere became progressively more poisonous over the next five years (Schultz 2007b, p.2).
Schultz (2007b, p.1) describes the Howard government’s approach to the ABC as ‘forceful and damaging’ but also, ....

...quixotic, inspired in part by a belief the ABC was ‘our enemy talking to our friends’. ....

The travails the corporation has endured since 1996 as his government sought to replace enemies with friends and reshape a wilful organisation [have] destroyed careers, damaged reputations, costs tens of millions of dollars and squandered opportunities for [technological] innovation and far-reaching change.

In the turbulence that followed the 2001 terrorist attacks in America, the government launched and subsequently maintained an unprecedented national surveillance policy to monitor ABC news and current affairs journalists. This ‘gloves-off’ approach with its totalitarian overtones of surveillance of political journalists’ words and attitudes lasted for the remainder of the decade. The Minister, Senator Richard Alston, became the country’s longest serving communications minister and under his watch ordered that ABC reporting, research, commentary and questioning be monitored for telltale signs of imbalance and/or bias in scripting, voice intonation and emphasis. By 2007 Schultz observed the eight-member board had become ‘absolutely the product of the Howard government’ [and]:

For much of the past decade the board has focused on content, as politicians and party officials lobbed a constant litany of complaints about individual news items, story selection and emphasis (Schultz 2007b, p.2).

The overtly political nature of this heavy-handed editorial intervention was exposed after the Howard government ignored the findings of two reviews that most of the alleged sixty-eight breaches were baseless. In the first instance the ABC's Complaints Review Executive upheld only two breaches of impartiality. Dissatisfied with this, Minister Alston re-routed the complaints first to an especially convened Independent Complaints Review Panel, and then the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). Nonetheless, only six out of the original sixty-eight were upheld. Referring to the Iraq war, the ABA reported that four of these breaches related to ‘tendentious language in connection with a controversial matter’ (Warren et al. 2005, p.12).
ABC journalists faced a second round of official surveillance two years later when their government-appointed managing director, Russell Balding, authorised internal monitoring during the 2004 federal election. The Corporation hired the media monitoring company Rehame to trawl for 'bias and balance' in reporting. The outcomes were barely cost-effective with the exercise finding a difference in coverage of the main political parties of only 1.1 per cent, and that was in favour of the incumbent coalition government. In both cases 'at every stage, the review bodies confirmed the majority of coverage was even-handed' (Simons 2005, p.145). In addition, a 2005 Senate Estimate Committee heard that alongside the official monitoring there was an on-going individual effort by Liberal Queensland Senator Santo Santoro who told the Committee he had set up an elaborate monitoring scheme in his electorate office. In an online posting at Crikey.com on 02 November, media commentator and analyst Glen Dwyer began with the colourful headline ‘Has the Liberal Party massed a secret army to spy on the ABC?’ and reported that:

Santo Santoro said he maintained a group of 28 people around Australia who monitored ABC news and current affairs programs and radio and TV broadcasts and sent 15-20 tapes to the Senator's office each week and said, "we get transcripts" from those tapes [and] without revealing who "we" were and who was paying for that service. But [revealing] he had 973 questions for the ABC, based on more than two and a half thousand pages of transcripts (Dwyer 2005).

The practical need for such high levels of surveillance was clearly questionable not only because much of the alleged bias proved unfounded, but also in the light of an array of internal and external accountability policy mechanisms, codes, processes and bodies. For instance, journalists and program-makers must take into account a range of ABC Board editorial policies such as a Code of Conduct that requires upward referral of contentious content before broadcast; management supervision of content ranging from network editors to program executive producers. There is also legal vetting before broadcast to take account of defamation and contempt laws in federal, state and territory jurisdictions and an internal Complaints Review Executive and an Independent Complaints Review Panel. In addition
and in line with other broadcasters, the ABC is subject to external appeal mechanisms such as the Australian Communications Media Authority (ACMA). But unlike its commercial counterparts, the publicly funded ABC comes under parliamentary scrutiny via Senate estimates and questions (with and without notice) in the House of Representatives and the Senate, and the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) monitors the Corporation’s financial performance and corporate governance.

Given these factors, the government’s surveillance for bias appears as unnecessary as it was fruitless, and driven by a desire for covert editorial management and control of the ABC’s hallmark robust political journalism. If this is so, anecdotal evidence suggests the government achieved some success. Former staff-elected ABC board director Quentin Dempster (ABCTV—NSW Stateline) claims that the government’s strategies undermined staff morale and journalists were squeezed between outside ‘political bullying’ and internal management ‘buckling’:

…the ABC can often seem to be self-censoring, timid and unsure of itself. ABC staff generally watch this process with a heads-down schoolroom response. There was no defiance or militancy… As the attacks clearly take their toll on staff morale, there is the danger, already apparent to many, that the ABC’s journalism is degenerating into careful blandness. Indeed ‘give me bland’ was the verbal instruction of one flustered radio editorial executive to current affairs journalists in 2004 (Dempster 2005, p.111).

The head of news and current affairs, John Cameron, told media analyst Margaret Simons that ‘self-censorship can be very hard to measure and that’s why it’s insidious’ but on a more hopeful note, he thought the climate made journalists more ‘aware’ rather than ‘wary’. Simons spent some time observing ABC journalists at work and found after the Alston complaints ‘a new awareness of weighting words’ and ‘tone of voice’, and although she could not source the origins of the ‘give me bland’ instructions cited by Dempster she found ‘the most significant thing was that it is believed’ and summed up the ‘mood at the national broadcaster’ with three words—‘It is defensive. It is weary, and it is wary’ (Simons 2005, p.127).
In summary, although Howard was not the first, he is unlikely to be the last prime minister to resent the editorial independence of publicly funded broadcasters—especially with regard to its political content on the ABC. However it is also true that Howard is the first to adopt an approach so comprehensively aimed at editorial content, practices and direction.

Rearranging relationships: the new building on Capital Hill

The next part of this chapter turns to journalists’ accounts about the effects of two decades of change in the social aspects of the journalist-politician interrelationship triggered by the 1988 occupation of the permanent parliament house. The intimate surrounds of the sixty-one year long occupation of the first parliamentary building embedded a social culture of intimacy between the executive and the media that increased, rather than decreased as their numbers grew out of all proportion to the size of the building (MacCallum 2007, p.152). However as noted briefly in the previous chapter, the design layout of the new building indelibly changed the construct of the media and executive’s continuing co-occupation in the parliamentary building. The media are effectively corralled from the executive and other politicians, new restrictions imposed on their movement in non-public areas and the members’ hall mean they are unable to initiate spontaneous, social contact.

Tony Walker (Australian Financial Review, 2003) pointed out that the physical barriers in the new parliament house ‘militate against regular close encounters with politicians’ which used to be a worthwhile ‘means of gathering information, getting impressions or reactions and developing relationships’. Ken Begg told Lloyd, he could:

…walk out of my office and talk directly to a Member or a Prime Minister, button hole him right there are then…The geographic closeness prevents them getting away… It may not suit them but it certainly suits us (Ken Begg cited in Lloyd 1988, p.256).
Rob Chalmers (*Inside Canberra*, 2003) sees the historical significance of this change as the ‘biggest [issue]—by a mile’:

Unlike the old building, in this building you rarely see a Member of Parliament let alone a Minister. Ministers are all down one end of the building and you only see them face to face when they’re walking up the corridor in the press gallery here to go to a TV interview or something. And most of the Members sit in their room and watch the debates on TV [and] hardly anyone goes into the House.

Tony Wright (*The Bulletin*, 2004) said the move had affected:

The relatively free interflow of ideas and social interaction between politicians, their minders and the media’ [and] the old parliament house was vastly more ‘democratic’ if you like, because it allowed for that flow of relationships… Now it’s only those who you can persuade to go to a particular place for dinner or a drink or for a bit of a chat.

Others found that new media technology exacerbated the disadvantages of the new building’s layout. Karen Middleton (*West Australian*, 2003) who spent one year (1987) in the old parliament house, expressed the view that the new building’s remote visual and textual access to all aspects of parliamentary activity had ‘dramatically changed’ the way journalists work at the interface with politicians. Tony Walker (*Australian Financial Review*, 2003) agreed that instant access to electronic information had made political journalism more desk-bound:

You can more quickly gather information from the Parliamentary website of individual MPs and Ministers…But this also means that journalists have become more desk-bound and reliant on published material and may spend hours surfing the web without necessarily going and talking to people. I think it’s a bad tendency for journalists simply to deal with their contacts on the telephone and not actually talk to people. Face-to-face contact is much more desirable as a means of gathering information, getting people’s impressions or reactions and developing relationships.

The parliament house pub—the non-members’ bar—achieved legendary status in the old building as a venue for well-oiled social interaction between parliamentarians, the executive, the media and public service (MacCallum 2007, p.155). Tony Wright (*The Bulletin*, 2004) remembers the bar as a place that allowed for a natural ‘flow of ideas and relationships’. Rob Chalmers (*Inside Canberra*, 2003) recalled that ‘just about everyone went down to the
non-member’s bar after the house rose at night, contrasting this with the present day where socialising takes place in the open spaces of a corridor coffee shop ‘Ozzie’s Café’—a remote and ‘pale imitation of the non-members bar’. The bar survived the move to a new building but as parliamentarians found they could choose more private and secure venues they did so, and after only a few years the bar closed in the early 1990s due to lack of custom. The closure of the pub belatedly signified the end of a shared culture amongst the three major political institutions—parliamentarians, the executive and the media—a mosaic of interrelationships that flourished in the old parliamentary precincts and where face-to-face contact became integral to newsgathering. An anonymous interviewee described documents to Edgar (1979, p.89-90) as merely ‘jumping off points’ [and]

Once you have that jumping off point… [the rest] is relatively easy. One thing that’s very helpful is the vanity of the politicians. They like to play with you, like a cat plays with a mouse, to show that they have superior knowledge. And what most of them fail to do, is realise that it is a mosaic. One may drop a hint then you move on to somebody else who you are aware holds another piece of the mosaic …I wear out shoe leather…I will walk miles to talk [directly] to a person…rather than on the telephone…. it’s much easier to detect the lie and the evasion across a desk.

This powerful three-some moved in together to occupy the new building in 1988, but in the twenty years since then, they have had to negotiate their interrelationship whilst being thoroughly physically divorced from each other. Ministerial suites once spread around amongst members’ offices are now in a separate executive citadel’ (Macintyre 2008, pp15-17) and parliamentarians and the media are corralled in their own separate areas.

In a sense the political journalism ended up in the worst of two worlds. On the one hand the physical architecture of the new parliament house achieved a tangible physical separation of the parliament, the executive and the media but on the other hand, the executive continued to ensure its primacy in newsworthiness through Canberra’s signature practice of selective privileging and furthermore, could favour journalists behind the closed doors of its
'citadel'. It is an ideal arrangement for covert favouritism—the drip-feed described by Richardson (2002, p. 177)—as a way to grant ‘rare access to information straight from the government, often delivered by a senior figure to journalists and broadcaster who are believed to be within the government tent (i.e. sympathetic)’. Journalists’ accounts of changes and challenges to newsgathering in this strictly controlled parliamentary precinct are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Background briefings

The Westminster derived lobby convention of providing executive-round journalists with policy based background briefings and the anonymous release of high-level information may have its origins in the useful notion that it was productive to enhance journalists’ critical expertise (Tiffen 1989, p.97). Although the innately divisive potential for playing favourites is somewhat obvious, it could be minimised for as long as there are open events with mutually understood ‘gentlemen’s rules’ or conventions between the main parties (executive and gallery). Unsurprisingly in the freewheeling environment of the old parliament house briefings readily developed into a multi-purpose tool:

At its most prosaic, the background briefing may simply involve a minister giving a group of journalists some elaboration on a public announcement he has made...What he says will be attributed to ‘government sources’. But at the other extreme, background briefings can be the most devastating way of damaging an opponent or if they go wrong, of harming the minister himself’ (Weller and Grattan 1981, pp.162-163).

As noted in the previous chapter, during wartime Labor Prime Minister Curtin (1941-1945) publicly institutionalised high-level off-the-record briefings—albeit in an unofficial, ad hoc way. For many decades Canberra’s eclectic version of the Westminster Lobby system of background briefings appeared to work reasonably well for both sides in the arm-wrestle over the news agenda. However, it was a product of the print era and a time when the gallery was a relatively small corps of permanent FPPG journalists (Edgar 1979, pp.81-109),
and some change was inevitable once the FPPG grew from several dozen journalists into the hundreds with the exponential growth in the 1970s of radio and television news and current affairs.

During the 1980s the executive increasingly outsourced much of the work to growing numbers of ministerial staffers. Off-the-record, face-to-face encounters with journalists more often than not were part of a political gameplay based on information about the ‘tactics, rather than the policies themselves’ (Schultz 1998, p.35).

At the non-executive level, Leland (online posting 2006) cites—but does not name—’a former Gallery Journo and press secretary' who explained that the formal party briefing system, begun by Labor minister Mick Young shortly after the Hawke Government came to power was based on the maxim that ‘you should always freely give the press everything they would otherwise find out by themselves anyway, and put your spin on it’. The former journalist also added:

The reason the names of the briefers are kept private is not a conspiracy—it's just that when they brief they are not speaking as an individual, but on behalf of the whole party room. To quote them would be to imply the views they express are their own which in some cases, is clearly not the case (anon cited by Leland 2006).

By the first decade of the 2000s Labor caucus and Coalition joint party room ‘debriefings’ were a ritual part of the first sitting days of each parliamentary week. Generally the government would use them to release the week’s legislative agenda and the opposition would flag their likely attitude in the debates to follow. In the same online posting Leland comments:

The formats are superficially similar. A spokesperson will tell the reptiles [gallery media] what the party wants them to know about the inner workings of the meeting. There will be questions in which the reptiles hopefully posit that their pet issue of the day was the centre of heated debate. It’s a bit like twenty questions and eventually someone's pet issue will be admitted to as being of some importance (Leland 2006).
Personifying ‘spin’

FPPG journalists’ contemporary views of the growth of ‘spin’ in Australian political journalism are discussed at length in the next chapter and confirm the Pearson and Patching (2008, p.36) finding that modern background briefings have been absorbed into the spin machinery of contemporary political communication to achieve political ‘PR’ (public relations) outcomes. Louw (2005, p.166) for instance, identifies several common strategies, including:

- Providing off the record backgrounders to journalists, sometimes involving key personnel such as the politician meeting directly with them [and]:
- Enhancing or damaging journalists’ career paths by providing stories to them if they were deemed ‘friendly’ or freezing them out otherwise.

Significant changes, intensification and expansion in modern media management and manipulation practices are discernable in contemporary accounts such as Richardson’s Playing Political Games (2002). This work notes for instance, that the infamous Keating ‘spray’ had been largely outsourced to media minders (and according to gallery journalists, particularly to the Prime Minister’s media chief, Tony O’Leary). Richardson describes this as ‘the most basic’ of government tactics:

- The intention is to intimidate, bully, silence or at least engender second thoughts within certain sections of the media about a particular story or stance (Richardson 2002, p. 175).

A palpable intensification in favouritism is also reflected in Richardson’s account of the use of unattributable briefings, especially when linked with tactics described as the ‘freeze’ and the ‘wedge’. As noted above, although these briefings were originally a method of ‘ensuring the government communicated its message effectively, directly and anonymously to the media’, Richardson describes their wide contemporary prevalence in ‘spin-doctoring’ and their central role in ‘divide-and-conquer’ tactics such as:

- The freeze [is] essentially punishment, most likely imposed by government media officers, on individuals who did not ‘play by the rules’ or who were perceived to report in a partial manner… The wedge [is] best explained as the divide-and-
conquer principle. The government basically drives a wedge between sections of the media [and] works to instill a sense of favouritism within the chosen ones (Richardson 2002, p.174 and p. 176).

Academic and former media adviser Richard Phillips described how some journalists proactively ‘put their spin doctors to good use’ by using ‘friendly contacts’ through a ‘rent-a-quote’ technique used to ‘lend weight to an unsourced story’ when other (less friendly) sources ‘were reluctant to go on the record with comments’ (Phillips 2002, pp.299-230).

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored several significant changes at the interface of executive-gallery relations in fora such as press conferences, door-stop conferences, broadcast interviews and the more informal settings of background briefings and social events.

Whilst executive strategies to use face-to-face fora to control the direction of political journalism is neither new nor surprising, history suggests that informality was a uniquely significant component in the development of political journalism in Canberra, where the close physical circumstances led to a high premium on one-to-one relationships with the executive, its staff and the public service. It was noted that the move to new parliament house in 1988 clearly changed the environment forever where—unlike the public space of Kings Hall in the old parliament house—chance encounters with the public and or journalists are not an option. However, in the eight years after the move until the election of the Howard government in 1996, anecdotal evidence shows Prime Ministers Hawke and Keating, other members of the executive and parliamentarians would frequently breach the physical divide and were often seen in the corridors of the FPPG’s quarters (Ester 2003).
The picture that emerges from this chapter suggests that by mid-way through the Howard years, the FPPG had experienced a measurable decrease in opportunities for dialogue and interrogation in many fora. It is apparent in strategies to avoid their questions whether in person or via television and radio broadcasts and in the Prime Minister’s adept use of commercial talkback radio that greatly expanded his capacity to personally drive much of the media agenda (Weller 2007, p.177 and p.254).

It is noteworthy that FPPG journalists’ expressions of disempowerment and frustration present in this and subsequent chapters were already apparent before the interview periods. In an extremely rare move in 2002 in the wake of the ‘Children overboard’ controversy (that first surfaced on election-eve in October 2001), the FPPG Committee gave qualified endorsement to a collective protest by nine journalists over perceived deliberate government ‘disinformation’ (Farr and Barker et al. 2002; and Appendix 3). It was an unprecedented37 act in the history of the FPPG in Canberra—where (as the previous chapter documented) collective action runs counter to the executive-gallery interrelationship of ad hoc privileging. Moreover (and perhaps emboldened by this), in November 2003, the adverse treatment of the gallery during the October visit of US President George W. Bush, the FPPG committee’s president and secretary, Malcolm Farr and James Grubel, delivered a letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives protesting at a ‘craven capitulation of sovereignty’ to the visiting US media and the use of security measures ‘to censor, harry and demean Australian journalists’ (Farr and Grubel 2004, cited in Senate 2004).

A month later in December 2003, media disquiet over the gnawing question of the wilful distribution of disinformation over the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq reached a critical point, especially amongst political journalists in those nations that joined the US-led invasion. In

37 In contrast in the FPPG’s early pre-Canberra days in Melbourne, in 1914 the whole gallery compiled a ‘lousy list’ of politicians they would refuse to report after the executive threatened to selectively shutout certain journalists (Lloyd 1979, p.30; 1988, p.256).
Canberra, Geoffrey Barker—one of the signatories to the 2002 protest petition and senior foreign affairs and defence policy columnist for the prestigious *Australian Financial Review*—released a step by step comparative analysis of the maze of information governments had about WMDs, and what they were telling the media (Barker 2003a). In a radio broadcast discussion Barker described the war to oust Saddam Hussein as ‘a remarkable case study in the globalisation of political spin and its consequences’ (Barker 2003b), explaining that a striking factor in the Iraq war was the remarkable similarity in the ‘misleading’ spin presented by ‘US, British and Australian leaders to justify their armed intervention’, including [that],

…the leaders released only selected and limited details of the intelligence information which they said supported their case for war—without explaining that much intelligence information is uncertain and ambiguous [and] it became apparent that some crucial information about Iraq’s weapons had been wrong or exaggerated or ‘sexed up’ to alarm the US, British and Australian publics (Barker 2003b).

These events before and after the interview period signify that executive-media relations were already on a downward slide that continued into 2007. By then, discontent spread beyond Canberra to the head offices of all Australian commercial and public media, who formed a coalition (with the support of the media union) under the banner of ‘Australia’s Right to Know’ and funded an independent audit of ‘The state of free speech in Australia’ (Moss 2007). After the report’s release Michelle Grattan from the FPPG Age bureau noted ‘such have been their frustrations at government secrecy [that] newspaper, television, radio and other interests’ usually reluctant to act together’ have co-operated to ‘lobby both sides of politics’ (Grattan 2007, p.12).

The next chapter explores three further issues arising from the interview data. The first relates to an expensive and unprecedented sector-wide, government crack-down on leaks; the second relates to a record-level expansion in the executive corps of ministerial staff, deployed not only to manage political journalists and to keep the media at arm’s-length, but also to monitor and
manage a large network of public relations officers spread across the public service; the third examines the role of new media technologies as they relate to the first two matters and their impact on journalistic practice in the parliamentary round.
Chapter Four: Views from the gallery: part two
The paper trail and the new information highway

Introduction

This chapter explores gallery journalists’ views and experiences of government strategies to restrict media access to document-based sources of policy and political news. It is divided into three sections all of which show evidence of a significant expansion in the range and intensity of strategies to contain information flows. The first highlights issues related to a marked escalation in the use of blunt-edged police raids to prosecute leakage from the public service assisted by the use of sophisticated modern surveillance techniques. The second examines the effects of a measurable expansion in the size and activities of the executive’s corps of media minders. The third examines the contextual role of new media technologies.

Section one: Prosecuting leakage

In a public lecture on 03 September 2003—after thirty-six years of reporting the Australian federal parliament—political editor of The Age newspaper Michelle Grattan aptly summarised the adversarial politician-journalist contest over flows of political information, describing both sides as ‘gatekeepers and gatecrashers’: politicians, because they ‘seek to regulate the information going out’—and when it suits them, ‘slam the gate shut’, and gatecrashers because they are constantly searching for new media avenues for ‘better ways to disseminate (and control) their messages’; and the media, because they are, …most obviously gatecrashers, attempting to force their way into the citadels of information, knocking at locked portals and trying to outsmart clever and well-armed guards, [and] they are gatekeepers because what they highlight, or ignore, what they

38 Note: in-text citations: Interview data in chapters three, four five: Quotations from interviews conducted for this thesis are attributed with the full name of the interviewee, the year and the name of their FPPG bureau in brackets. Further details of their status and date of interview are listed in Appendix 2a. Quotations and commentary by FPPG and other journalists from public discourse are referenced in the standard way—surname and year of publication/broadcast, with a full citation in the Bibliography.
think important, or old hat, affects what reaches, and remains on the political agenda
(Grattan 2005, p.2).

Just over mid-way through Howard’s eleven-and-half year incumbency, journalists described this
perennial contest over information as more intense and hard-edged. Areas singled out for
particular concern were a significant increase in the frequency, intensity and scope of punitive
action to stem leakage of ‘unauthorised’ information and a measurable expansion not only in the
size of the executive corps of media minders, but also in its use of electronic surveillance to
monitor and control potential sources of information.

**Plugging leaks in a changing climate**

Leaking unauthorised or secret policy information has always been integral to
the terms of engagement between politicians, public servants and journalists.
For politicians, leaking is used when it plays out to their advantage by
facilitating anonymous politically strategic stories, and is deplored when
unwelcome illegally released policy information appears in the media. From a
journalistic point of view the function is to report the information and protect
confidential sources, regardless of its origins. A part of the standard game-
play is the pursuit of public servants suspected of unwelcome leaking, and
journalists can get caught in court proceedings and face contempt of court
charges when they refuse to break a confidence and divulge the identity of
their sources. The ardour of governments wax and wane but as a general rule
the most robust investigations are usually reserved for information at the
higher end of the secrecy/security scale. However, on Prime Minister
Howard’s watch there was a catch-all policy towards prosecution.

The scale of resources allocated to catching leaks of unwelcome information
was revealed by the Minister for State Senator Chris Ellison, in an answer to a
Question on Notice in October 2006\(^\text{39}\). The cost was over $2m ($2,160,940.00)

\(^{39}\) Note —page references from the federal parliament’s Hansard records. The page number is taken from
the official Senate or House of Representatives websites and relate to the numbers as scanned from the
print version, and not to the .pdf page number.

Chris Graham (*National Indigenous Times*) experienced the seriousness of the government's intent during an Australian Federal Police (AFP) raid over unauthorised cabinet information relating to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). The *National Indigenous Times* (NIT) is a national bi-weekly newspaper—a modest but politically robust publication with an audited circulation of around ten thousand and produced from an office in the downstairs part of his house in suburban Canberra. In a recorded telephone interview with this author, Graham re-told his experience (Ester 2006).

Early on the morning that NIT published the story on 11 November 2004 Graham, still in his pyjamas opened the door to two plain-clothed AFP officers and noticed another three standing around in his driveway. Graham’s female partner (who has no involvement in the paper) was also called out of bed. Neither was given time to change into day-wear, and while they were grilled and tape-recorded at the breakfast table strangers searched their bedroom, rifling through their clothes and private belongings and turning over the contents of their drawers and cupboards. A search warrant for the whole of the premises had been issued, even though the private upstairs home is physically separated from the newspaper’s office, which has a downstairs entrance. Graham recalls that he:

> Gave the AFP the documents in the first half-hour. It wasn't hard, they were out on the desks downstairs. In any event the horse had bolted—the paper was already out. [But] the warrant was for the whole premises (Ester 2006).

At the time the government was unrepentant and unconcerned about the obvious unfairness such heavy-handed tactics involving an independent media player with none of the protections available to the mainstream media organisations. Six days after the *NIT* raid, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Peter Shergold, in an address to the Australian
Graduate School of Management in November, vowed to continue to call on the police to deal with leaks and labelled the media scrutiny of unauthorised information as ‘democratic sabotage’ because leaking:

…blows apart the Westminster tradition of confidentiality upon which the provision of frank and fearless advice depends. So if some people seem surprised that I have called in the police to deal with leaks, they shouldn’t be – I always have and I always will (Cited in Marr 2007, p.55).

Fears about the AFP treatment of the National Indigenous Times and the threat it posed to media freedom persisted and were further inflamed after the raid, when the paper experienced a covert form of blacklisting when it began work on another investigative story about Aboriginal affairs and the Crime Commission. In this case the story did not involve leaked information, but the same week that the paper’s journalists interviewed government officials, it received a notice of audit from the Australian Bureau of Circulation. While the National Indigenous Times was not forced to take part, the Federal Government (the paper’s biggest advertiser) threatened to withdraw all advertising if it did not. Even so, paid advertising from Centrelink and the Department of Education Science and Training was withdrawn on the basis that the copy ‘contained mistakes’ (Warren et al. 2005, p.10). Such incidents add to a politically effective but a cumulatively undemocratic climate of fear in the Canberra political culture. In Chris Graham’s view, the aftermath of the raid further chilled the flow of information and ‘It works…many of my regular contacts are too scared to call, or respond to contact from me’.

The NIT raid added one more incident to many others that had already contributed to a process of isolating gallery journalists from sources of information in the public service. According to Marr (2007, p.55) it was the ‘113th investigation of leaks from the public service since 1997 [and] by the following year the number had grown to 210’.

Michelle Grattan (The Age, 2003), in an interview for this thesis a year before the 2004 raid, said she already had no doubt that ramping up the number and
intensity of police actions deliberately fed fear and intimidation, suggesting that this climate also infects the ‘frank and fearless’ maxim of public service policy advice because ‘the impact of this goes far beyond access for the media. [Public servants] are intimidated generally, which has quite profound implications for the way policy is formulated’.

Tony Walker (Australian Financial Review, 2003) said he found the public service was ‘frightened’ and that ‘electronic surveillance, the ability to trace material and the penalties visited on people who leak’ had ended the days when policy documents ‘used to regularly fall off the back of trucks’. Geoff Kitney (Sydney Morning Herald, 2003) said public servants found the prospect of briefing journalists ‘quite scary’ and this had interfered with his personal ability to crosscheck facts or follow up information.

Now when you call a bureaucrat they say: ‘Sorry I can’t talk to you’, and refer you to the press secretary—There’s a sort of reporting-back process, which allows the Government to monitor media inquiries.

Denis Shanahan (The Australian, 2003) pointed out that although tracking down leakers was not new, the harsher nature of the Howard government’s tactics meant the public service was ‘much less open’ because the system of hunting out and trying to stop leaks ‘is much more efficient and ruthless now than it ever was [before]’:

The public service is less open...senior people lose incentive pays if there are leaks...It’s actually your departmental head or your boss who’s going to lose $40,000 if you leak something. So the system of hunting out leakers and trying to stop leaks is much more efficient and ruthless now than it ever was. I’ve found public servants far less forthcoming than they ever were. And I’m not talking about people, you know, seeking you out to try and slip you the plans of an atomic reactor or something. I’m talking about people willing to background you on a particular issue—they're just frightened to do it.

Documents tabled in the Senate in 2006 by Minister Ellison support the journalists’ views including the indiscriminate nature of the crackdown. Of the thirty-eight cases selected from well over a hundred referrals, a majority relate to low level security portfolios or authorities such as the Commonwealth Superannuation Administration, the Departments of Employment and
Workplace Relations, Finance and Administration, Transport and Regional Services, Veteran’s Affairs, Health and Aged Care, the Australian Broadcasting Authority, the Civil Aviation Authority, the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions, the Crime and Misconduct Commission, the National Gallery of Australia and the Office of Police Integrity.

The Office of Indigenous Policy and Coordination, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural affairs, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission topped the list, accounting for eight referrals. In comparison only three involved departments that interface with national intelligence agencies, two in the Department of Foreign Affairs and one each in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Department of Defence, respectively (Ellison 2006, p.155-156). The cost-benefit equation also points to a productive political rather than actual outcome, with the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) releasing information to show that between 2000 and 2004 only three convictions had been secured from thirty-eight investigations (Warren et al. 2005, p.11).

Applying the letter of the law to every case carries innate hazards for journalists and in late 2005 two members of the Herald-Sun press gallery bureau got caught up in the trial of Desmond Kelly, a public servant accused of leaking cabinet documents relating to funds for war pensioners. AFP monitoring of three thousand telephone extensions and thousands of mobile phones in the department found calls to the journalists Michael Harvey and Gerard McManus (Marr 2007, p.56). Harvey and McManus were charged with contempt of court because they refused a court order to reveal the source of their story, in spite of an offer of indemnity. They defended their action to abide by the journalists’ Code of Ethics to protect the identity of confidential sources, but this carried no weight and they were charged with a criminal offence that includes the penalty of imprisonment.

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40 Full text of Answer to the Question on Notice at Appendix 5.
There are political costs for a democratic government faced with the unwelcome spectacle of senior political journalists on criminal charges and the prospect of jail sentences. In an interview with Chris Merritt published in The Media section of *The Australian* on 25 August 2005, Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance Secretary (MEAA) Chris Warren said he believed the government miscalculated in the Harvey and McManus case and the journalists’ punishment was unforeseen ‘collateral damage’ in a strategy blind to the fact that without shield laws to protect journalists, any large scale clamp-down on leaks is likely to have ‘the inevitable consequence that [journalists] will face trial and possibly imprisonment’ (Warren 2005, p.14). A measure of the political damage was displayed when federal Attorney-General Phillip Ruddock intervened the week of the Harvey and McManus trial, asking the Victorian County Court to reconsider and exercise its discretion to dismiss the contempt of court charges against the *Herald-Sun* journalists. The *Lawyers Weekly* website posted a copy of Ruddock’s submission on 11 November 2005 citing the fact that the federal government’s expressed view was ‘that imprisonment would not be an appropriate penalty for the journalists’ (Lawyers Weekly 2005). However after three years of ‘endless court hearings’, on 28 June 2007 *The Australian*’s Media supplement reported that:

…threats of jail and an eventual guilty plea from Harvey and McManus brought the saga to a close this week. The two journalists were fined $7000 each and both had criminal convictions recorded. For a working political journalist, such a sentence is almost the worst possible outcome, aside from prison. *The Herald Sun* is now considering a Victorian parliamentary petition seeking a pardon for the pair, which would be an unprecedented move. Editor Bruce Guthrie said the newspaper was examining whether the convictions could be lifted. The prospect of obtaining visas to travel and work overseas now becomes difficult for the two journalists and they could be barred from covering official visits to the US (Murdoch 2007, p.35).

In the meantime, the government’s political problems with the media had been further compounded in 2005 when two other journalists from Rupert Murdoch’s *News Limited* stable were also caught in its stringent anti-leaking net. In this instance *The Australian* published unauthorised information of a more serious nature relating to a ‘highly protected’ report on the state of
border security controls at Australian airports. In search of the source the AFP investigated journalists Martin Chulov and Johnathan Porter. Chulov’s home was searched, as was the house of his recently deceased mother. Telephone and notepaper evidence from these raids led to the police to charge Allan Kessing, the public servant who had compiled the secret report two years prior to his retirement. However for over a year, the potential jailing of Harvey and McManus had cast a long politically unpleasant, shadow and the government back-peddled, making no demands on Chulov or Porter to give evidence in the Kessing trial. Chulov moved into a foreign correspondent’s job overseas and it was not until the eve of the trial that the AFP subpoenaed Porter—but after one failed attempt to serve summons at Porter’s workplace, the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions subsequently withdrew it (Marr 2007, p.57).

A less fortunate Kessing was put on trial. The Crown prosecutor’s candid argument for his conviction was that it ‘would have the desirable outcome of being seen as a warning to other public servants who may consider leaking confidential information’. This scapegoat attitude to Kessing adds weight to gallery journalists’ views that the principal aim of Howard’s tough strategy was to cultivate a culture of fear.

Kessing agreed, telling the SBSTV 25 September 2007 *Insight* program ‘Strictly Confidential’ that:

>The Crown prosecutor, Lincoln Crowley, made that very clear. He said a custodial sentence is indicated as a specific warning to other public servants. You can’t get much clearer than that. It was to discourage other public servants from [acting] in the public interest [and] it clearly has had that effect. There’s been something approaching a reign of terror in my old department…ex-colleagues tell me that it’s become almost a byword now, you know—‘keep your mouth shut about that or you’ll end up like Kessing’.

On the same program, Kessing added that his case also exposed the existing law’s potential for quashing free speech, pointing to the fact that during his trial the judge ‘specifically told the jury they were not to take any public interest
into account when deciding the case’ (Kessing 2007). Clearly no judicial weight was given to the defence counsel's argument that after *The Australian* published the leaked information, the public interest benefited from the government’s swift response to set up a $200 million review and upgrade of airport security.

Two years after Allan Kessing was first charged, in March 2007 he was convicted under the *Crimes Act* (1914) for leaking the Custom’s report and received a nine-month suspended sentence. Kessing continues to insist he was not the source of the leak.

**Public servants and the Janus dilemma**

Canberra’s failure to clarify or codify the role of the federal gallery makes journalists’ assumptions about mutually understood ground rules at best precarious. The strict application of anti-leaking laws saw an upheaval in the political culture generally and the journalist-public servant interrelationship in particular – and has deeply polarised opinion. The nationally respected political editor for *Network TV Channel 9* and the *Bulletin magazine* Laurie Oakes, broadcast and posted on the *Channel 9* website the view that:

Democracy cannot work if journalists only report what governments want them to report. It is the threat of leaks that keeps politicians honest. Well, relatively honest. They are much more reluctant to lie or act improperly if they know they could be found out, that there is a risk some whistleblower will disclose it to the media. A society where government has tight control of the flow of information, that is, control of what the public is allowed to know, is not a democratic society. Leaks, and whistleblowers, are essential to a proper democratic system (Oakes 2005).

At the other end of the spectrum is the equally firm view of the secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Shergold** referred to above

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**Shergold also drew attention to changes to the Public Service Act in 1999, although retaining the criminality of leaking to information relating to policy issues – for the first time it enabled protection for public servants albeit limited to reports of misconduct such as exposing ‘corruption, nepotism, misappropriation or inappropriate conduct’ (Shergold 2007).**
and reiterated in correspondence published in response to David Marr’s comments in the 2007 Quarterly Essay ‘His Master’ Voice’ (Marr 2007, p.55):

What Marr doesn’t accept is that public servants do not have a moral responsibility or enjoy legal protection for leaking documents simply because they believe the government has got it wrong. Good governance depends upon senior public servants being able to provide ministers with frank and fearless policy advice in confidence…The [leaking] behaviour Marr admires is at odds with the Crimes Act…This is not some recent measure designed to silence dissent. Non-disclosure offences have been a feature of the Act since 1914 (Shergold 2007, p.95-100).

In the neglected middle-ground are the views of Professor P. D. Finn first expressed several years before the Howard government’s stringent strategy came into effect:

Public servants are not mere employees. As a matter of long-standing legal and constitutional principle, we have made their positions Janus like, looking in one direction to their superiors, in the other to the public (Finn 1992, pp.251-252).

In 2003 as a Judge of the Federal Court, Finn again anticipated the need for a fresh look at the 1914 Crimes Act. In Bennett v President, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, December 2003, Bennett, an employee of the public service, but in his capacity as president of the Association of Customs Officers, made unauthorised public comments about a proposed single federal Border Protection Agency. Bennett refused an order to stop talking to the media, in spite of being charged under the Commonwealth’s Public Service Regulation 7(13) and suffered a punitive salary cut and change in duties. When the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) declined Bennett’s request to investigate, he took his case to the Federal Court where Justice Finn described the regulation as ‘draconian’, designed for a colonial era and out of place in modern democracies where excessive government secrecy is a major issue. In Justice Finn’s view, Reg 7(13):

Impedes quite unreasonably the possible flow of information to the community information which, without possibly prejudicing the interests of the Commonwealth, could only serve to enlarge the public’s knowledge and understanding of the operation, practices and policies of executive government (Finn 2003, p.1433).
Significantly, Finn also warned that unqualified sanctions on public service employees for placing unwelcome and unauthorised policy issues on the public agenda contradicts the High Court’s 1992 and 1997 decisions to define and then uphold an implied constitutional freedom of political communication.

**Leaks and FOI**

Given the unique way Australian political journalism evolved within the same parliamentary domain as the executive, it is perhaps inevitable that a culture of leaking would flourish alongside the executives’ capacity to covertly privilege sections of the gallery media bureaus. But the centrality of leaking can also be linked to long-standing weaknesses in the federal Freedom of Information (FOI) law.

The advent of the *Commonwealth Freedom of Information Act, 1982* was heralded as groundbreaking and ahead of comparable modern democracies (Canada 1983, Britain 2000). However in practice as an instrument of democracy, it has become close to unworkable and according to former Public Service Commissioner Andrew Podger, the law’s intent has worked as a deterrent. In a copy of a speech Podger gave at the end of his term as commissioner on 17 August 2005 and reported in a posting on the *New Matilda* website, he said:

> There is widespread concern in Government and the senior echelons of the Service that FOI has so widened access to information that counter-measures are needed. Fewer file notes, diaries destroyed regularly, documents given security classifications at higher levels than are strictly required and handled to minimize the chances of FOI access—most senior public servants recognise that these counter-measures must not hide the decision-making trail, but the trail that is left is often now just a skeleton without any sign of the flesh and blood of the real process, and even the skeleton is only visible to those with a need to know (Podger 2005).

The positive potential for FOI laws to enhance political journalism is apparent in the research findings of Swedish-Australian media scholar Johan Lidberg...
Lidberg set out to assess ‘to what extent, if any, are the promises made by FoI (sic) legislation borne out by the practice? He compared Australia with Sweden, America, South Africa and Thailand because:

- Sweden and the US are mature liberal democratic systems with high levels of economic prosperity, and the ‘parents’ of most other FoI systems.
- Australia is a mature democracy with a mix of the Westminster and federal political systems, a strong economy, a relatively old FoI system (the federal FoI Act was passed in 1982), but with a very shaky FoI track record.
- South Africa is a young, emerging democracy with social issues and big divides in prosperity and a newcomer to the FoI ‘family’, and ‘interesting as its Official Information Act in part applies to the private sector’.
- Thailand is one of only three south East Asian countries that at the time of Lidberg’s study, had FoI laws (the other countries were Japan and South Korea), ‘a semi-mature democracy’ with issues relating to press freedoms and a lower level of prosperity compared to the US, Sweden and Australia (Lidberg 2005, p.9).

Lidberg shows that whereas there is ‘a consistent gap between the promise and the practice of FOI in the countries of study…Australia has the greatest gap between government promises regarding FoI and the reality for anyone seeking to use the laws’. Out of a maximum possible score of 68, Sweden was the highest at sixty-three, followed by South Africa and USA at thirty-one, Thailand at eighteen and Australia at twelve (Lidberg 2005, pp.18-20).

The ineffectiveness of Australia’s federal law was also apparent in its absence from the 2003-2004 interview data, where FOI rated a mention on only four occasions. Louise Dodson (The Age, 2003) gave the law qualified approval saying her newspaper had used the law ‘a bit and I would like to use it a lot more’, and that she had raised the idea of a dedicated FOI correspondent with her editor but that the overall process of accessing information was too
‘cumbersome’. Michelle Grattan (*The Age*, 2003) also noted that with the exception of the News Ltd. bureau (the only gallery bureau with a dedicated FOI position), the law ‘was hardly used at all’. Denis Shanahan (*The Australian*, 2003) pointed out that cumbersome delays were required and often fruitless, pursuits of information made a dedicated full-time position necessary and described his organisation’s FOI editor Michael McKinnon, as ‘a unique resource’; and Head of Bureau Ian McPhedran (News Ltd. 2003) described the work as a ‘difficult and expensive process’:

We try and use FOI as much as we can but…for example, I put an FOI in recently about a matter that was in the annual report of the Department of Defence because I cover defence myself, and I wanted some information on some contracts that were mentioned in the annual report which had no detail attached to them and it was several hundred million dollars worth of stuff. And they came back with a quote to get the material I wanted of $4700 just for photocopying and search fees. That makes it very difficult for us on a limited budget. They make the probably valid point that you’re working for newspapers that are making a profit – you should be able to pay these fees. Well that’s the sort of debate that’s ongoing really between the profit motive of our newspapers and the public interest issues of them providing this information to the general public. It’s a fight that is ongoing. We’ve been to the AAT [Australian Administrative Tribunal] a couple of times. In fact one occasion they were forced to give us the documents for nothing… [but that] was about two years ago.

FOI was pushed into the public domain in 2007 after the four-year long trials and tribulations of News Ltd.’s FOI Editor became a news story in their own right. Over this time McKinnon attempted to use the federal law to obtain Treasury documents relating to policy areas of prosaic public interest—income from tax ‘bracket creep’, and details relating to the government’s first-home buyers subsidy scheme. His first attempt failed completely in 2002 when Treasurer Peter Costello used ministerial discretion to issue a ‘conclusive certificate’, a device that effectively bans media access. Backed by his employer McKinnon pursued appeals and after their failure, rival publisher John Fairfax joined with Rupert Murdoch’s News Ltd. to challenge the rulings in the Federal Court and then the High Court. When this was lost, the editorial in the 7 September 2006 edition of the Fairfax media company’s flagship
publication, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, declared the ruling ‘an effective death sentence’ for FOI:

The federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, has won an ignominious victory in the High Court, with a majority of judges upholding his refusal to divulge important information sought under the federal Freedom of Information Act. The ruling is an effective death sentence for the ground-breaking FOI legislation introduced by the Fraser government in 1982 and later emulated by the states. Beyond that, it is an enormous setback to informed debate, and further tips the scales towards unaccountable ministerial power. Australia’s democracy is diminished by the court’s decision.

The Commonwealth’s 2006-2007 annual FOI report confirms the widely held view that the law had the reverse effect of deterring access to high-quality policy information, although it did function well enough to release personal information to individual applicants (Snell 2007a, p.14). The report’s data showed that 15 per cent of the FOI requests received sought access to non-personal information such as details of policy development and government decision-making. Of the 38,987 requests that were determined in 2006-2007, only 4,690 concerned requests for information in the non-personal category. Of those, 537 were refused and another 1,629 were only partly successful. When these two categories are considered together, the report reveals that 46.3 per cent of requests for non-personal information were refused in whole or in part (Merritt 2007, p.14).

**Whither critical expertise?**

As noted above, increasingly negative attitudes to the role of the fourth estate were clearly present in executive-media relations during the Howard years, and in the context of ineffective FOI laws, the crackdown on ‘leak-dependent’ journalism a deliberate (and effective) strategy to hobble political journalism. In a gallery system that has traditionally relied on good contacts for sources of news, there is naturally a high premium on journalists’ trustworthiness—something that can only come with serving time. This led journalists to express a deep-seated concern about a tendency for employers to send
journalists to Canberra for periods as short as one or two years and a trend
toward ‘event reporting’ and away from analysis.

The potential ill-effects of a ‘hollowing out’ in the age-range and experience in
the gallery’s profile were raised as a key issue by eight of the twenty-four
interviewees: Paul Bongiorno (Network 10 TV, 2003) Alison Carabine
(Southern Cross, 2004), Amanda Cavill (SBS Radio, 2004), Ian McPhedran
Grattan (The Age, 2003), Rob Chalmers (Inside Canberra, 2003) and Tony
Wright (Bulletin magazine, 2004).

Ian McPhedran and Michelle Grattan agreed that without effective FOI there is
much more reliance on personal trust and credibility and the period of time it
takes to build this up. Paul Bongiorno calculated it was ‘at least two or three
years’ before he learnt the ropes, and did not think it was possible to join the
gallery and ‘get on top of it and get the contacts and know who’s who and
where they’re coming from, without being around for a while’. Broadcasters
Amanda Cavill observed a ‘churn’ in new journalists who come ‘in and out
quickly’, and Alison Carabine agreed this contributed to the ‘hollowing out’,
saying:

There are two types of journalists in Canberra. There are the lifers, the Laurie Oakes,
Michelle Grattan and so forth, who are invaluable because they've got a lot of
experience—they've got corporate knowledge, the lot. But then the bulk of the people
who come into the gallery are young people in the early to mid-twenties who view
covering federal politics as simply part of a broader media experience. I think the other
problem is that a lot just don't put a lot of thought into what they do—this is more a
general complaint about younger journalists.

Tony Walker saw the problem as part of the broader picture of modern media
management techniques—although he acknowledged both older hands and
newcomers would always find it hard. It was also his view that the
bureaucracy was more difficult to penetrate and making it difficult to find
enough time for ‘fossicking around in the bureaucracy and looking at what it's
actually up to’. In particular he believed a combination of ‘electronic surveillance and the penalties that are visited on people who leak’ made for an unsympathetic, unproductive training ground. Rob Chalmers thought the gallery could hollow out because ‘it’s more of a step on the way, than a destination’ and contrasted this with veteran journalists such as himself and (for instance) Laurie Oakes (Network TV 9 and Bulletin magazine), Alan Ramsay (Sydney Morning Herald) and Michelle Grattan (The Age) as all coming from the tradition where ‘once it was a great privilege and honour to work in the press gallery’.

Drawing on his experience, Tony Wright (Bulletin magazine, 2004), said:

When I first came here in 1989 it was probably the end of that era where journalists would have killed to come to Canberra to report the big picture—to report federal politics. These days there are a small group of people who have been here for a very long time. They have the corporate memory that was once held by quite a lot more people, or a higher proportion of people. This is followed by a slightly smaller group, who have been here as long as I have, or a bit longer, then there is a great gap to the majority of people who come here as young journalists…They will spend a year or two or even less, here and then head off and be replaced.

Wright saw a need for media owners and management to take the problem on board and ensure there is time for new gallery journalists ‘to build up knowledge until they're specialist political writers’ because:

Fewer and fewer journalists are able to join the dots and give an in-depth understanding for readers, or listeners or viewers. At the same time, as I said earlier, amongst editors there is a general trend—I'm not talking about all newspapers or all organisations—to downgrade news coverage from the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, and it reflects a lower priority in the minds of those running the news desks. It also means there are less opportunities for writing long pieces that give a depth of analysis.

A handful of others were not as pessimistic. Denis Atkins (Courier-Mail, 2003) for instance, thought the problem may be overstated, and whilst acknowledging there had been a shift, it was ‘not a huge one’, adding:

I think more young journalists now come and go through the gallery, but the better ones stay…. Journalism is a sort of very mobile profession but I think you feel that turnover more in politics than in just about anything else.
Summary

The Howard government’s crackdown on leaks and the collateral political damage outlined above, forced notions regarding the public interest into the foreground of public debate.

Media frustration with reduced and often distorted sources of political information, criminal proceedings against journalists and chronic on-going problems with the federal Freedom of Information law reached a tipping point in May 2007. In an historic show of unity all major media managements43 joined the media workers union—the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA)—to form the Australia’s Right To Know coalition. Their central concern was ‘the erosion of freedom of speech and expression’ and they commissioned a five-month independent audit of the state of free speech in Australia. The terms of reference include the ‘limitations on, and threats to free speech and press freedom, in particular federal, state and territory laws that impact on media access to, and dissemination of information, and the public’s right to be informed’ (Moss 2007, p.1). The report investigated issues of media management and access making recommendations beyond the urgent need for reform of Freedom of Information (FOI) laws and the protection whistleblowers. For example, the Audit’s executive summary draws attention to: ‘mounting evidence that the lure of political advantage increasingly trumps principles democratic transparency’ and cites political journalists’ experiences of a distorted use of forums such as press conferences and the increased use of talkback radio as a central source of political information.

The Australia’s Right To Know coalition was made more extraordinary because it was initiated by John Hartigan, chairman and chief executive of Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited—the most notoriously conservative member

43 News Ltd; Fairfax Media; Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC); FreeTV Australia; Commercial Radio Australia; Special broadcasting Service (SBS); Australian Associated Press (AAP); Sky News; Australian Provincial Newspapers (APN) New media; Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association (ASTRA), The West Australian and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA).
of Australia’s commercial media oligopoly. Speaking in debate on the SBS TV program *Insight* on 25 September 2007, he said:

> Look, we [all] got to a point where we said, ‘Enough’s enough. Someone has to stand up’. So we formed together, we thought about News doing it by itself and we thought that we wouldn’t be able to get as far, so we asked all the other media companies, broadcasters—radio [and TV]—to come together and they did so immediately.

Hartigan also confirmed the historical observations in Chapter two of this thesis, when he added that:

> The erosion of free speech is not a result of a ‘Machiavellian blueprint’ carefully implemented over just the past decade’… The erosion has been gradual, over at least three decades, and has occurred at the hands of Commonwealth governments … of all colours (Hartigan 2007b).

Whilst the Australian media along with their overseas counterparts saw the need for more stringent anti-terror laws following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America they also emphasise the need for a ‘balance between security and preservation of civil liberties and the public’s right to know’. The *Australia’s Right to Know* coalition also supports the long-standing position of the MEAA that all levels of government should have a process to protect public servants who make public interest disclosures. Hartigan commented that ‘given that even with sound protection some public servants may not use [such a] process ‘there should be laws that allow journalists to protect the identity of their sources in cases of public interest’:

> If citizens are to participate effectively in a democracy, form opinions freely and protect their rights and interests, they need access to information directly or via the media on their behalf. But across all levels of government, this balance has shifted away from the people to governments, which makes today’s freedom of information laws unworkable…At the Commonwealth level, News Ltd is still smarting from the costly two-year battle between The Australian and the treasurer Peter Costello, for the release of details of the effect on taxpayers of bracket creep and the first home owners’ scheme. Costello believed release of this information was not in the public interest. The High Court agreed, but I believe the media’s role is to lift the veil on exactly this kind of information (Hartigan 2007a, pp.90-93).
Australian prime ministers are wary of provoking such oligarchic power and unsurprisingly, the Howard government was quick to respond to formation of the Australia’s Right to Know group. A month after the media industry coalition formed, federal Attorney-General Phillip Ruddock introduced an Evidence Act to shield (or give qualified privilege to) journalists. During the debate in the House of Representatives on 31 May 2007 (Commonwealth of Australia 2007) two government backbench Liberal MPs, Patrick Secker and Petro Georgiou explained:

I think the Harvey-McManus situation has certainly prompted us to see what we can do about future situations. Of course, we hope that this Evidence Amendment (Journalists’ Privilege) Bill 2007 will give a message to the Victorian Supreme Court when it comes to that particular case. Obviously, we as members of the parliament, if we are going to act properly, do not actually interfere in judicial cases, I think that is a very important tenet of government, but I think this legislation will give a very clear feeling of what the parliament now thinks (Secker 2007, p.61).

Petro Georgiou agreed that ‘current tensions between the ethical and legal obligations of journalists’ was jeopardising the freedom of the press and the public’s right to be informed:

This bill seeks to address this tension and introduce a new professional confidential relationship privilege. It applies to communications and records made in confidence to journalists acting in a professional capacity. Such legislation would put Australia broadly in step with many European countries and American states which have legislated so-called shield laws…The insertion of a new division 1A into part 3.10 of the Evidence Act amends the law to recognise a new professional privilege for journalists. I have to emphasise that it is limited to information given in confidence to journalists acting in their professional capacity. Again, it is important to underscore that this amendment does not give unqualified universal privilege to journalists and their sources. What it does is to set out a guided discretion allowing the courts to weigh the probative value of the evidence in the proceedings and the nature of the offence against likely harm to the protected confider in adducing the evidence. The court will also be asked to deliberate whether the public interest is best served by directing disclosure of the evidence or through the preservation of the confidence privileged to the journalist. I regard it as being implicit, and it possibly should be explicit, that the notion of it being in the public interest to protect freedom of the press and the public’s right to know is something that governments may care to incorporate in this act in future (Georgiou 2007, pp.70-71).
Nonetheless many, including journalists and media commentators, regarded this as half-baked because the amendment did not include protection for those who leak unauthorised policy information that proves to serve the public interest. Thus, gallery journalists’ concerns about a climate of fear and the drought in useful policy information remain unchanged. As the opposition Labor Party’s Kelvin Thompson pointed out:

If you look at the nature of the proposed legislation, you will see it is very restricted in its scope in that it relates only to journalists. There is no protection for whistleblowers or what are now known as public interest disclosures (Thompson 2007, p.73).

Four months later, in September 2007 Attorney-General Ruddock again responded to pressure from the Australia’s Right to Know group and announced that the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) would set up a major new review of the problematic Freedom of Information laws in light of four factors: changes in the way information is gathered and stored, the need to balance the public’s right to know with keeping some information protected, the need to cut red tape, and the benefits of harmonising state laws. In a press release titled ‘Australian Law Reform Commission to examine FOI laws’ dated 24 September, 2007 Attorney-General Ruddock stated:

The ALRC will examine existing Commonwealth, State and Territory access laws and practices, with a view to providing advice on how to harmonise those laws and practices. This action is partly in response to the Right to Know campaign and demonstrates the Government’s commitment to better administration in Australia. Since the media organisations started their campaign we have carefully considered existing laws and are concerned by the inconsistencies between jurisdictions…Greater consistency between access laws in the Commonwealth, States and Territories will promote best practice in all jurisdictions. It will also examine the impact of technology on existing access laws. The existing legislation was developed in an era of paper documents, and its implicit assumptions and processes are still locked in that era. Today information takes myriad forms and can be overwhelming in its volume. The Commission will undertake widespread consultation with the public and key stakeholders. The ALRC is to complete its work by 31 December 2008 (Ruddock 2007).
This development (admittedly in the lead up to the 2007 federal election) was greeted with much scepticism by journalists and commentators and summed up by John Hartigan during the 25 September SBS TV *Insight* program:

> It falls far short… Look, harmonisation is not what we’re looking for. We’re looking for liberalisation. This will be put over until the end of 2008 before they put up their hand and say, "We're going to do this, that and the other thing." And also it doesn't acknowledge that there's a problem. So unless you acknowledge there's a problem you really can't go forward in a positive way (Hartigan 2007b).

FOI expert Rick Snell also queried the necessity for a fifteen-month law reform investigation and suggested the government instead adopt key reforms already recommended by the ALRC in 1996, in particular to, ‘remove ministerial discretion to issue conclusive certificates’ (Snell 2007b, p.37).

**Section Two: Media Minding**

*Introduction*

This section explores the effect of a large increase in the size and activities of the executive’s corps of media ‘minders’. In Howard’s skilful hands media management consolidated earlier more sporadic approaches and expanded to an extreme, strategies bequeathed by his Labor predecessors. By the fourth term of his prime ministership, gallery journalists had experienced an unparalleled centralised and professional management. As media scholar Rod Tiffen (University of Sydney) noted in an online posting on 21 October 2004, at the *Australia policy online* website, under Howard media management was imposed 'professionally, systematically and immediately [and] with huge amount of resources' (Tiffen 2004). Patrick Weller's (Griffith University) 2007 account of cabinet government in Australia notes the Prime Minister included managing the media in a wider strategy to ‘avoid the errors of the last [Fraser] coalition government’:

> He wanted to ensure that the cabinet was able to combine the political and policy perspectives, and to maintain control of the public agenda. Indeed ‘controlled’ is a good
description of cabinet in his time as prime minister. Cabinet has usually remained united, leak proof and on-song’ (Weller 2007, p.117).

Tiernan (2007a, p.20) describes Howard as the ‘most media-active prime minister Australia has ever seen’, noting that ‘in this modern leadership context …a substantial amount of a prime minister’s time is devoted to the media and to the stricture of the permanent campaign’ [so that],

...substantial staff support is needed to sustain these key communications functions. The press secretary or media adviser has assumed particular significance; [they are] at the centre of the governing enterprise and have a significant impact on relationships with other actors, including the public service as well as the overall performance of their minister (Tiernan 2007a, p.20).

Eighteen of the twenty-four gallery journalists interviewed for this thesis in 2003-2004 remarked on the negative effect of increased numbers of ‘media minders’ and a marked increase in centralisation of media management strategies that Kerry-Anne Walsh (Sun Herald, 2004) characterized as an ‘octopus-like’ network of media control ‘extending from the prime minister’s office (PMO) to ministerial press secretaries, departmental press officers and electorate media officers’.

Tiernan (2007a, p.135) documents a significant rise in personal staff involved in media activities. The seven-strong media unit in the PMO is ‘the largest ever assembled by an Australian prime minister’ and she notes that the prime minister’s principal media adviser, Tony O’Leary directly co-ordinates the activities of another thirty-four media staff:

...currently serving across the Howard government, determining which ministers and issues will be made available for certain media appearances; television current affairs programmes and especially Sunday morning television. In practice, many more staff are involved in media activities than official numbers acknowledge. This includes the network of additional media advisers in the office of six ministers (Senate, Debates, 3 April 2000, pp. 13206-12309) [and] the 12 staff in the government members’ secretariat GMS are also deeply immersed in media management and coordination (Tiernan 2007a, p.136).
Media advisers were part of a phenomenal increase in the overall size of the executive’s ministerial staff. By the end of the 1996-2006 decade the overall numbers grew from two hundred and forty-five to four hundred and forty-five (a 65 per cent increase) and almost outnumbered the staff quota of the entire Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). Over the same period Australia had outstripped its larger counterparts with its four hundred plus ministerial adviser corps, huge in comparison with Britain’s seventy-eight and Canada’s two hundred and two (Tiernan 2007a, pp.21-22; Tiernan 2007a, Table 5.1 p.111).

Tiernan identifies four categories of ministerial staff employed under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act* 1984: 1. Administration and support. 2. Provision of advice and assistance with policy issues, including liaison with public servants, key stakeholders and lobbyists. 3. Advice and assistance on issues associated with ministers’ responsibilities as an MP or Senator. 4. Provision of media liaison and advice. For gallery journalists, obtaining information and tracking its evolution and distribution involves dealings beyond group four to include policy advisers in groups two and three. The overlap occurs because there is ‘considerable fluidity and flexibility in the roles performed by ministerial staff’ and difficulties in drawing ‘distinctions based on job title or perceived job role’ (Tiernan 2007a, Table 2.1 p.26).

**Being minded**

Mid-way through Howard’s eleven-year incumbency there is evidence of a new level in the size and intensity of centralised control of media relations through the prime minister’s office and it registered as a major issue for gallery journalists.

who has experienced different executives for more than fifty years, thought that to a ‘much greater extent than previous prime ministers’ Howard insisted on controlling the public agenda to such an extent that he was ‘a control freak with the media’. Michelle Grattan (The Age, 2003) noted that the prime minister’s office acted as an overseer of government media strategies ‘very carefully, centrally vetting’ all media officer appointments to the executive’s personal staff. Ross Peake (Canberra Times, 2003) agreed with the collective view that one of the greatest challenges of the last decade was ‘working up against a new barrage of press secretaries’. In her column in The Age on 02 May 2005, Michelle Grattan said that in her experience (dating back to 1971) the number of ‘media minders’ had increased to an ‘unprecedented’ level, to the extent that ministers have ‘an army of propagandists—many of them journalistic poachers turned gamekeepers’ (Grattan 2003). Denis Atkins (Courier-Mail, 2003) said that the increase in staff did not lead to a commensurate increase in useful information and that ‘you get less [useful information] out of ministerial staff than you did with previous governments’, and that in general he thought this was part of a climate of ‘greater distrust of the media’.

Paul Bongiorno (Network TV 10, 2003) saw a significant trend in the greater professionalisation of political communication and media management:

An important aspect about management of the media is that both the major parties have become extremely professional in the way in which they handle their media strategy...so there has been far tighter management of media strategy and far more discipline.

Jim Middleton (ABC TV, 2003) regarded the increased size and professionalisation of political media management as a more successful but less sophisticated, media management strategy than previous governments – describing it as ‘cruder but more effective. The key is simply the withdrawal of access, that’s the most significant difference’. Another major bone of contention was the prime ministerial media office’s control over public service media units and policy experts. Louise Dodson
(The Age, 2003) found her calls to public servants had been reported to Howard’s press office and in her view this was a ‘brazen’ example of executive control:

You used to be able to talk to the actual people in the (policy) area. Now it’s very much more controlled by the media division in consultation with the minister’s media office and they report everything – any media query, they report to the minister’s office…The prime minister’s office has a role in general but then it’s the minister’s officers who also control the media in their department.

To Karen Middleton (West Australian, 2003) the disciplined, more centralised control and command mechanisms from the media office had ‘changed the way we work, and the way our democracy works’:

There are edicts from the Prime Minister on the language public servants can use in their paper work and increasingly the line between what is political and what is public sector policy is blurred and that is a huge frustration for journalists. It’s not just because we can’t get access to the information but we also see that it gives a government enormous advantage in staying in government – the incumbency factor becomes much more powerful because they are using the public sector much more extensively to keep themselves in power.

Tony Wright (Bulletin magazine, 2004) noted that Howard had managed to ensure the executive kept ‘on song’ (Weller 2007, p.117) and this had extended across the backbench. In Wright’s experience there are ‘people to watch [ministerial] press secretaries to make sure that the same message is being put out by everyone, every minister, every backbencher’, and as a result it was difficult to find any information ‘outside the government line’.

**Disinformation and distrust**

The political journalist-media adviser interrelationship reached an all-time low in 2001 when the gallery found they had been manipulated by ministerial staff to help spread lies in the ‘children overboard’ affair. This controversy erupted after it became clear that misleading photographs had been handed out to the media. These were used to back false claims by the Prime Minister and the
then Minister for Defence, Peter Reith, that some members of a boatload of asylum seekers had thrown their children overboard in a desperate bid to head off interception by the Australian Navy. When doubts were raised about the photographs, ministerial staff actively impeded the correction of the public record:

Reith’s office was not inclined, nor did they have incentive to brook doubts about the photographs’ veracity. Thus as Weller (2002) [p.65 and pp.70-73]) has argued, ‘a false story became a fact and then had to be disproved, not merely checked’ (Tiernan 2007a, p.172 and p.187)

Following these events the federal parliamentary press gallery committee took the unprecedented step of endorsing a small collective response in the shape of a formal submission and complaint from nine gallery journalists44 to the Senate inquiry into a ‘Certain Maritime Incident’. Their protest was tabled on 13 May 2002 and is a strongly worded warning about the dangers of distributing ‘clearly false information’ and outlining a ‘widespread resentment among journalists’.

The introduction to the journalists’ submission said:

A government campaign of censorship and misinformation, which peaked during the Tampa incident and continued through the HMAS Adelaide ‘children overboard’ affair, is unprecedented in recent times. It involved the Ministries of Defence and Immigration as well as the office of the Prime Minister.

However, the high level of deliberate deception—which came clearly to light in Senate Estimates committee hearings—could not have been perpetrated without the involvement of senior and junior public servants.

As well as fostering feelings of distrust and resentment in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, this affair has underscored an urgent requirement for safeguards and guidelines to avoid a repeat of such blatant political manipulation of the bureaucracy (Farr and Barker et al. 2002 cited p.1297, Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Submission No. 13, Senate May 2002, Select CMI).

Ross Peake (Canberra Times, 2003) said the disinformation experienced during the ‘children overboard’ incident led the gallery to ‘totally re-examine

44 Appendix 7.
what officials [working with the executive] say to us and put it through a different filter’. Filters include not only re-evaluating assumptions about ministerial media officers but also longstanding conventions about ministerial accountability. Between October and November 2002, the false information was repeated by the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister, and allowed to stay on the public record even though ministerial officers and some senior public service personnel knew the story was untrue. Howard and his ministers later claimed they did not lie because they were not advised of the truth. From this, journalists learnt they could not assume ministerial ‘spokespeople’ were by default an extension of the minister, or that information to and from ministerial staff was known and endorsed by the minister. False presumptions about ministerial accountability also undermine the routine checking of facts through covert or overt confirmation by ministerial advisers, or ministers themselves.

In theory the Westminster doctrine of individual ministerial responsibility should mean personal staff are accountable to their minister who is in turn accountable to the parliament, and therefore ultimately to the voting public (Tiernan 2007a, p.36). But (as Tiernan points out) according to Weller (2002, p.65 and pp.70-73),

Howard undermined the convention observed by previous governments that telling a ministerial staffer is the same as telling the minister [and] what the prime minister failed to recognise was that at the point where ministerial staff cease to operate as extension of their minister, they have moved beyond traditional accountability frameworks. His approach fuelled a perception that [had] gained significant currency in the wake of the Travel Rorts affair, that ministerial staff can be used to provide ‘plausible deniability’ for the minister (cited in Tiernan 2007a, p.169).

Animals old and new

The gallery responses beg the question of how the Coalition Government’s apparently larger, more influential network of ministerial media advisers differs from their Labor predecessors’, particularly Labor’s taxpayer-funded National
Media Liaison Service (NLMS)—nicknamed ‘aNiMaLS’. Phillips (2002) described its role:

Australia’s National Media Liaison Service...which served the Hawke federal government as a 22-strong team, had been strengthened by Bob Hawke’s successor as Prime Minister, Paul Keating, with advisers located in Canberra and in state capitals. Under both Hawke and Keating it had a media-monitoring role and was quick to supply Press Gallery journalists with transcripts of gaffes made by Opposition shadow ministers (Phillips 2002, p.17).

Holland (2001-2002) details the way NMLS evolved:

Each government has arranged its media and information functions differently. All governments employ media advisers in individual ministers’ offices. Some governments have had units for gathering or disseminating information about government programs: the Government Information Unit [under Fraser] and the NMLS [under Hawke and Keating]. The Fraser ministry employed far fewer press secretaries in individual ministers' offices, but also had the Government Information Unit, which comprised two Canberra-based staff and another in each capital city.

The Keating ministry in 1994 had 17 media advisers plus 15 members of the Ministerial Media Group [most of them performing essentially the same functions as ministerial media advisers] and 12 media officers in the NMLS. In addition to media staff, governments have had staff providing other additional administrative or coordinating support. These have included the Government Caucus Committees Secretariat (GCCS) under Labor, the CPU (Cabinet Policy Unit) under Howard, and the staff allocated to Government Whips. This last category has grown steadily: there were two such staff in 1991, but by 1998 this had grown to eight (Holland 2001-2002, p.92).

Holland records that the Howard ministry in 1999 ‘had 34 media advisers, plus a media unit within the PM's office with six staff’, but there was ‘no official organisation to parallel the NMLS’—however, it had ‘synthesised some of the functions of Labor's government caucus committee secretariat (GCCS) and NMLS into the Government Members’ Secretariat (Holland 2001-2002, p.92).

The interview data show a generally uniform gallery response to the roles of National Media Liaison Service (NMLS) and the Government Members’ Secretariat (GMS).
Richard Griffiths (Capital Monitor, 2003) recounted that when the Hawke Labor government set up NMLS in 1983, it established units in every capital city for rapid government responses to media questions but within ‘four or five years’ the service turned into a propaganda arm’. Commenting on the 1996 election promise to disband NMLS, Griffiths said:

They were going to save lots of money and lots of staff, and no minister, apart from the prime minister, would have a press secretary and everyone would share journalists to write their press releases for them. That lasted for all of about a year and then all the ministers started to get their own staff together, and [now] they’re falling out of the doors down there to try and fit them in.

Tony Walker (Australian Financial Review, 2003) remembered the NMLS as mainly directing resources to getting ‘the government’s spin throughout the media’, but argued the media management network reconstituted by Howard does ‘much more’ and runs a much tighter operation in comparison with Labor governments:

Of course the better organised the government is, the more difficult it becomes for the Fourth Estate to penetrate. Our business is to find out what is really happening behind the scenes so inevitably, when there’s a well-oiled publicity machine and centralised control and everyone singing off the same song sheet, it makes it more difficult and there’s no question the Howard Government, compared with previous Labor governments, runs a tight ship.

James Grubel (Australian Associated Press, 2003) noted that a lot of the work once carried out by NMLS has been privatised and though media monitoring ‘is still going on, it’s not just being done by government, but agencies like Rehame and others’. Denis Shanahan (The Australian, 2003) agreed that as well as private monitors, the work of the former NMLS to ‘pick up mistakes by the (coalition) opposition still carries on’ and:

There are still people who do that and so that job just continues, out of ministerial offices, out of party offices and communications offices (and) the special GMS office that handles backbench communication.

In a contribution to the 2007 Senate Occasional lectures and in her capacity as president of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery Committee, Karen
Middleton (SBS TV) described the main difference as a ‘much more sophisticated network without the snazzy acronym’ (Middleton 2007, p.6). Holland’s work largely substantiates this claim concluding that the two main arms of the coalition’s network—the corps of media officers and the Government Members’ Secretariat (GMS)—‘taken together’ are ‘essentially the same as some of the official functions of the former NMLS’ (Holland 2001-2002, Endnote 62 p.33-34). Tiernan also alludes to the GMS role in media management and coordination and notes that ‘critics ague that the group has an extensive listening and propaganda machine’ (Tiernan 2007a, p.136).

**Summary**

The first extensive analysis of the prime ministerial command structure of media relations undertaken by Kate MacDermott (2008) is revealing in two ways—firstly in its assessment of the pivotal role of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), and secondly, in its observation that it remains difficult to fully measure the size and extent of the network under its control.

1. Citing Wayne Errington and Peter van Onselen (2005, pp.27-28) MacDermott (2008) shows that the PMO and the Ministerial Committee on Government Communications (MCGC) conveyed the government’s communications strategies to the GMS:

   The GMS as an institution inherited the mantle of Whitlam’s Government Liaison Service, Fraser’s Government Information Unit, and Hawke and Keating’s National Media Liaison Service (the so-called ‘aNiMaLS’). Officially located in the Office of the Government Whip until being transferred to the Office of the then Attorney- General in 2007, funded by the public, but not staffed by people employed under the Public Service Act, the GMS was in the business of coordinating the government communications strategies developed within the executive (public service public affairs sections and ministerial offices) (MacDermott 2008, pp.67-68).

Moreover, gallery journalists’ assertion of the partisan nature of the Howard executive’s network can be seen in MacDermott’s account of a 2005 Senate
Estimates committee findings that showed the Ministerial Committee (MCGC) was not ‘as a number of people have observed, a ministerial committee’:

In 2005, when the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee considered its membership, the then Special Minister of State, Senator Abetz, who chaired the MCGC, was the only minister who was also a permanent member of the committee. The other five permanent members included a parliamentary secretary, backbench MPs and senior ministerial staff [and] the permanent members are described by Onselen and Errington, 2007, p.7) as ‘Former campaign and party functionaries. Andrew Robb is a former federal director of the Liberal Party, Petro Georgiou is a former Victorian Liberal Party director and Tony Smith is a former ministerial staffer to Peter Costello. The prime minister’s representative on the committee is Tony Nutt, a former New South Wales and South Australian Liberal Party Director’ (Senate Hansard 2005; MacDermott 2008, p.64).

2. Scholars investigating details of the ‘PR State’ network as it developed under the Howard Government have found much of the data available to them ‘far from comprehensive’ [but that] anecdotal evidence [suggests] that specialist public affairs units ‘have been areas of significant growth in the public sector over the past decade’ (MacDermott 2008, p. 59). Ward (2003, pp.25-42) established a global number ‘as at 2002, approximately 4,000 journalists work for State or Commonwealth governments in a public relations capacity’ [but]

More disaggregated data has to be pieced together from annual reports and other sources. For example, Ward [2003] notes that in 2001 Environment Australia had a public affairs section of 12 professional staff and a budget of $1.828 million; the public affairs section in the Attorney-General’s department had a staff of five; and the public affairs division of the Department of Defence had 105 staff and a budget of $11.6 million (MacDermott 2008, p.59)

In Canberra, an unofficial estimate by Fitzgerald (2008, p.17 and p.176) put the total at around ‘660 media advisers’ working for the executive and a cohort of ‘1,056 communications/public affairs officers spread across 100 Government agencies’.
Section three: New media technologies

**Digital ‘immigrants’ in the gallery**

In the mid-2000s the global ‘information revolution’ had picked up momentum, catapulting journalists everywhere into a fast-paced and more anarchic media landscape. In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 2005 the powerful head of News Ltd., Rupert Murdoch, described himself, fellow proprietors, editors and journalists alike as ‘a bunch of digital immigrants’ who must ‘start thinking like our newest consumers’. He said that in order to face their collective challenge:

> We have to free our minds of our prejudices and predispositions, and start thinking like our newest consumers. In short, we have to answer this fundamental question: What do we – a bunch of digital immigrants - need to do to be relevant to the digital natives? …What do they want to know, and where will they go to get it? They want news on demand, continuously updated. They want a point of view about not just what happened, but why it happened (Murdoch 2005).

As well as shrinking the distance between journalists and their audiences and increasing audience demand and input, modern media technologies have also forced ‘digital immigrants’ to find new ways to cope with structural changes. For example, the capacity to instantly transmit and disperse information across multi-media platforms, blur professional divisions between print and electronic journalism and massively increase the volume of information flowing into news desk via email and the internet.

Such changes most intensely register in specialised news rounds such as the Canberra gallery, where time is of the essence in a perennial balancing act of proactively producing information to draw audience attention to topics ‘in the

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45 The period under study predates the impact of Web2.0 and subsequent far-reaching changes to broadcast communication in the public sphere where producers and consumers alike now have the means to multi-cast through the ‘blogosphere’ and other interactive platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.
public interest’, and the less time consuming task of responding to populist concepts of what the public wants to hear or know. Twenty-two of the twenty-five journalists interviewed in the first half of the present decade named new media as an issue of major concern and described their impact as a two-edged sword. On the one hand they cited negative effects such as information overload and pressure from the fast-track 24-hour news cycle whilst on the other hand, they acknowledged the obvious advantages of swift access to more diverse and accessible research tools. Nonetheless, there was across-the-board agreement that the new media landscape was affecting all aspects of political journalism, and being felt hardest amongst the print-based gallery bureaus.

Dennis Atkins (Courier-Mail, 2003) spoke of changes in the politician-journalist relationship from the increased ‘pressure to keep up with the information flow and speed of the news cycle that:

Moves so fast that politicians’ behaviour has, of necessity, changed. The news demand is more instant and the political reactions are more instant. This [Howard] government [is] like any other government, and will exploit whatever opportunities come along, and there are plenty of opportunities to skim over things because of the speed of the news cycle…. And [at the same time] there’s explosion in information outlets … and they’re all voracious…you’ve got 24-hour news channels—you’ve got more wire services and everything [has] to be constantly updated and kept ahead of the story.

Karen Middleton (West Australian, 2003) who joined the gallery on the cusp of change in the early 1990’s said ‘the way we work has changed quite dramatically and most of that has got to do with communications technology’, [and]:

One of the biggest issues that we have to contend with these days is the fact that we deal with such an enormous volume of information now. Events are transmitted faster and information shared more quickly. The change in [the] last seven years has been dramatic. There are more mechanisms to receive information and distribute it…We are now bombarded with [more] paper as well as electronic information.

Dennis Shanahan (The Australian, 2003) described the ‘worst effect’ of the internet as:
The complete inundation that you get as a political reporter—a lot of it is sheer rubbish particularly from public relations people. Pointless speeches, media releases, abusive mail, all of that sort of stuff. So that if you actually read everything that came every day, you wouldn't get any work done.

Veracity is an integral challenge for users of web-based information, and as Pearson (1999, p. 280) notes, journalists who need to be agile at developing ways to authenticate material, use facilities such as web-based discussion lists to cross-check facts and sources with colleagues:

Others were using the lists to warn their colleagues of dubious material or were voicing their concerns about the abuse of the medium for such purposes. Clearly, journalists needed to develop systematic authentication procedures when dealing with such information and investigate workable means of balancing views in their stories (cited Pearson and Patching 2008, p.42)

Tony Walker (Australian Financial Review, 2003) credits the internet not only with the advent of ‘the accelerated [24-hour] news cycle’ but also as ‘the main driver of the information avalanche’ and the ‘sheer velocity of [its] information flows’ was such that the ‘nature of our business is changing’.

Glenn Milne (Network TV channel 7, 2003), who has worked both in print and television media, described the impact on print deadlines where ‘the more sophisticated and efficient the technology’, the worse it became for deadlines, recalling that when he first started out in the gallery in the Sydney Morning Herald bureau, he ‘used to be able to get something ‘in at the 10.30 pm [deadline]’ but these days ‘you can’t get anything in after 7-7.30pm’. Tony Wright (Bulletin Magazine, 2004) also described his experience of shrinking deadlines:

When I was first in the gallery [1989], deadlines were much later and I would often file stories after midnight for the Canberra Times, and rarely leave before 10-11pm. Then the advent of new technology has brought these deadlines forward—the Twenty-four hour news cycle makes it hard for newspapers to bring you the latest news, that is news that happens after six or 7 o'clock in the evening, and I think that's a big downside.
The knock-on effect of earlier deadlines on work practices and the constraints on developing content were also high on the journalists’ list of concerns. Dennis Atkins (Courier-Mail, 2003) for instance, spoke of the way print journalists were ‘always being asked to project and ‘to throw forward’ and to try and report ‘where the story is going rather than where it is’, adding that he was ‘not entirely sure that [our readers] wouldn’t rather read a detailed account of what actually occurs’. However, whilst Dennis Shanahan (The Australian, 2003) agreed that ‘in order to sell a newspaper’ now ‘you have to throw forward’, he saw a growing potential for newspapers to make a market pitch as providers of analysis, noting that a significant increase in the number of times ‘Why?’ [rather than ‘What?’], appears on the newspapers posters’. Others also expressed the view that newspapers were well placed to provide background information in an overcrowded events-driven news cycle.

Geoff Kitney (Sydney Morning Herald, 2003) said in his view, the new media environment made adaptation an ‘imperative’ for print bureaus in the gallery:

There is a real challenge for the print media to take the things that are said and add value to them to find out what lies behind them, to dig deeper in other words and to pursue things that the Prime Minister doesn’t want pursued, to get the less obvious stories. I think this is a real imperative now for the Canberra Gallery, to dig much deeper. For Kitney it was somewhat ironic that the pressing need to adapt was occurring at a time of greatly increased government control over information and it was ‘actually a lot harder to dig deeper’.

Tony Wright (Bulletin magazine, 2004) thought the challenge for gallery journalists in the new media environment was ‘immense’ and ‘a double-edged sword’ that “sped up the amount of information that you can take in, and put into a story’ [and]:

On one hand it is very easy now to research just about any subject on the internet just sitting here with the computer [but the] downside of it is that you’re actually locked to your desk looking at a screen for long periods, rather than networking and partaking in discussions where you can learn something new that might be of use to you and to readers or listeners; and build a new relationship that might lead somewhere else. The
internet is not a networking tool, it can’t build working relationships. It just provides information.  

Tony Walker (Australian Financial Review, 2003) shared Wright's concerns about an over-reliance on electronic resources from the twin effect of new media resources and the Howard government’s clamp-down on face-to-face contact via the ‘centralised control’ and a ‘well-oiled publicity machine [where] everyone [is] singing off the same song sheet’. Walker speculated that in ‘this electronic age it’s possible to imagine that someone could perch up here and be a reporter for weeks and months on end without any human contact’. Whilst acknowledging the parliamentary website provides direct access to information from Ministers, the Prime Minister, the Opposition or the Parliamentary library ‘means you can more quickly gather that sort of information’. At the same time:

It also means that journalists have become more desk-bound and reliant on published material and may spend hours surfing the web without necessarily going and talking to people. I think it’s a bad tendency for Press Gallery journalists simply to deal with their contacts on the telephone and not actually talk to people. Face-to-face contact is much more desirable as a means of gathering information, getting people’s impressions or reactions and developing relationships, instead of having telephone type relationships.

**A Plus for electronic media**

Within the interview group, those working in electronic media bureaus saw the impact of new digital and internet-based media in a significantly more positive light. For example, the accelerated 24-hour news cycle is Sky TV’s core business, and as head of bureau, David Speers (SkyTV, 2004) explained, the reason it opened a new gallery bureau in 2003-2004 was:

Before we set up the bureau here there really wasn’t anything like Sky News. We do 24 hour news so anytime the story breaks we just jump on air and start talking about it and start getting guests to interview rather than waiting for that night’s (TV) bulletin or the next day’s newspaper. I think this has changed the way the press gallery works and indeed, I think, how parliament works. The press gallery and many MPs operate in different ways when they know that there is a television service breaking news live.
There’s also a greater demand for immediate information beamed through Sky, beamed through the internet. I guess this is being driven by consumers as much as anything else, they do want news on demand and not just when the media outlet is offering to show it. I think people are taking more and more advantage of that option.

New technology has massively expanded the electronic capacity of media such as the predominant wire service Australian Associated Press (AAP), the two Australia-wide commercial radio network bureaus—Southern Cross (now Fairfax radio) and Macquarie and the national public broadcasters, ABC and SBS.

Amanda Cavill (SBS Radio, 2004) found the digitisation of information and internet based technology had ‘vastly improved’ the bureau’s capacity.

I tend to use the internet daily as a source of background information when I write quite long, 10 to 15 minute current affairs pieces. For example, I might be doing a piece on wedge politics and whether it’s affecting the way the electorate thinks, and for something like this the internet is a wonderful resource—it’s fantastic to be able to go in and pull up documents, articles and things people have written to give you a starting point—it’s like a reference library—digitisation has made everything quicker and really more simple to get, but overall the end product, what's delivered, hasn’t changed.

Bureau head James Grubel (AAP, 2003) said the internet had expanded and modernised their existing operation and ‘opened up a new market for wire services’ [but] it had not ‘changed the way we work’:

We have a whole new lot of potential customers and the internet business. Our Internet desk now has a staff of about 45 [in Sydney head office]—the Internet has become a way of AAP selling its news to clients and it’s created employment because we need a whole separate structure now to gear material for the internet, [but] I don’t think it’s changed the role of the journalist because news is much the same—you’re still writing things. Wire services are always writing things quickly and accurately, with less of the spin and discussion. It’s clean and punchy news, it’s not that much different from writing
for radio—it's the same kind of clean, short, sharp and fast copy, which is what we've always been doing anyway.

A major difference cited by Grubel was the need to employ a photographer because of the need for vision, and to garner audio and vision that effectively converted AAP into a multi-media platform.

We do sound stories and pictures with our major stories. It's very hard for us now to ignore the Prime Minister on talkback because someone's got a video to provide what goes with that stuff.

David Speers (SkyTV) explained how the technology had facilitated a dedicated digital channel for live telecast footage of selected parliamentary proceedings. (The service described by Speers has capacities similar to the AAP role of monitoring parliament and could perhaps be seen as a television-type ‘wire-service’).

For radio broadcaster Alison Carabine (Southern Cross, 2004), the geographic restraints of Canberra-based reporting had been removed through access to direct live (audio) feeds from anywhere in the country:

New media technology has certainly helped us cover the enormous round of national politics, federal affairs. It is a huge area and in this country huge geographical distances are involved. The way in which the media has changed over the last decade has made it easier for us to cover stories.

**Summary**

The evidence in this section of the chapter provides an insight into Canberra political journalists’ experiences of new information technology and the way that its impact was most keenly felt in print bureaus. An observation by Geoff Kitney (Sydney Morning Herald, 2003) typifies the gallery sentiment:

Technology has changed the way everything is reported and that includes Canberra. When I came here in the 70s the newspaper bureaus and Gallery-based TV were the only way that politicians could get their message through to the electorate. These
days they have a variety of means of getting to the electorate, which don’t have to go through the Press Gallery to do that.

The interview data in this and the preceding chapters contribute an Australian perspective to a period when politics in all modern democracies entered the ‘spin era’ and public discourse was alive with issues such as the ‘dumbing-down’ or ‘tabloidization’ of political news and the advent of the ‘PR-State’ (for example: Tiffen 2004; Young 2007a; Negrine 1999; Franklin 1994; Franklin 1996, p.298).

Two interesting aspects of the digital information revolution are revealed in interview participants’ views and associated documentary research.

Firstly, they demonstrate there are contradictory forces at work that have a particular impact in specialised rounds. Whilst new technologies have almost infinitely multiplied the distribution of information, journalistic production skills and techniques are much the same as they have always been. The means of production continues to involve writing skills for text, and scripts for audiovisual mediums and the crafting of it into a meaningful (or at least, truthful) context and readily understood formats—the implications of this contradiction is explored in more detail in Chapter six.

Secondly, the elite or specialist, journalist’s refrain that in the new media era ‘now everyone can be a commentator’ appears to have triggered an increase in hard-line political commentators as well as the open alignment of some political journalists with their specialised sources. Tiffen (2007) noted:

One difference in the media [in 2007] compared to when Labor last won power in 1983 is the plethora of columnists in the press, expressing largely predictable opinions only minimally disciplined by any evidence that does not fit their prejudices, and overwhelmingly skewed to right of the political spectrum. The News Limited trio of Janet Albrechtsen, Andrew Bolt and Piers Akerman constitute a conformist echo chamber reliably savaging all critics of the Howard government while amplifying the main themes the government wants to promote.
Tiffen added that parallel with this was ‘an intriguing’ increase in the number of senior gallery journalists amply demonstrating their close relationship to government sources (Tiffen 2007). Much of the work of Dennis Shanahan (*The Australian*) for instance could be overtly linked to sources within Howard’s office. Both issues clearly fall within the purview of the purpose of the *Australia’s Right to Know* industry coalition—a point also taken up for discussion in chapter seven of this thesis.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the contest between politicians and journalists over the direction, presentation and volume of policy and political information flows in mid-2003 and mid-2004, at a time when rapidly changing new media technologies were increasingly revolutionising the production and distribution of all forms of communication.

Federal gallery journalists describe an array of new policies designed to hamper or block their access to information that were more intense, more ‘hard-edged’. Amongst the most challenging were the harsher regime designed to deter leaking of policy information, and the aggressive activities of the executive’s larger, increasingly professionalised corps of media minders.

Leaking unauthorised policy information has always been integral to the terms of engagement between politicians, public servants and journalists—used by politicians for advantage but deplored when it involves unwelcome information. The data show however, that during the Howard years the force and intensity of media management and manipulation strategies increased to new levels. Chief amongst them was a catch-all punitive policy towards the leaking of unwelcome, unauthorised information leading to a climate of fear that, some may argue, contradicts the capacity for public servants to give fearless advice.
FPPG journalists also found the clampdown on meaningful background briefings, a marked expansion in centralised prime ministerial control and a significant rise in the cohort of media advisers, combined to severely reduce sources of political information.

Further, under Howard a new phenomenon of ‘plausible deniability’ distorted the Westminster doctrine of individual ministerial responsibility and unravelled previously held assumptions that personal staffs are accountable to their minister, and the parliament (Tiernan 2007a, p.169). It was also an unhealthy addition to the political communication lexicon protecting the executive from scrutiny (as well as responsibility) and thus undermining journalists’ capacity to contribute to the democratic tenet of transparency. At the same time the government found there were some unexpected political costs, particularly after twice facing the undemocratic spectacle of the possible jailing of senior political journalists and a top-level, sector-wide revolt in mainstream media managements resulting in the extraordinary alliance of employers and employees under the umbrella of the Australia’s Right to Know group.

This chapter, together with those preceding it, provided a cumulative description of an executive-gallery interrelationship that reached an historic nadir, the intensity of which was due to two main factors in federal political journalism. Firstly, the ad hoc way political communication evolved in Canberra not only made the journalist-executive interface more precarious in the mid-2000s, it also enabled a hitherto unrealised potential for the introduction of extreme measures to control and side-step the critical expertise of the Canberra gallery. Secondly, their joint occupation of the parliamentary domain aided and abetted executive manoeuvres to stretch the boundaries of control over the media. The next chapter completes the analysis of the interview based research data. It explores participants’ discussion of issues relating to the relative news values of the executive and the parliament and examines issues arising from their observations, including implications that arise from the contemporary configuration of the FPPG.
Chapter Five: Views from the gallery**: part three

News values in the new building

Introduction

Eighteen of the twenty-five interviewees discussed issues relating to the relative news values of executive and the parliament. The first part of this chapter explores these views and the second analyses a range of issues arising from their observations, including their experience of the impact of the 1988 move to the permanent parliament house and the first structural separation of the executive, parliamentarians and the media. This is followed by a discussion of a number of other issues arising from the data including implications arising from the contemporary configuration of the FPPG—where mainstream media bureaus now constitute just over 50 per cent of the lessees in the area reserved for the media.

Executive-media relations: The old and new parliament house

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the opening of the permanent parliament house building on Capital Hill, historian Clement Macintyre drew attention to the fact that in the late 1970s, guidelines for architects competing to win the design tender required a layout that reinforced the executive’s permissive occupancy inside the parliament. The ‘executive government element’ had to be located in a clearly defined zone’ and ‘connections with other parts of the building to be kept to a minimum’ (Macintyre 2008, p.15).

The year the building opened Clem Lloyd had expressed the hope in The Parliament and the Press, that the new lay-out would leaven the effects of six

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46 Note in-text citations: Interview data in chapters three, four five: Quotations from interviews conducted for this thesis are attributed with the full name of the interviewee, the year and the name of their FPPG bureau in brackets. Further details of their status and date of interview are listed in Appendix 2a. Quotations and commentary by FPPG and other journalists, from public discourse are referenced in the standard way—surname and year of publication/broadcast, with a full citation in the Bibliography.
decades of political journalism that reported the executive government in a parliamentary framework, and perhaps see a return to the Westminster principal convention of ensuring a tangible separation of the executive, the parliament and the media:

The belated emergence of the permanent Parliament House may revive parliamentary proceedings as a source of political news, with the media diverting resources to a more extensive reporting of Parliament, perhaps even a partial restoration of some independent, rather than syndicated parliamentary reporting (Lloyd 1988, p.265).

Importantly, Lloyd also noted that a necessary part of this equation would contain some form of official declaration/recognition of the FPPG’s rights and responsibilities in its engagement with the executive and an end to ad hoc arrangements ‘under which the media is in parliament’ that, according to leading constitutional scholar and expert, Geoffrey Sawer, were ‘wholly contingent and discretionary’ (Lloyd 1988, p.259; Sawer 1983, pp.1-2).

As it transpired this issue was not resolved and the new building enhanced executive authority over media relations and now not only grants access on the basis of grace and favour, it does so from the security of an area Macintyre described (2008, p.16-17) as an executive ‘citadel’.

Political science scholar Greg McIntosh conducted a survey of Members of Parliament, government and opposition shadow ministers, parliamentary officials and gallery journalists during their first year in the new building. This work shows the isolating effects of the building’s design were almost immediately apparent, with 70-79 percent of people in the survey groups experiencing significantly less personal interaction with the executive (McIntosh 1989, pp.52-53; Grattan 1996, p. 218). Moreover:

Ninety-four per cent of journalists were in general agreement that face-to-face communication was more difficult in the new building. This [high percentage response] may be related to the fact that personal contact is part and parcel of being an effective journalist in the Gallery and thus they are more likely to notice the effects of a drop off in face-to-face communication (McIntosh 1989, p.53).
The copious but clearly divided precincts of the permanent parliament house, clearly and physically entrenched conventional curbs on the media’s access and movement within the building together with the guidelines for media that continue to remain as brief as they are proscriptive:

S5. General guidelines for Press Gallery members
5.1 Areas "off limits" to the Press
5.1.1 Members of the Press Gallery may not linger in the corridors in the vicinity of the Cabinet Room or party rooms. In these areas, members of the Press Gallery may not seek to engage Senators or Members in conversation. As a general rule, members of the Press Gallery wishing to speak with a Senator or Member should make an appointment by telephone.
5.1.2 Members of the Press Gallery are not permitted to enter the Members’ and Guests’ Dining Room on sitting days (unless invited to do so by a Senator or Member, and not for filming/photography purposes).
5.1.3 Journalists, photographers and camera crews must not stand at the entrances to Parliament House so as to impede the access of Senators, Members or others to the building. They must comply with the directions of security staff at the entrances (House of Representatives Procedure Committee 2004, pp.32-33).

Relative news values: the executive and the parliament

The data from this study’s mid-2003 and mid-2004 interviews with Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) journalists confirm a significant drift towards executive dominance of the parliament from 1996-2004, with a majority (18) of interview participants mentioning this as a major issue. Ross Peake (Canberra Times, 2003) commented that,

Prime ministers do not much like doing that old fashioned thing of making a statement to parliament and allowing a big debate about it. Increasingly with all the prime ministers, and especially with Howard, the push is to get into the public forum, get on John Laws [talkback radio] or on a TV show.

Paul Bongiorno (Network TV 10, 2003) pointed out the most powerful institution would inevitably be the most newsworthy. Geoff Kitney (Sydney Morning Herald, 2003) concurred that the executive ‘always gets page one—
because that’s where the power is’ and that ‘particularly with Howard the big decisions come from the prime minister’s office and the group around him’.

To Glenn Milne (Network TV 7, 2003) a concentration in executive power meant that:

It doesn’t matter what the parliament thinks, the troops [backbenchers] just fall into line and therefore [rarely is policy] a matter of debate—it’s more a matter of government by announcement.

David Speers (SkyTV, 2004) who had recently commenced in the newly installed SkyTV bureau, found that from ‘a broad journalistic point of view’ debate was limited:

I think there’s a growing interest in looking at how politicians operate within their party structure… we are not seeing MPs being given the licence to speak out on their own as much. That seems to be growing to be more and more the case. It limits debate to what the leaders are saying as opposed to what various MPs think of issues [and] it is increasingly difficult to find out what individual MPs think of various issues because they are so constrained by their party discipline, and that’s not necessarily a good thing—certainly from a journalist’s point of view—for covering the issues properly.

For journalists working in two commercial radio network bureaus in the FPPG the under-resourcing compounded the executive’s comparatively higher news value. Julie Colagiuri (Macquarie Network, 2003) explained that ‘generally there are only two of us here and we do everything, including weekends and overtime’ and,

…so in terms of the parliament—it’s rare that we get the opportunity to go in and have a look at what’s going on. That’s not to say it doesn’t ever happen—but we do not have much time to dedicate to just listening to what’s going on in parliament or to listening to Senate committees, unless there’s something really major going on.

Alison Carabine from the other commercial radio bureau (Southern Cross Network, 2004)47 also said the lack of resources made it impossible to have ‘someone sitting in the House and the Senate every day of a parliamentary week—we’ve got to cherry-pick, and that’s what we do’. Amanda Cavill (SBS

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47 Since replaced by Fairfax Radio
Radio, 2004) explained the complexity of the political process made ‘it easy for the focus to be on the cabinet’ and citing as an example, how a journalist who was relatively new to the gallery had thought only the Senate had committees:

The political process takes an enormous amount of time to understand. It takes a long time to fully understand the important roles and processes such as a Bill being sent into committee—one [newer] colleague did not understand that committees are important arms of the House of Representatives process.

Older hands such as the FPPG’s longest serving member Rob Chalmers (Inside Canberra, 2003), argued that Prime Minister John Howard’s leadership style had added to the devaluing of the parliament’s newsworthiness:

For instance in Menzies’s day he’d carpet a minister who did not make a ministerial statement to the parliament on a matter of importance, or [major] policy. These days, Howard goes out of his way not to do this. For instance, when he announced the decision to go to war in Iraq he made a media announcement, two or three hours before he made a statement to parliament. But with Howard it’s always the cameras first. He didn’t even announce the appointment of the Governor-General to parliament [but] told the media on a Sunday late afternoon in order to hit the Sunday evening news bulletins which are the highest rating of the week. Parliament is a sort of stage [used] every now and again.

Dennis Atkins (Courier-Mail, 2003) thought there had been a pronounced ‘falling away from following (and reporting) backbenchers and because greater degrees of executive dominance had largely ‘rendered the House of Representatives irrelevant’, adding that because the ‘votes are all pre-determined’ even the role of second-reading speeches’ had changed from clear statements of legislative intent, to being more ‘like party political broadcasts’. Karen Middleton (West Australian, 2003) described the government as obsessed with executive control’ even though ‘conservative governments’ are traditionally ‘about devolving responsibility’ and led by a prime minister ‘much more involved in his minister’s decision’ than any of his predecessors.
Research conducted by media scholar Trish Payne (1999a) during the first
term of the Howard government (1996-1998) shows that the trends outlined in
the interview data above were apparent in gallery-backbench relations during
the second year. Her scholarship draws on observation of analysis, interviews
with backbenchers and gallery journalists and the monitoring the gallery's
political coverage published and broadcast in a cross-section of electronic and
print media. The study found the ‘dictates of party discipline’ were a vital
contributing factor to the ‘lack of backbench input into national coverage’.
Payne also found that the FPPG’s acceptance of this reinforced ‘the
limitations of backbench power’ (Payne 1999b, p.36).

Payne’s research coincided with the period that Prime Minister Howard moved
to disendorse the Queensland MP Pauline Hanson following her divisive
maiden speech that ignited accusations of racism. According to Payne ‘the
massive concentration of media coverage that followed led one backbencher
to weigh-up the value of ‘using the media rather than the parliamentary
process’ as an alternative for political power’ telling Payne:

I have seen the big bickies [rewards] that are available for those who defy the
conventional wisdom and the politically correct brigade— but the price to be paid for
that is to become a heretic and you get burnt at the stake (anonymous, cited in Payne
1999b, p.40)

Those in the political sphere also noted the big political ‘bickies’ or dividend,
reaped by Hanson’s wedge—and as history shows the tactic was absorbed
into the Prime Minister’s leadership style, as was the affair’s abject lesson on
the inherent dangers of an undisciplined backbench.

Payne notes that this early lesson led to ‘a wide acceptance amongst both
politicians and the media, that the weaker the backbench the stronger the
Prime Minister’s leadership’ and party discipline was necessary in order to
protect ‘the prime minister’s leadership’. After the phenomenon of Pauline
Hanson, backbench attempts to attract media attention (however worthy the
motive may be) were automatically and ‘widely defined as moves to undermine government unity’ (Payne 1999b, p.38 and p.41).

In an interview for this thesis in 2003, Paul Bongiorno (Network TV10) observed that the extent of Howard’s determination to assert executive authority was demonstrated when the Prime Minister arbitrarily removed the right for ‘the Senate and his own party room to vote for the key positions on Committees’:

The Senate Liberals used to vote for the leadership of their own committees and the Senate party room and the Reps [House of Representatives] party room voted for key positions on their committees. The Prime Minister now appoints every one of them. This is an appalling act on the part of the Liberal Party, handing over virtually dictatorial control without recourse. The only recourse [backbenchers] now have is if their seat is marginal, they will speak out if they are more worried about their own personal survival than the survival of the government—these days they rarely speak out. There are Liberals who are very unhappy for example, on the asylum [refugee] policy but they’ve scarcely spoken out in the party room. They’ve kept to themselves.

Most interviewees found the increased assertion of executive authority reduced alternate sources of political news inside parliament house and that they increasingly relied on the Senate Committee system (particularly the Estimates process) for information.

Louise Dodson (the Age, 2003) commented that in 2003, when non-government senators were then in the majority:

The Senate Estimates Committee hearings generate more stories these days than the controlled and orchestrated Question Time—it is one of the few—very much one of the few opportunities—that members of parliament actually get to ask, and get the answers about executive policy, [and even then] that’s from the public servants who implement it.

Ian McPhedran (News Ltd., 2003), shared Dodson’s view of the Senate as an effective news source:
The Senate Estimates Committee system— is a process of democracy a great leveller, and a great way of getting information out—[opposition Senators] Robert Ray and John Faulkner are without peer in effectiveness. Thank goodness there are two experts like those guys [who are] like barristers, dragging information out. [In comparison] Question Time in the House of Representatives, is often just a free kick for [PM] Howard and [Deputy leader] Costello, and that makes the Senate Estimates system an even more important source of news.

Paul Bongiorno’s (Network TV10, 2003) substantial experience reporting from Washington brought a useful comparative view to the participants’ discussion of the negative effect of party discipline on the newsworthiness of parliamentary proceedings. He described the Australian system of ‘rigid party control’ as ‘regrettable’ and added that even though it had been ‘apparent in the Labor Party for many years’ and he thought it was especially regrettable that the Liberal Party had abandoned its ‘great tradition’ for tolerating dissent that had ‘existed right up to and including the Fraser government’. He recalled ‘a couple of occasions’ for example, when Liberal Senators blocked [their own] government’s legislation. In his view the strong control over Liberal backbenchers ‘speaking out’ in the mid-2000s, meant that in the House of Representatives ‘there is no check or balance of the executive at all’.

In re-emphasising the news value of the Senate in the prevailing circumstances of 2003, Bongiorno also warned that ‘we would [all] rue the day that a government of either colour gets the numbers in the Senate’ adding that he thought Australian democracy was remarkably vulnerable, especially in comparison with Washington:

The American system does not suffer from this same undemocratic, rigid party system. The American system does allow Senators and Representatives to speak out, to exercise their role as representatives of the people first and representatives of their party second. As a result I think that in the American system their party system has checks and balances and is in a healthier state than ours.
Much of the above analysis of interview data is a reflection of the structural realities (outlined in chapter two of this thesis) resulting from the relocation of the Australian parliament to the new national capital in the 1920s. After the move from Melbourne to Canberra the parliament, unlike other Westminster-derived democracies elsewhere, uniquely accommodated the executive, parliamentary and media functions in the one building. It was shown that the effect of concentrating all political journalism under the one roof prevented the overt development of specialist media corps assigned to the constitutionally separate institutions of the parliament and the executive.

The interview data above confirms that Canberra’s unique arrangement to combine the constitutional and news media functions is reflected in newsgathering practices that are structurally different from political journalism in (for instance) London and Washington. The FPPG viewpoints support Lloyd’s (1998) argument that a clearer separation where ‘each [has] its own institutional space and press gallery to cover it’ could have achieved a better balance in comparative newsworthiness in Canberra. He notes that in Washington the Congress has a distinct sub-gallery ‘performing a specialist media function’, which guarantees it gets ‘a fair share of news media and attention’, even though it may be ‘less in proportion than space and broadcast time going to the [executive] President’; and as well:

*Physical separation of space gives perhaps an even fairer balance in the United Kingdom, where the coverage given to Westminster in session is comparable to what Number Ten and Whitehall receive (Lloyd 1998, pp.7-9).*

Another legacy of Canberra’s unique media arrangements relevant to this chapter is the way an ‘all-in’ or unitary gallery leaves the majority of political journalists to self-define as members of an executive media corps—whilst in

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48 Page numbers are absent from the transcript of Lloyd’s 1998 lecture in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series, therefore page citations in this thesis refer to the online .pdf version of this document.
reality this ad hoc arrangement allows the executive to arbitrarily define who’s in and who’s out, and give access to some executive information, to some journalists, some of the time.

As a result, media coverage of parliamentary proceedings has been treated as a leftover, for ‘others’ to cover—in the early days this took the form of a caste of journalist-stenographers who were transported to Canberra specifically to cover the parliament when it was in session. In the early 1970s the Australian Associated Press (AAP) wire service took on this role and the FPPG interviews in this study show that thirty years on, journalists in mainstream media bureaus continue to depend on wire services and other syndications for the capture and distribution of raw data from the parliament. Journalists in the over-stretched two commercial radio network bureaus regard the AAP service as vital. Julie Colagiuri (Macquarie Network, 2003) for instance, described it as an invaluable back up ‘in terms of making sure that I haven’t missed anything’ [it is] ‘always good to know that there’s another place to check’. Rob Chalmers (Inside Canberra, 2003) pointed out that once Question Time finishes ‘only AAP remains in the chambers [press gallery benches]’ and ‘AAP covers for everyone—so if it misses something, well the world misses it’.

Head of the AAP bureau in 2003 James Grubel, explained the bureau must have ‘somebody who is watching and reporting Federal politics all the time’ that with no provision for 24-hour national broadcasts of federal parliament, there’s no other way ‘people living outside Canberra can follow politics the way that the gallery does’:

The thing AAP does that others do not is to have a team of three people in the gallery benches. When Parliament sits—we not only cover politics but we look at the proceedings. A team is on all day when the House of Reps and the Senate sits and they just follow everything that’s happening—all the debates, everything anyone says. We do a story on every Bill that’s introduced and everything [law] that’s passed. We select stories from debates on merit. So when Parliament is sitting six people out of this office are just covering parliament, keeping an eye on it—three in the Senate and three in the House—that is the gallery’s safety net. None of the other bureaus have the resources to be watching parliament round the clock, so they rely on us to tell
them what’s happening in the Chambers, and alert them if something interesting happens.

According to Grubel (2003) AAP journalists are assigned portfolio rounds, as well as running general ‘shifts from 6 in the morning until midnight most days of the week, three shifts on Sunday and one on Saturday.

The entry of SkyTV to the gallery in 2004 introduced a visual dynamic to the AAP-style back-up service. The inaugural head of bureau, David Speers explained that the SkyTV digital service had a dedicated channel devoted to parliament. However its content is constrained by a Procedures Committee specification that all television footage must be siphoned and controlled by the government through the parliament’s Sound and Vision Office (SVO), whose directors work to set pre-determined rules. Speers (SkyTV, 2004) explained

> We show all the House of Representatives and all the Senate live, not just Question Time. The way it works is if you subscribe to digital channels such as Foxtel or AusStar you can access eight screens on SkyNews. One is our main news channel, and there’s a series of others, for business, news, sports news and now one of them is the parliament channel. We also do regular updates on what’s happening in Federal politics as part of the main news channel [and] regularly include a lot of live interviews.

He added that the parliamentary news service was ‘very much’ modelled on the C-Span service that provides unfettered coverage of the US legislature—and in spite of the current restrictions imposed by the Procedures Committee sees the SkyTV gallery service as:

> Opening up more of the federal parliament to the public—apart from what they see in Question Time which is slightly different to the rest of the day in parliament as it is far more combative, and cameras-driven. Although our other coverage is more mundane, some of the debates, I think, are quite passionate and interesting to watch—I think it will be interesting to see how viewers in Australia take it.

In a contribution to the 2002 Senate Occasional Lectures Series, media scholar Julianne Schultz discussed the need for Australia to adopt the practice of televising parliament based on the US C-Span model, through an especially dedicated public television channel. The digital era makes this more than
possible and is worth discussing here in some detail because of its capacity to help re-balance political news.

The issue of televising the Australian parliament is a highly contested idea that has defied resolution. Schultz notes in regard to the televising of Australian parliamentary proceedings:

The first report dates back to 1978, there is no record of any response to that. The second was an unfinished report in 1984, then there was another in ’85 also with no response and then a further four, and the last in 1995—also failed to draw a response from the government of the day (Schultz 2002, p.11).

In the parliamentary forum politicians remain camera-shy, in spite of the 21st century’s mobile phone and internet technology that has turned the national transmission of visual images into an every-day event. Clearly the electorate deserves more than the orchestrated pic-and-sound-grabs regularly served up on television as political news (particularly from door-stop press conferences).

Schultz mounts a compelling argument for the televising of parliament, arguing it should no longer be just an issue for the elected members and senators and is worthy of wider concern as a means for generating greater public access and interest in the processes of democracy. According to Schultz, the US C-Span public affairs network is a proven and successful model that if adopted, could deliver an audience representing upwards of eight per cent of Australian TV households:

C-Span has two television networks covering the Congress and the Senate, committees, media conferences, speeches, and conferences and three radio networks. It is reached by 77 million of the 98 million American TV households, up from 3.5 million in 1979. While 60 percent never or rarely watch the network, 30 percent watch occasionally and ten percent watch regularly several times a week – a committed audience of more than 23 million. This is in a country where only about 45 percent of people still watch the network news shows. These figures, if translated to Australian cable television could mean that eight percent of Australian TV households could be expected to watch the network at least occasionally—more if it was available by free to air television. I haven’t seen the ratings for the pay TV channels for a while, but I suspect that this would be in the middle ranking channels. This is not expensive
television – the costs of production would be low, programming costs would be negligible, staff numbers small (Schultz 2002, p.14).

Audience surveys of the service also revealed a demographic that was not confined to wealthy, political elites, but included a third under the age of thirty-five (in 2002) and another third at high school age and just over a third were low-income earners. The C-Span model also proved to be a useful platform for feedback. Their surveys showed most US politicians who appeared on the network reported ‘a significant increase in correspondence’ and over sixty-percent believed it ‘enhanced the reputation of congress’ (Schultz 2002, p.14)

A similar network in Australia would have the potential to return greater newsworthiness to the parliamentary process and break the longstanding Canberra deadlock between the fourth-estate and the executive.

**The modern shape of the gallery**

This section of the chapter turns to observations about the size, configuration and make-up of the FPPG made during the research interview rounds.

At the time Howard assumed office, the FPPG had already undergone a decade of radical physical transformation in its size and configuration. The allocation of media offices is spread over a three thousand square metre area on the second floor on the Senate side of the parliamentary building and was filled to capacity in less than a decade.

In part, a substantial increase in space created its own demand. The major newspaper offices, the ABC, and the television networks, doubled and in some cases tripled the size of their gallery staffs. The sprouting of a range of diversified news interests outside the mainstream sparked pressures for individual and small-unit representation … Space was also awarded to news agency services, mainly commercial and financial, which proliferated (Lloyd 1998, p.10).
During the 1990s the configuration of the FPPG bureaus differed markedly from its origins in the traditions of the fourth estate, and the proportion of gallery bureaus serving mainstream Australian audiences reduced to barely above 50 percent (FPPG Committee 2005; Fitzgerald 2008, pp.365-393).

By the time of this study’s interviews in mid-2003-mid-2004, the official FPPG list included sixty-two media bureaus with the largest being the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) with ten program-based offices. A wide variety of media workers operate inside parliament house. There are camera crews and photographers, office managers and others employed to monitor and re-cycle raw parliamentary data while some work under the auspices of the parliament itself such as the government’s photographic service bureau Auspic and the ABC’s Parliamentary Network News. Around 60 percent work for newspapers/print and 40 per cent for electronic media. Two hundred and forty one are journalist members of the FPPG. However, less than two hundred are located in press gallery bureaus (Fitzgerald 2008, p.14). The number of media passes on issue varies from three to four hundred (Waterford 2005) and includes a significant number of journalists based outside the parliament and Canberra itself (Fitzgerald 2008, p.263). In an interview in 2003 James Grubel, then Secretary of the Press Gallery Committee and head of the AAP bureau, explained,

...we have about 400 gallery passes on issue’ – an estimate that would include up to 100 bona fide media workers who may not work inside a bureau, nor even be based in Canberra, but have a legitimate case for a media pass to attend media conferences and sit in the designated press gallery in the chambers of parliament.

Thirty of the sixty-two bureaus located in the FFPG can be identified below as principally publishing or broadcasting for mainstream Australian audiences and are listed in Appendix 2b. The balance is a combination of bureaus with specialist subscriber audiences and others that are specifically directed at religious denominations or overseas audiences. Most have bureaus inside parliament house—those located elsewhere are identified with an asterisk [*]—and all have gallery-based media boxes and media passes.
A major group of bureaus are leased by media monitors who re-cycle and on-sell raw unmediated parliamentary data. They are located in an area once dubbed ‘radio alley’ but now renamed ‘monitor ally’: Media Monitors; Rehame; Capital Monitors; Media Release Services, Political Reference Service*, Bytext, CCH —Access communications. Other bureaus have audiences that fall into one of the three categories: Overseas, specific religious audience, or specialised commercial sector interest groups:


Particular religious denominations: Australian Buddhist Press, Australian Jewish News, National Catholic Media;


Others have dedicated freelance journalists such as Australian Defence Magazine—Daniel Cotterill, Computerworld—Wayne Adams, Health science sector—Jane Ford*, Armed forces/Defence industry—Peter La Franchi* (FPPG Committee 2005).

**Political journalists, niche publications and lobbyists**

Subject to security checks media passes continue to be issued in consultation with the FPPG committee and with the number on issue at 400, the guidelines appear to be very broad. Many of the bureaus listed above are niche publishers with specialist subscription-based audiences. For example defence industry’s The Australian Defence Business Review, Workplace Express (its service is self-described as ‘essential industrial relations and human resources news’ for business), Science Media (specialises in science and technology related communications), Lloyds List/Daily Commercial News (maritime business news and information).

The issuing of media passes to a large number of journalists working outside the gallery precinct and the presence in the FPPG of a large cohort of
specialist niche publications is a significant step away from the days when admission to the Canberra fourth estate was tightly linked to the mass media function of informing and educating the national electorate. The days when presiding officers of the parliament and executive would use the removal of a media pass to exercise authority over journalists’ access to parliament house have passed. Today the construct of the new parliament itself, regulates journalists’ movements within the building with key areas such as the ministerial wing and Members' Hall strictly off-limits and entry by permission only.

Discussed in more detail below are others with topic-specific defined audiences within the business sector such as Bytext (Bolger Media Services), The Lobbyist/Clareville Press, Australian Business Brief, Corporate Media Publications and Economic Information Services.

The Bytext (Bolger Media Services) bureau provides information and media service subscribers to sectoral interest such as the Independent Contractors Association of Australia (whose subscribers have a major interest in industrial relations reforms). It is also a media management contractor and as the case study in the next chapter shows, Bolger Media Services secured a controversial contract with the Prime Minister’s Office in 2003 to manage the FPPG media during the visit of US President George W. Bush.

The Lobbyist/Clareville Press provides data and advice tailored for professional lobbyists. In March 2006, Rosenberg Publishing launched a handbook at parliament house, Lobbying in Australia, authored by the bureau’s journalist, Julian Fitzgerald (Fitzgerald 2006). The Australian Business Brief and Hansard Services bureau (also known as the Government Affairs Monitor) provides ‘a weekly report to management on national issues affecting business’ and similarly Corporate Media Publications and Economic Information Services provide specialist information for the business/finance sector. Several of the nine individual freelance journalists also serviced
special interest or niche publications—such as Daniel Cotterill (Australian Defence Magazine), Wayne Adams (Computerworld magazine) Jane Ford (Health science sector) and Peter La Franchi (Armed forces/ Defence industry).

In an online posting at Australia Policy Online in 2008, John Warhurst notes that lobbying has ‘both closed and open connotations’ and can be described as insider work—‘that is, gaining private access to government’. Questions about lobbying were made more difficult in 1996 when the incoming Howard government abolished the federal lobbyist register and abandoned federal regulation of lobbyists (Warhurst 2008).

It is also relevant to this study that inherent in the design of the new parliament house building is a deeply restrictive system that placed the media’s physical access to the ministers and parliamentarians, on an individualised ‘by-permission-only’ basis. More often or not this would be a negative for gallery journalists with a brief to pursue diverse and conflicting sources of political information—but those publishing for specialised audiences or interests could well see this arrangement as a positive.

There is a thin line between niche publishing for specialist interests and lobbying for those interests and this becomes fainter when the writing and publishing is done within the precincts of the parliament in close proximity with a legislature. For example, such access for the Independent Contractors Association magazine is likely to have worked as a bonus for both the executive and that media outlet (accredited to the ByText bureau) in 2004 during the development and passage of the highly contested Work Choices legislation. However to determine whether or not cross-overs into the realms of lobbying were a significant feature of the Howard years, would require a separate in-depth inquiry beyond the scope and resources of this thesis. Nonetheless it is worth noting here that the question of lobbyists working from inside the gallery is not a new issue.
For example, the 1981-1982 archive of the FPPG Committee's working files reveals that one of the agenda items for a meeting in early 1981, was 'to investigate allegations that the contents of some press boxes are being sold to lobbyists' (Lloyd 1988, p.226).

**Conclusion**

The interview data in this chapter show that mid-way through the Howard government’s four terms of office, a significant number of senior FPPG political journalists were concerned about issues relating to the relative news values of executive and the parliament and most believed that problems associated with this had been exacerbated by the lay-out and regulations imposed in the permanent parliament house building.

The chapter also draws attention to the fact that over the same period, a large number of niche publications with special interest subscribers flourished together with a plethora of media monitoring businesses—and the once predominant domain of mainstream ‘fourth estate’ media has shrunk and now occupies just over fifty-per cent of the bureaus in the FPPG parliamentary precinct.

The impact of the trends, issues and challenges outlined in this and the previous two chapters, is captured in the case studies that follow in the next chapter, and is discussed in more detail in the conclusion (chapter seven) of this thesis. The two case studies in the next chapter supplement the multi-method research approach of this thesis to show the executive-FPPG interrelationship in action.
Chapter Six: Case Studies

Introduction

The two case studies in this chapter form part of the multi-research methodology outlined in chapter one of this thesis, adding different dimensions to the empirical and documentary research in this study. Each recounts events that reflect the extent of structural and conventional change in executive-gallery relations during the period of Coalition governance under the leadership of John Howard.

The first case study concerns the visit of U.S. President George W. Bush in October 2003. At that time the Coalition government—well into its third successive term—was riding high under Howard’s combative and controlling leadership style, that had been given an ‘added licence by the post-9/11 climate of crisis’ (Walter and Strangio 2007, p.11; Brett 2007, p.8). The high profile U.S. presidential visit illustrates how an executive led by a determined and combative prime minister has the capacity to sideline parliamentary sovereignty, public rights of entry to parliament and the role of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG).

The second study illustrates the way the systemic practice of arbitrary privileging in the executive-FPPG’s interrelationship plays out in leadership struggles. The case recounts an incident involving three gallery journalists and their belated revelation in August 2007 of an ‘off the record’ dinner conversation with prime ministerial pretender, Treasurer Peter Costello, at a pivotal point in his long-standing desire to succeed John Howard as Prime Minister.
Widely known as the ‘dinnergate’ affair, this case thrust issues of media manipulation, trust and journalists’ ethics into the national limelight and illustrated the on-going problems of ‘ramshackle’ rules in executive-FPPG relations. Furthermore, it highlights the on-going need for an overt formal concordat by showing how, in its absence, media organisations can be forced to develop vital principles and ethics on the run for journalists in the federal parliamentary round.

**Case study one:**
**US President George W. Bush goes to Canberra**

The father of George W. Bush, former President George Bush Snr had been the first foreign head of government to address the Australian federal parliament in 1992 as part of an official state visit organised by Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating.

In October 2003 the Howard government made history twice, when it convened two special joint sittings of the parliament to accommodate back-to-back visits from two foreign heads of state, the ‘informal’ visit by US President George W. Bush on October 23, and the official state visit by the Peoples’ Republic of China President, Hu Jintao, the following day, October 24. The Australian parliament was especially (and expensively)\(^49\) convened for both occasions as neither presidential visit coincided with parliamentary sitting days.

The US Presidential visit is selected for study because it raised a number of controversial issues of fundamental importance to government-media relations, most of which did not flow on to the subsequent official state visit by President Hu.

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\(^49\) Reported to be $2m (Kingston 2004, p.176).
On 8 October 2003, in the lead up to the President’s George W. Bush’s visit, Howard government minister and manager of parliamentary business Tony Abbott, moved a motion for the parliament to approve an invitation to address the parliament, stating that:

The visit to Australia by the President of the United States is a very important occasion, and it should be treated appropriately by the Australian parliament and the Australian people. The government has decided to deal with the visit of President Bush in precisely the same way that the Keating government dealt with the visit of President Bush Snr on 2 January 1992 (Abbott 2003, Hansard p. 20784).

In fact Abbott’s motion to parliament hid a key difference between the two visits. Notes from a planning meeting held on 17 September 2003 at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and secured under Freedom of Information by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, show that from its inception the visit of President Bush would not be dealt with in ‘precisely the same way that the Keating government dealt with the visit of President Bush Snr’ The notes show that the meeting with the US President’s ‘advance [planning] team’ agreed:

- The visit was to be short—[apart from the address to Parliament] there would be just the wreathlaying (sic) in the Hall of Memory [at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra], no official state visit, with, no ceremonial greeting, gun salute etc. (cited Kingston 2004, p.171).

In reality, the logistics and management strategies for President George W. Bush’s visit broke and changed protocols and were a far cry from the blueprint established by his father’s earlier visit. First and foremost unlike the visit by President Bush Snr (and President Hu Jintao), this was not to be an official state visit and would not carry the same bi-partisan and public obligations and protocols. In contrast it was a working visit and President Bush a guest of Prime Minister Howard, rather than the state as a whole. This relieved the President and his prime ministerial host of a number of formal obligations and set-piece public events that accompany state-visits—such as an official public welcome by the Governor-General as the Australian Head of State, the Prime Minister as Head of the Government and the Leader of the Opposition. Nor
was there any obligation to hold an official press conference to field questions on a 50-50 basis with the visiting and local media (Kingston 2004, p.170).

The US presidential visit in 2003 was a remarkable mix of private informal encounters with the Prime Minister and his invitees and highly orchestrated ultra-secure media and public appearances. Instead of an official public greeting, only the Australian Prime Minister and his wife privately met the President and his wife inside the US Air Force One jet. The foursome descended the stairs to an empty tarmac except for the 150-strong US media contingent and a select group of Australian television crews and photographers. It was not until the next day that Bush paid a short twenty-minute courtesy visit to the Head of State at the Governor General’s Yarralumla residence and a ‘meet-and-greet’ photo opportunity.

**Joint sitting of the Australian Parliament**

The centrepiece of President George W. Bush’s twenty-one hour whirlwind visit was an address to a joint sitting of the Australian parliament on October 23.

The responsibility for the management of parliament on all occasions in Westminster-derived systems lies with the presiding officers. In this case, Speaker Neil Andrew MP and Senate President Paul Calvert had to deal with the twin pressures of their own executive as well as that of the President (who in the US system is the executive incarnate) and the entourage of personal staff and security guards, in the post-9/11 era of hyper-security. In the face of this pressure, Andrew and Calvert conceded their authority over public and press gallery rights of access to the parliament to a contractor employed by the Prime Minister’s department.

The following ‘first-time-ever’ security measures were summarily adopted (Kingston 2004, pp.160-202):
firearms were permitted inside parliament house in response to a request by US security agents;
on-essential parliamentary staff were instructed to take the day off;
uninvited members of the public were banned from entering the parliament and from the public gallery;
a security screen was temporarily installed at the public entrance; and
a second temporary screen was set up at the entrance of the House of Representatives chamber (in addition to the usual screens at secure side-entrances).

There was also an unprecedented surrender of authority with regard to media matters (Price 2004; Kingston 2004; Farr and Grubel 2004) which saw the:

- transfer of responsibility for issuing media passes from the presiding officers to the Prime Minister’s department, who then outsourced the responsibility to a private contractor who had no power over a US secret service decision not to recognise gallery passes. As a result several senior reporters were blocked from entering in spite of extended negotiations and agreements struck between Parliament House security officers and the gallery committee secretary, James Grubel. Amongst those banned from entering was the editor-at-large for Rupert Murdoch’s *The Australian* newspaper, Paul Kelly, who ‘spent almost half an hour furiously arguing before eventually being allowed into the press gallery’ (Price 2003);
- transfer of all executive and public service media-minding to the prime minister’s personal office;
- suspension of commercial media photographers’ rights of access to the parliamentary chamber and restriction of that right to the government controlled *Auspic* bureau;
- granting of greater rights to the pool of US media than to the Australian media. For example, only the US media were permitted to cover the presidential motorcade; and
o banning distribution to gallery journalists of photographs—taken by government’s Auspic bureau—during the President’s private meeting with Opposition Leader Simon Crean (the pictures eventually got out via Crean’s office).

**A media sensation in parliament house**

In accordance with Privilege Committee rules, Speaker Andrew refused repeated US media requests to film inside the House of Representatives chamber. Instead US television crews were allocated positions in an enclosed corridor that overlooks the chamber. This was described by Price (2004, pp.1-4) as an ‘intriguing’ arrangement [where] ‘there appeared a deliberate strategy’ to separate US media from their Australian counterparts, so that the White House press corps covered the Bush speech from behind glass in an area ‘high above the chamber, separate from the press gallery’. Price records that:


Unlike many other Westminster-derived parliaments (including the Queensland Parliament in Australia), in Canberra television images of parliamentary proceedings are siphoned and controlled by the government through the SVO, which is managed by the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS); and its TV directors must work to a set of rules developed by the parliament’s Procedure Committee. There can be ‘long-shots’ of both sides of the chamber, but filming must otherwise be confined to the person who is speaking (or has the Speakers/Senate President's ‘call’). The rationale is that other events in the chambers such as protesters and gratuitous interjectors, could threaten the dignity of the parliament and are likely to encourage bad behaviour (Price 2004, pp.1-4).
Section 4 of the Procedure Committee rulebook states in Section 4.1 ‘Television and radio recording of proceedings’:

4.1.1 Television filming in the chambers is the responsibility exclusively of the Department of the Parliamentary Reporting Staff (DPRS).

4.1.2 The live television "feed" of proceedings in both chambers is broadcast directly to offices in Parliament House, including Press Gallery offices, to various other agencies and institutions.

4.1.3 DPRS maintains video and audio records of proceedings. They will generally be made available for rebroadcasting when they are required for fair and factual reporting of proceedings.

4.1.4 Rules regarding rebroadcasting of proceedings are to be found in the volume of Standing Orders of each House.

(Standing Committee on Procedure 2005a, p.35).

Nonetheless, Price (2004, pp.1-4) recounts that during President Bush’s address to parliament, a US crew from CNN ‘brazenly’ flouted the instructions of Speaker Andrew ‘to sneak a rogue camera into the House’ and through the glass panels overlooking the chamber, filmed all proceeding during the President’s speech to the joint sitting of parliament. From their unique vantage point the US television crew captured a world-wide news exclusive when Greens Party Senators Bob Brown and Kerry Nettle defiantly interrupted and challenged the President, interjecting with protests about two Australian citizens detained at Guantanamo Bay, and the terms of the US-Australia free-trade agreement. A record of the events as they unfolded was posted online by Margo Kingston at the Sydney Morning Herald's WebDairy:

After Bush asserted that America had removed ‘a grave and gathering danger’ from Saddam [Hussein], [Senator] Bob Brown stood up. ‘I call on you to return our Australians …and we will respect you’. Coalition members yelled ‘sit down, sit down’ and a parliamentary attendant approached to ask him to leave. Bob Brown stayed in his seat and the attendant moved away. [PM] Howard went bright red and stayed that way for the rest of the speech. His hand clutched the lectern in front of him. When Bush said that ‘Australia is leading the way to peace in South-East Asia’, Brown interjected ‘We are not a sheriff’. When Greens Senator Kerry Nettle rose to protest the ‘free trade’ agreement Bush and Howard are negotiating in secret, the Coalition shouted her down. But when Bush responded that ‘I love free speech’ the Coalition broke into wild applause. Many Labor pollies clapped too. Brown opened his arms and
said with a smile: ‘We do too’…The Coalition stood as one and clapped continuously for several minutes until Bush shook hands with pollies and left the Chamber. Most Labor MPs stood and briefly applauded. About 13 remained seated, mostly women. As Bush headed to the exit, Coalition MPs formed a human shield to stop the Greens Senator Nettle approaching the president with a letter from the wife of one of the two Australians imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay. Western Australian [Senator] Ross Lightfoot used his elbows, as he and others held her back like police holding back the protesters outside (Kingston 2003).

The broadcasting of these sensationally newsworthy images sparked a rush from Australian and overseas networks to get hold of the footage from the visiting US media contingent. However, unfortunately for the host nation, Australian and US audiovisual formats were incompatible, and Australian audiences had to make do with fuzzy TV-images-of-TV-images taken from US TV monitors. In fact only one original image of the events made it into the Australian media via a Canberra Times photographer.

The guidelines give photographic journalists more ‘wriggle room’. In 1998 the House of Representatives freed non-government photographers from the stricture that restricted their shots to politicians with the Speaker/Senate President’s call, and allow photography ‘anywhere in the chamber’ provided the images and ‘associated captions and editorial comment relate directly to the circumstances in the chamber’ (Standing Committee on Procedure 2005b, pp. 16-17). This enabled Canberra Times’ photographer Graham Tidy to adroitly snap an image of Prime Minister Howard at the forefront of the ‘human shield’ of politicians blocking Senator Nettle’s attempt to deliver a letter to Bush (Kingston 2004, p.189).

The day’s events inside parliament house contain a litany of instances that traduced notions of the parliament’s sovereign and separate status from the executive and conventions in executive-gallery relations. The subsequent outrage from parliamentarians and gallery journalists alike surfaced in a fiery protest letter to Speaker Andrews from the FPPG Committee, and in heated exchanges during a Senate Estimates Committee in early November 2003.
Political fallout

A Senate Estimates Committee hearing on 3 November 2003 scrutinised the numerous debacles during the US President’s address to parliament. Labor Senator John Faulkner told the Head of the Joint House Department, Michael Bolton, that he wanted to establish ‘how the hell this [US CNN) camera—it could have been a bazooka for all I know—got into the north gallery of the Parliament? These characters carrying movie cameras were not a risk, is that it?’ Bolton’s answer simply said ‘US security service personnel were happy for them to be there, and to get in quickly, and therefore that was done’. The following exchange ensued:

Faulkner: You [Bolton] told me that you were in charge. Are you saying that whoever is in charge of the President’s security within Parliament House overrides your authority?
Bolton: No, the risk was in relation to the American President, and they were happy for them to be there to cover the thing (Senate 2003 cited Kingston 2004, pp.181-182; Ramsey 2003).

Faulkner’s heated words at the Senate Estimates committee and public controversy over events during the joint sitting were referred for inquiry to the parliament’s Standing Committee on Procedure. It was asked to determine if there had been ‘inappropriate presence or activity by agents of the Government of the United States’; whether any officers of the Parliamentary Service were involved in ‘any improper interference with Senator Nettle’; and more coyly, if ‘there was any other’ improper interference with Senator Brown or Senator Nettle. These were weighty matters that impinge on the central democratic principle of the sovereignty of the Australian parliament. However the Committee’s final ‘Conclusions and Recommendations’ released in 2004, are remarkably opaque and inconclusive. Due to ‘lack of evidence’ the Committee found:

- it was ‘unable to conclude whether the presence or activity of US agents was inappropriate’, due to an absence of evidence from
sources other than the President of the Senate and Head of the DPS [Department of Parliamentary Services];

- that, although there was ‘no dispute’ that ‘there was improper interference with Senator Nettle’ and a Chamber attendant had ‘put his hand on Senator Nettle’s arm’, nonetheless it was ‘unable to make a finding on this issue’;
- that the ‘uncertain constitutional status of the joint meetings’ meant it was impossible to determine if the Speaker’s suspension from parliament of Senators Brown and Nettle for twenty-four hours was ‘improper interference’ because this led the committee into ‘unnavigable territory where a sound finding is impossible’ (Senate Report 2004, pp. 19-20).

The Committee was also unable to make a clear determination on evidence that there was a flow-on effect to the next day’s state visit by President Hu Jintao. During last minute preparations the Australian parliament’s presiding officers agreed to extend the suspension of the two Green Party senators.

Although the Committee found there was ‘no dispute’ that Chinese officials ‘expressed concern’ about possible disruption to President Hu’s address, it was ‘unable to conclude’ that agents of the Chinese government exercised or attempted to exercise any inappropriate influence over this part of the proceedings’ (Senate 2004, p.21). It found Chinese government influence on the exclusion of Senators Brown and Nettle was ‘impossible to determine in the absence of further evidence from the Speaker and evidence from the Chinese government’. Further, the Committee would not pursue this because ‘under present constitutional arrangements’ there is no solution to the serious problems raised by the joint meeting format’ (Senate 2004, s.3.12 p.22 and s. 3.21 p.24).

The precarious state of parliamentary sovereignty was further compounded by the Committee’s endorsement of the Speaker’s decision to ban from the
public gallery, guests of a particular political party. This unprecedented (and disturbing) decision is explained in s.3 of the 2004 report:

3.10 In his statement to the House on 3 November 2003, the Speaker stated as follows: The fact of the matter is that, having sole responsibility for the management of the House galleries, I made a deliberate decision on Thursday, 23 October 2003, following the unacceptable behaviour of the Greens senators in the chamber and one of their guests in the gallery that day, to ensure that guests of the Greens’ were unable to interrupt proceedings during the visit of President Hu. I directed that the Greens guests be seated with other overflow guests from the open galleries in the enclosed galleries.

3.11 In the face of such an unequivocal statement, the committee finds that the Speaker made the decision to place guests of the Australian Greens in the glazed galleries and accepts that Chinese government agents did not directly inappropriately influence his decision. The committee is unable to pursue with the Speaker the extent to which he may have been influenced by a desire to avoid offending the Chinese and whether this amounted to inappropriate influence, albeit indirectly.

The high-handed treatment of the Australian parliament and the media by the government executive during the back-to-back visits of Presidents George W. Bush and Hu Jintao clearly raises a number of serious democratic and constitutional issues, but all such issues have since foundered in the obfuscation of the 2004 Senate Committee enquiry.

**Media fallout**

On 29 October 2003, a week after the US President’s visit, the president of the FPPG Committee, Malcolm Farr, and secretary, James Grubel, presented a detailed list of complaints to Speaker Neil Andrew.

According to Farr and Grubel, whilst Andrew ‘was himself upset by some instances’ [he was] ‘primarily concerned with the unauthorised filming of proceedings’. The gallery committee asked the Speaker to address the ‘bizarre situation’ where the US media were ‘somehow able to film the speech’ so that the world ‘could see vision of what was happening in the
Australia parliament, but not Australians’ (Farr and Grubel 2004 cited Senate 2004, p.34ff). Other complaints from the gallery were [that]:

- US security cancelled ‘at the last minute’ arrangements for recording the President’s arrival at parliament house;
- Official gallery passes were not recognised and thus undermined ‘the value and validity of the Press Gallery Passes’, and the ‘right of the Gallery Committee to oversee the issue of journalist passes’; and
- A government (SVO) broadcast of a meeting in parliament house between the President and the Prime Minister and a pooled media opportunity with Mr Bush and Mr Howard, was cancelled at the last minute.

**Events outside parliament house**

Controversy also dogged the two major events held outside parliament—an invitation-only barbeque lunch hosted by the Prime Minister at his Canberra residence and a wreath-laying ceremony at the Australian War Memorial.

Invitations to the lunch were extended to the US media contingent and to talkback radio show hosts Alan Jones (*Sydney Macquarie Radio Network*) and Neil Mitchell (*Melbourne Southern Cross Radio Network*) but none to members of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG). However, after much pressure and ‘only as a last-minute favour’ the prime minister’s chief media minder, Tony O’Leary, reluctantly allowed two to attend—Malcolm Farr, as president of the gallery committee, and a photographer from the government’s *Auspic* bureau (Kingston 2004, p.185).

A wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Australian War Memorial was the final public event for President Bush. From start to finish this event was unnecessarily fraught for Australian journalists and photographers. At the start, they were jostled out of their prime positions in favour of the US media, and at the end of the ceremony several print and
photojournalists were locked inside the building for twenty minutes. In his ‘Sketch’ column in *The Australian*, Matt Price gave a vivid account of the extraordinary incidents (2004, pp.1-4). It begins with gallery television journalists Greg Turnbull (*Channel 10*) and Nigel Blunden (*Channel 9*) who were ‘enraged as they prepared to cross live to news bulletins from the War Memorial’:

> Turnbull and Blunden were sharing a pool camera at an agreed location, well away from the President and his entourage, but close enough to keep the familiar dome [roof] in frame. Forty minutes before airtime, an Australian official demanded they move a further 80m from the Memorial. The pair were (sic) incensed, and demanded to know why. ‘We were told a [US] secret service official wanted us to shift, and that was it,’ Turnbull says.

> Turnbull demanded to see the Australian Federal Police officer in charge at the site. ‘I said this is our country, we’re at our memorial, we’re working for Australian audiences and we’ve got all the proper accreditation’ he seethes. ‘He said there was nothing he could do and we had to shift.’

Price reports that later, journalists and photographers who had jostled for positions at the wreath-laying venue at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier endured worse treatment. News Ltd. reporter Mark Phillips told Price that ‘We arrived an hour before to stake our positions, but White House media staff told us to move when the travelling press corps arrived because they needed our spots’. But worse was to follow, as Price recounts:

> About a dozen Australian journalists and photographers were locked inside the Hall of Memory with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for 20 minutes after Bush laid a wreath [and] were detained until the motorcade left for the airport (Price 2003, cited in Price 2004).

Six months later, in April 2004, nothing much had been resolved. Speaker Andrew had not yet made public his findings into the ‘rogue’ US camera crew, prompting the Federal Press Gallery Committee to repeat their concerns to the Senate inquiry into the President’s visit.
Gallery president Farr and secretary Grubel attached a fiery covering letter to the FPPG submission\(^{50}\) that said in part:

The visit was marked by several unnecessary, damaging and ultimately humiliating preferences given to American media over Australian media. Australian officials surrendered authority to the Americans to the extent that in one episode a group of visiting reporters was exempted from a security check within Parliament House which local reporters—all of them accredited members of the Press Gallery—had to go through.

[Whilst acknowledging the importance of security], it is another matter to censor, harry and demean Australian journalists in a craven capitulation of sovereignty to those visitors. And that is what happened during the 21 hours President Bush was in Canberra (Farr and Grubel 2004 cited Senate 2004).

In relation to the media, the Senate committee’s terms of reference included the ‘rogue camera’ incident, and the need to find out whether or not ‘foreign media or other personnel were permitted’ to record the President’s address to parliament ‘in circumstances in which Australian media were forbidden to do so’ and ‘whether this was appropriate’ (Senate Report 2004, p.1, s.1).

However the Committee’s recommendations regarding the media’s concerns were as opaque as its other findings. After acknowledging that the Australian media were ‘at a disadvantage in their own country’, it found:

On the basis of a statement to the House of Representatives by the Speaker on 3 November 2003, the committee finds that an unauthorised camera was taken into the public gallery by a foreign media crew and filmed the proceedings. No permission had been given to the media crew to do so.

[However] Given that an inquiry into this incident is still in train, the committee proposes no further action on this point [and although] the Press Gallery submission contains other possible examples of foreign media being permitted to record proceedings in circumstances in which Australia media were forbidden to do so. In the absence of further evidence on these incidents, the committee is unable to make findings in relation to them.

(Senate Report 2004, s.3.3 and 3.4 p.19).

\(^{50}\) Appendix 7
Summary

The historic nature of back-to-back visits by the foreign heads of government from two of the world’s most powerful nations, continues to obscure the seriousness of the events discussed in this case study.

At the time of writing this thesis many fundamental questions remain unanswered and buried in the opaque and ineffective 2004 Senate Committee inquiry recommendations. The case study clearly demonstrates that for as long as the executive-gallery relationship remains vague and ill-defined, so too do the media’s rights of access to the parliament and the exercise of their semi-institutional fourth estate role.

Case study two: ‘Dinnergate’

This study relates to the executive’s practice of using political information to manipulate the media. Executive-sourced leaks of ‘unauthorised information’ and on-the-record (but unattributable) briefings are deliberate manoeuvres to disperse advantageous information into the media. Whilst ‘off the record’ briefings are mutually understood to mean ‘not for publication’, both types of unattributable ‘background briefings’ have the (notional) purpose of keeping political journalists better informed, as Tiffen explains in an online posting at Australian Policy Online:

[Background briefings] give anonymous guidance about the ‘real meaning’ of public events, shaping the interpretation of success and failure, to give the flow of ambiguous moments the desired shape and political definition (Tiffen 2004).

The case involves two separate incidents, the first in June 2005 when the Howard executive’s second most senior member and Treasurer Peter Costello, unexpectedly re-classified an overnight briefing to three senior gallery journalists on his leadership ambitions to declare all information off-
the-record. It was to end in controversy two years later in August 2007, when the journalists belatedly broke with convention and revealed the information at a pivotal point in Costello’s long-running tout for the prime ministership. Widely known as the ‘dinnergate’ affair, it pushed the widespread and long-standing practice of selective unattributable briefings into the national spotlight.

**Dinner at the ‘Waters Edge’: 2 June 2005**

In June 2005 Treasurer Peter Costello invited three senior gallery journalists—Michael Brissenden from ABC TV’s 7.30 Report and Paul Daley and Tony Wright from the Bulletin magazine’s bureau—to dine with him and his press secretary at the ‘Waters Edge’ restaurant in the parliamentary triangle alongside Lake Burley Griffin. According to all three journalists, in a news-breaking ‘on-the-record’ briefing, Costello revealed that he had run out of patience waiting for the Prime Minister to arrange Costello’s smooth ascension, and he would lay down the gauntlet by asking Howard to stand aside by April 2006, if he refused, Costello would launch an aggressive leadership challenge. The gallery trio cross-checked Costello’s key points in preparation for publication/broadcast. However, the next day when the Bulletin journalists were preparing to file their story they were interrupted by Costello’s press secretary who retrospectively declared the dinner conversation ‘off-the-record’.

On 15 August 2007 an online posting entitled ‘Costello caught out on leadership comments’, at the ABC news website provides an account of the dinner and its aftermath:

The Treasurer was in an expansive mood. The three journalists still have the notes of that discussion. Michael Brissenden says Mr Costello told the group he had set next April 2006 as the absolute deadline [because] ‘that is mid-term’, for Mr Howard to stand aside. If not, Mr Costello would challenge Mr Howard. Mr Costello said a challenge ‘will happen then if ‘Howard is still there, I’ll do it,’ Mr Costello said, also saying he was ‘prepared to go to the backbench’ [and] ‘carp’ at Howard's leadership from the
backbench and ‘destroy it’ until he won the leadership. He says he would do it ‘because Howard would lose the [next] election’. Mr Costello said he could beat [then Opposition Leader] Kim Beazley but that Howard cannot win ‘without me’. He said April [2006] is the deadline, ‘then it’s on’.

The journalists all left the dinner that night with the understanding that the information [as an on-the-record background briefing] could be reported. The *Bulletin* planned to splash with the story the next week. The ABC agreed to run the story the night before the magazine was published. But by 1pm the day after the dinner, the Treasurer had a change of mind...an agitated press secretary rang pleading for the conversation to be now placed off the record and that the Bulletin pull its report. Reluctantly, the journalists agreed (Brissenden 2007).

The Treasurer and his press secretary have denied the intervention occurred and claim the conversation was always mutually understood to be ‘off-the-record’[^51]. In any event, Canberra’s opaque terms for executive-media engagement prevailed and the story of Costello’s vainglorious boasting stayed dormant for almost two years.

Costello had singled out three gallery journalists from FPPG bureaus, just as the Prime Minister, John Howard, had done five week’s earlier on 29 April, near the end of an overseas trip while in Athens where Howard selectively held an on-the-record interview with two gallery journalists from the travelling press contingent. With a media staffer present, the Prime Minister signalled that he had no intention of standing down, but would lead the Coalition to the next election confidently, reaffirming confidence in his capacity to again defeat then opposition leader, Kim Beazley (Ramsey 2005).

[^51]: A subsequent review by Alan Sunderland, Head of National Programs ABC stated: 1. There is no dispute that the dinner took place [on 02 June 2005], but there was initial disagreement, and an error by the ABC, since acknowledged, on the date of the dinner. 2. The journalists were originally convinced the dinner discussion was ‘on background’ and could be reported. The Treasurer’s office has indicated that it always considered the conversation at the dinner to be off-the-record. This essential disagreement is vital to what followed. 3. The day after the dinner, the journalists were proceeding with their plans to prepare stories, using the discussion at the dinner as unattributable background. They were contacted by the Treasurer’s media adviser, whose office has indicated that it always considered the conversation at the dinner to be off-the-record that the dinner should not be reported (Sunderland 2007).
Judith Brett’s (2007) expert analysis of Howard’s leadership style in _Exit Right_, argues that it was inevitable that unresolved leadership issues would erupt. Citing Graham Little’s (1985; 1988) ‘masterly’ classification of democratic leadership into three types (Group leader, Strong leader and Inspiring leader), Brett’s work shows that Howard’s leadership was a hallmark case of the ‘Strong Leader’ and:

Strong Leaders put themselves and their capacity to win at the centre of the nation’s politics. In 2007 Howard was the focus of two inter-related leadership contests: the first was with Kevin Rudd [who succeeded Beazley in November 2006]; the second was inside his own party, both with his inevitable ageing and with the challenger-in-waiting, Peter Costello…. Strong Leaders win their right not just by defeating external enemies, but by staring down internal opponents… [however] Costello’s anger with Howard did not go away. Twice [including ‘dinnergate’] during 2007 it captured the headlines (Brett 2007, p.13 and p.25).

When the three gallery journalists decided to go public with their ‘off-the-record’ information from a dinner conversation with Costello in 2005, the 2007 election campaign had infinitely multiplied its news values. By then:

The Liberal leadership question was a public spectacle, somewhere between a Greek tragedy and a soap opera, [and] played out in almost daily instalments on the 7.30 Report, Sky News and Lateline (Brett 2007, p.28).

At the same time, the journalists’ breaking of an off-the-record pact caused much uproar in media circles and amongst political journalists, and exposed the many fault lines running through the executive-gallery interrelationship. An online posting by author and writer Margaret Simons on 15 April at _Crikey.com_ headed ‘How can we ever trust the Canberra Press Gallery?’ encapsulates the tenor of hostile responses to the journalists’ original decision:

We now know that more than two years ago, three of Canberra’s best and brightest had a story of national significance, revealing of both the state of the Government and [of] the judgement of the Prime Ministerial heir apparent. According to Michael Brissenden, they believed this story to be on the record ‘as background’. They were planning to run it big. But then—wait for it—a press secretary rang them up and pleaded with them. And they crumbled!! What credibility is left for journalists who want to complain about
spin and the rise of public relations when three of the most senior journalists in the land are so compliant, and act with so little sense of their duty to their audience? (Simons 2007a).

The outrage aside, both stages in this case study reflect important aspects of contemporary political journalism in Canberra.

The first (2005) shows the extent and impact of the executive’s devolution of power to its partisan cohort of media advisers and the distorting effect on gallery journalists’ capacity to access and assess political information. It not only confirms journalists’ frustrations expressed in the previous chapter who described the difficulty of working ‘up against a barrage’ of media advisers (Peake 2003), but it confirms the degree of authority conceded to ministers’ personal staff—whose ill-defined role could is described an administrative ‘black hole’ (Tiernan 2004, title page) and acts as a reminder of an assumption—dating to the Whitlam government in the early 1970s,

…that the accountability of ministerial staff is addressed through the principle of individual ministerial responsibility...Because they act in the name of the minister, it is assumed that when they [for instance] propose a particular course of action, they are doing so with the minister’s authority (Tiernan 2007a, pp.36-37).

The second stage (2007) shows an unenviable contradiction at work in the practice of political journalism. On the one hand the Media Alliance’s Code of Ethics requires that journalists receiving information in confidence must maintain that confidence. Code no.3. states: ‘Where confidences are accepted, respect them in all circumstances’ (online at: MEAA 2008)—but what to do, when for political gain, the confidential source publicly falsifies your record of the information? At stake is journalists’ self-reflexive role of exposing political truths as spelt out in their Code’s preamble where ‘respect for truth and the public's right to information are fundamental principles of journalism’ [and] amongst other things journalists’ work is to ‘inform citizens and animate democracy’ (online at MEAA, 2008)
The three gallery journalists’ 2007 revelation is tangentially reminiscent of a far earlier and more dramatic incident inside the House of Representatives. In 1971 when Alan Ramsey (then with The Australian), in defiance of all protocols and privilege called out from the press gallery benches ‘you liar’ when Liberal Prime Minister John Gorton was speaking—and in Ramsey’s view, falsifying information he had received from a confidential and reliable source (Lloyd 1988, p.248).52

Summary

The ‘dinnergate’ affair is a contemporary example of Canberra’s system of ad hoc and selective privileging at work in the perennial media by plays that occur during leadership struggles. Moreover it showed that the executive practice of extending ad hoc privileges to gallery journalists is so deeply ingrained in the system that anger at the practice itself was muted in comparison with that directed at the journalists’ 2005 decision to kill their stories and put it into the off-the-record basket. Simons (2007a) rightly points out the real problem is the unwritten terms of engagement that foster manipulation where political journalists ‘can be played like trout by the politicians and their minders’.

Chapter two of this thesis notes the historical absence of a mutually agreed and open statement or concordat, for parliamentary-press relations and executive preference for loosely defined ‘rules’ such as ‘oral agreements, defined, enforced and/or ignored according to [government] whims and circumstances’ (Lloyd 1979, p.32). Interestingly, the desirability of a more stable, less fluid arrangement was briefly and unsuccessfully raised on one occasion in the early years of the Menzies’ government. The proposal came from the irascible Speaker, Archie Cameron, who proposed that a Committee be established to achieve ‘some sort of concordat to put the press-

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52 In this instance, after an apology Ramsey narrowly escaped being put on trial before the ‘bar’ of the House.
parliamentary relationship on a constitutional basis and allow it to be properly regulated’, observing:

So far as I can learn, no attempt has ever been made to examine the relationship of the press to this Parliament…I think that the House might well establish a committee to examine the relationships which exist between the press and parliament. I should be very happy to discuss the matter in detail with such a committee (Cameron 1951, p.1645).

Cameron’s suggestion was not taken up at the time (Lloyd 1988, pp.180-181) and no subsequent government has suggested a similar initiative in the subsequent five decades. Thus, the role and status of the press in the Australian parliament is yet to be properly defined. There is, therefore, no framework for the rules and regulations imposed on the media that are developed largely in response to each new problem or crisis. As Schultz (2007a, p.68) explains, the media has more than not ‘been defined in the negative, by limits, exclusions, caveats, and so on’.

The vacuum leaves the media to adjust or rework their own (self-regulatory) industry codes of ethics. This process was at work in the wake of the so-called dinnergate affair when in early November ABC management made a major attempt to grapple with the ethical problems of non-attribution in off-the-record background briefings.

Because one of the major players was high profile ABCTV gallery journalist Michael Brissenden, the Director of Editorial Policies, Paul Chadwick, circulated a discussion paper recommending that editorial policies should define the terms “off the record”, “on background” and “on the record”. In an online posting at Crikey.com on 7 November, ‘ABC dinnergate verdict is in: please pass the source’, Simons points out that in Australian terms, Chadwick’s paper is a groundbreaking piece of work and that the issue of whether a journalist’s commitment to a source should be absolute has only been considered once before in Australia—by the Brennan committee that reviewed the journalists’ union code of ethics in 1995—but,
…as [Chadwick] makes clear with his list of references, including the work done by the New York Times in the wake of the Jayson Blair affair, his suggestions are not that innovative in the international context (Simons 2007b).

The Chadwick paper treats the issue with gravity—describing the journalists’ choice to abide by the Journalists’ Code of Ethics and protect the identity of confidential sources as compromising their truth-telling commitment ‘by omitting relevant information’ and that this can sometimes mean ‘claiming to be above the law, [adding] ‘It is a huge decision’.

The core ethical questions at stake are listed as:

- Is a promise to keep confidential the identity of a source absolute? Or are there circumstances in which truth-telling overrides promise-keeping?
- How can this clash of basic values be minimised in practice?
- When a clash is unavoidable, how ought journalists make and explain their decisions?

The committee’s answers were tough, and a requirement that journalists’ refer information received in confidence to more senior editorial staff has since been incorporated into ABC editorial policies (ABC 2008). ABC journalists’ autonomy was also further diminished with removal of a common qualification used by journalists in the dinnergate affair, one of whom was from the ABC’s gallery bureau. In 2007 all three journalists had agreed to take Costello at his word and treated his leadership boasts as confidential and off-the-record. But when Costello subsequently denied the words they had noted and cross-checked at the 2005 dinner, the journalists’ decided to break their silence citing the public interest and a ‘lack of good faith’ on Costello’s part—in short, they had kept their part of the bargain by agreeing to keep the information quiet, but when Costello did not and went ‘on-the-record- to deny it, all bets were off.
In his review Chadwick decided to dilute individual journalist’s autonomy over such decisions, explaining:

The implications—ethical and legal—of the ABC making a binding promise to keep a source confidential, or of breaking such a promise, are such that, in my view, no such promise should be made or broken without the relevant staff first referring upward the decision to a level of executive responsibility commensurate with the seriousness of the decision (cited Simons 2007b).

Gallery journalists’ self-reflexive professional raison d’etre courses through the interview data in this and the two preceding chapters, and is confirmed elsewhere in statistically significant quantitative survey results of Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG), such as the Henningham (1995, p.327) survey of attitudes to ‘news media functions’ in relation to non-FPPG journalists. Tony Wright (2004) summarised political journalists’ professional lodestone apparent in much of the interview data:

I think the job of a journalist in Canberra has always been really important because the bureaucracy and government agencies use a language that is obscure. I’ve always believed that it was done on purpose, to exclude ordinary people. So they can either swamp you in total bullshit if you like [so that] things can’t be understood at all because there is nothing to understand in the first place—or it’s a report that is going to be so controversial that they want to exclude the normal person from understanding it. That’s a big reason why our work is important.

Government disinformation and deliberate manipulation of valid information therefore necessarily contradicts how political journalists define themselves and the work they do. However as this thesis demonstrates, the line between management and manipulation is often blurred. Lloyd (1992, p. 132) points to a ‘certain subtlety’ in deciding just where media management ‘trips over’ into democratically undesirable manipulation. He argues it manifests when there are measurable rises in the consistency and intensity in management techniques such as:

(i) quasi-government information units with extensive monitoring capability to pump out news material favourable to the executive government;

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53 Reproduced in Appendix 8.
(ii) leaking to selected journalists by the prime minister, or his delegates (or ministers);

(iii) giving media interviews which mostly yield little or no hard news and only have limited opportunity for follow-up questioning;

(iv) executive strategies to shut down alternate sources of government information; and/or

(v) deliberate physical obstruction or control of media coverage of parliament.

The empirical data in this thesis is testament to the skilful way Prime Minister Howard developed media management strategies that deployed combinations of these management strategies and expanded their reach through adept use of new media technologies and their capacity for surveillance and data gathering—amply illustrated in chapter four and expanded in the first section of this chapter.

Case Studies: Conclusion

This chapter and those preceding it, reveal a range of factors at work that led to the historic nadir in executive-media relations under the Howard government.

The first of the two case studies in this chapter—the visit of President George W. Bush in 2003—illustrates media manipulation at work and the executive’s authoritarian potential in Westminster majoritarian systems. It is a high-profile example of executive manipulation of the FPPG media through the exercise of physical obstruction and controls over their movement (point v.).

The second study, the 2005/2007 ‘dinnergate affair’, is an example of the widely accepted practice of using political information to manipulate the media (point ii). It raises the on-going issue of problems associated with the absence of an overt concordat with the Canberra fourth estate and pinpoints the need
for a more transparent and less manipulative environment in government-media relations.

The next chapter reflects on the major findings of this thesis and considers the significance of the implications arising from this study.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This study has confirmed the hypothesis that during the Howard years the quasi-institutional function of the Canberra fourth estate was severely circumscribed and undermined by the excessive use of executive power over government-media relations. A multi-method approach from the descriptive-inductive research tradition was used to explore the research questions relating to how this occurred and to build an accurate description of the relationship between the two institutions, the nature of the relationship and the factors at work during Prime Minister John Howard’s eleven-and-a-half year incumbency.

This study’s multi-method research approach:

- Used historical analysis to uncover important systematic factors (Chapter 2).
- Built a qualitative description of the nature of the executive-Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) relationship from data gathered through elite interviewing techniques (Chapters 3, 4 and 5).
- Applied documentary research strategies to provide a diverse range of topical material from the public sphere and the federal parliament (Chapters 2-5).
- Included case study methods to add depth to the research and describe events that illustrated telling moments in the executive-FPPG relationship during the period of study (Chapter 6).

This concluding chapter summarises the main findings of this thesis and explores implications for the future functioning of the Canberra fourth estate as it faces the challenges of the increasingly diverse and demanding media landscape of 21st century new digital and internet technologies. The study showed how the enhanced surveillance and data collection capacities of these technologies were effectively deployed during the Howard years. The lessons of this era are vital as democratic systems of government face the challenge
of negotiating a constructive relationship with the media, so that political journalism can effectively provide that crucial ‘line of communication’ to inform citizens ‘of the workings of government and the machinations of the political system’ (Pearson and Patching 2008, p.2).

**Historical/systemic issues**

The broad historical analysis revealed many of the systemic problems in the Canberra system can be traced to the FPPG’s comparatively ambiguous place within a Westminster-style political system where it functions in an ill-defined framework for an institution of its size, complexity and influence. It traced this and other factors back to the unique formative years in Canberra where unlike other similar political systems, the executive-FPPG relations evolved in propinquity with each other and the Parliament.

This study showed their joint and continuous occupation of offices inside parliament house has bequeathed governments arbitrary power and relative advantage in their contested relationship and as a result, during the first five decades prime ministerial control came to personify government-media relations.

The executive-FPPG co-habitation was found to be largely responsible for the gallery’s distinctive unitary structure, collective focus on the executive and de-emphasis on a formal division of labour that assigns senior journalists to either the executive or the parliamentary round (as happens elsewhere for example, in Britain and the US). Instead the Canberra gallery evolved into a more unwieldy unitary corps of competitive individuals and outlets—that in turn, provided governments with ample opportunity for the arbitrary and selective disbursal of executive information and news.

The origins of these uniquely Canberra arrangements were shown to lie in the foundation years when the federal parliament moved to the national capital in 1927, and into a building set in a ‘frontier-like’ bush town where much of the
infrastructure was still under construction. In this situation the transplanted urban elite naturally clustered together in and around parliament house and eventually led both the executive and the media to set up offices inside the building—in a manner described as ‘permissive occupancy’. In such surrounds a small and elite group of permanent FPPG members or ‘roundsmen’ were permanently based in Canberra to report on the activities of the executive and the reporting of parliamentary proceedings defaulted to a team of lower status transient ‘stenographer-journalists’, transported from interstate when parliament was in session. This two-tier arrangement became an indelible part of the federal political round—mainstream media bureaus remain transfixed by executive politics whilst wire-service technology and digitised media monitoring services have taken the place of stenographer-journalists.

This effect of a large competitive unitary gallery principally assigned to the executive round accorded a lesser status to journalists covering parliamentary proceedings, simultaneously devaluing the newsworthiness of parliamentarians and parliamentary proceedings and enhancing the power and influence of the Australian political executive—already considered to be more than ‘substantial’ (Tiernan 2004; Russell 2004).

Nonetheless accounts of these early decades provided some evidence that the media was aware of the dangers of arbitrary favouritism and its capacity to undermine collective advantage. In the mid-1960s for instance, media proprietors (led by Keith Murdoch) floated the idea of bolstering the gallery’s independence by jointly funding a ‘Newspaper House’ located outside the parliamentary-executive precinct. However, according to Lloyd (1988 pp.186-187) the idea lost traction in the face of a decidedly lukewarm reception from the Menzies government which expressed more interest in a separate media building within the parliamentary precinct. It was a prescient alternative and two decades later in the new permanent parliament house, both the media
and the executive were corralled within separate wings inside the massive
building.

Overall the historical data in this study has explained key continuities and
changes in executive-media relations across a selection of governments and
identified the drivers or levers on hand when the Howard government took
office in 1996.

**Interview data**

The historical themes and issues discussed above resonated through the
interview data. Elite interview techniques were applied to the task of
ascertaining the state of play in executive-(FPPG) interrelations during the
prime ministership of John Howard. To ensure a representative interview
group, twenty-five journalists were selected from the FPPG’s thirty-three
broadcast and print bureaus that principally target mainstream Australian
audiences. Only one participant requested anonymity and the group’s overall
willingness to participate openly and ‘on the record’ enhanced this study with
valuable contextual information about their place of employment, seniority and
experience. The wide-ranging nature of the interviews was reflected in
transcripts that totalled 39,000 words. They yielded a range of themes, most
of which fell into three categories that were discussed separately and in detail
in chapters 3-5 of this thesis. They showed:

- A major demise in face-to-face fora such as interviews, press
  conferences and background briefings (Chapter 3).
- Significantly reduced access to political news and information from
electronic and text documents generally and particularly following a
major $2m crack-down on ‘unauthorised’ leakage of information from
the administration. This, combined with multiplication and intensification
in media management and manipulation, created an ‘octopus-like’
network of controls (Walsh 2004)—extending from the Prime Minister’s office, through the full executive, government backbench and the administration (Chapter 4).

- There was an imbalance in news values away from the parliament to the executive that remains at issue in the Australian context.
- The exceptional increase in the size of ministers’ personal staff under Prime Minister Howard led to a significant rise in the number of professional media advisers (or spin-doctors) that not only reduced journalists’ access to political information, but also fed into the phenomenon of the ‘permanent campaign’ where discussion of policy during periods of governance is distorted and politicised.

With regard to the final point above, this thesis drew on the work of Tiernan (2004; 2007a) to establish that the growth in the overall number of ministerial staff exceeded that of any other comparable democracy. However, further documentary research also showed that the exact proportion of ministerial staffers dedicated to media management was unclear. Note was made of MacDermott (2008) who found the federal ‘PR State’ network as it developed under the Howard Government, was ‘significant’; and of the unofficial estimate in Fitzgerald (2008) that the number of media advisers was at around ‘660 media [personnel]’ working for the executive, and a cohort of ‘1,056 communications/public affairs officers spread across 100 government agencies’. However this study clearly established that those charged with controlling political information flows were part of a far-reaching media relations strategy, based on a control and command structure and coordinated by officials attached to the Prime Minister’s personal staff. They were responsible for keeping watch over a media management regime that included:

- Surveillance of public servants’ contact with the media.
- A significant reduction in exposure to political journalists’ critical expertise by minimising questions through the use of media formats such as talk-back radio, and the specialised construction of press and
door-stop conferences
- The development of sophisticated techniques to undermine the well-recognised culture of robust-journalism at the largest and most influential of the public broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)
- Ensuring party discipline was extended beyond the executive to all members of the governing party to cover aspects of media relations through the sophisticated, centralised use of electorate data bases (van Onselen and Errington 2004).

Chapter 5 showed how over the last two decades, the architecture of the new permanent parliament house embedded ‘usurpation by the executive government of parliamentary space’ and installation of the media in a ‘commodious adaptation of traditional press gallery formats’ (Lloyd 1992, p.113), and has allowed governments to use the new building’s internal separation of the executive, parliamentarians and the FPPG to enhance their dominance over media relations.

This study discovered that although media bureaus continue to be conveniently located within the parliamentary precinct the effect of severely reduced mobility in the new parliament house physically restricted access to several major sources of political information. Rules of entry by ‘express permission only’ also served to encourage the undesirable practice of covert favoured access to designated areas such as the executive ‘citadel’ (Mcintyre 2008), offices in the parliamentarians’ wing and the Members’ Hall (the main area frequented by the public).

In summary, the interviews in chapters 3, 4 and 5 showed that during the Howard years, FPPG journalists’ proactive search for alternate sources of news and information was blocked at almost every turn and in a more intense and thorough manner than ever before, so much so that for many the Senate became a last bastion of alternate news sources—at least up until the
Howard-led Coalition achieved a Senate majority as a result of the 2004 federal election.

**Documentary research and case studies**

Substantial documentary evidence and the two case studies confirmed and triangulated the findings in the interview data. Material was drawn from primary sources in the electronic media, on the internet and in print media, it included expert commentary, academic analyses and other contributions to public discourse by political commentators and journalists (some from within the interview group) before and after the mid-2003 and mid-2004 interview-period. Also included are official records such as Hansards from the House of Representatives and the Senate, electronic briefs and research monographs from the federal parliamentary library. The two case studies gave further depth to the inductive-descriptive research approach by recounting events that demonstrated added veracity to claims made elsewhere in the empirical and documentary evidence.

**Contribution to political communication literature**

More generally, this work contributes to filling a gap in scholarly literature. It has added an Australian perspective and helped correct a tendency in contemporary political communication research to overlook the self-reflexive views and experiences of political journalists working at the interface between Westminster-derived parliaments and the media. This work took heed of the discourse in the 2002 European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) compendium that identified the need for a fresh approach in political communication scholarship to overcome a ‘blind spot’ that routinely assigns (and confines) journalists to a reactive role (Kuhn and Neveu 2002, p.2). The review of Australian literature confirmed this gap in scholarly works identifying only three major works—Edgar (1979); Tiffen (1989) and Payne
(1999) that are incidentally and consecutively separated by ten-year gaps. It has also shown their scholarship and more recently, commentary in the major literature review by Pearson and Patching (2008), provided examples of the way journalists’ viewpoints can value-add and enhance political communication scholarship.

This study also considered predominant international political communication theories that can be traced to the influential notion of governments as ‘primary definers’ where political journalists are theorised as co-dependent insiders, trapped by their sources in a process that inevitably neuters a pro-active fourth estate role, and transforms media ‘watchdogs’ into ‘lapdogs’. Moreover, that the alchemy of sociologically based expert outside observation necessarily assigns a passive role to the subjects under scrutiny. It was noted that there is a deterministic emphasis in Australian political communication discourse and this scholarship would benefit from more analyses that ‘flesh-out’ the role of journalists in the cast-list of political players (Bowman and McIlwaine 2004), and in particular take account of the way journalists in specialist rounds (such as politics) operate across a range of complex source-relationships.

Implications of the Research

This thesis showed that the harsh clampdown on the FPPG during the Howard years was excessive enough to cause unprecedented public protests from gallery journalists and from the Australian media as a whole—it was not however, in breach of the constitution, nor did it break any rules or regulations. Instead it served to demonstrate the latent potency of unregulated executive power over government-media relations.

This was demonstrated in the cumulative and descriptive evidence in this study’s historical overview, interview data, documentary evidence and in particular, the case study of the US President’s 2003 visit. This case was a
clear illustration of how a prime minister from the strong leader mould (Brett 2007) could chose to exercise partisan authority to overturn a range of previously understood conventions.

The media management and manipulation strategies documented in this study effectively overrode the notion that whilst the adversarial relationship between politicians and journalists is neither easy nor harmonious in parliamentary democracies, tenets of open governance demand that at the very least, this relationship is functional.

This work has therefore highlighted a need for governments, the parliament and the media to examine ways to establish an executive-FPPG relationship that is more overt, independent and based on a formal recognition of its quasi-institutional role in an open democracy through a mutually agreed concordat—a proposal first mooted in the early 1950s by Speaker Archie Cameron who recommended that the parliament set up a committee to establish a concordat in order ‘to put the press-parliamentary relationship on a constitutional basis’ (Cameron 1951).

The research also implies that there is a need for the recently formed industry-wide media coalition—the ‘Australia’s Right to Know’ group—to follow-up its Independent Audit of Free Speech in Australia (Moss 2007) to investigate measures to ensure the political media work in an environment free from covert and selective privileging. Apart from the aforementioned concordat, this could include re-visiting the proposal first made by proprietors in the mid-1960s and articulated by Keith Murdoch, that the FPPG move out of the parliamentary precinct and thereby force politicians to come to them, rather than the other way around.

Furthermore, the interview data in Chapter 5 indicated that it would be productive for media employers to examine ways to best support and expand the critical expertise of political journalists such as: better organising their
gallery bureaus to provide balanced coverage of both the executive and the parliament; developing strategies for the increasing numbers of media minders; and examining the positive potentials of 21st century new digital and internet technologies.
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________________________________________
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APPENDIX 1

Sample: email sent to all interview participants in 2003.
Note: The 2004 emails contained the exact wording with change of dates only.

Please find attached a transcript of the interview with you re. the major trends and issues of press gallery journalism in 2003. If you would like me to post a hard copy, please let me know by return e-mail.

If you have any concerns about the transcript could you please notify by the 19 December. If I do not hear by then I will take it that you have given the OK.

Thank you very much for your time – the material is important and interesting

Thank you again

Helen Ester
Senior lecturer
Contemporary Communications
Central Queensland University
APPENDIX 2a

List of Interviewees

Note: Employment status at time of interview and identified as requested by participant - otherwise as per official

July 2004

Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery list

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>June 03</td>
<td>xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Atkins</td>
<td>June 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Courier-Mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Bongiorno</td>
<td>July 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: TV Network 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison Carabine</td>
<td>June 04</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Southern Cross Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda Cavill</td>
<td>June 04</td>
<td>Chief political correspondent: SBS Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob Chalmers</td>
<td>June 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Inside Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Colagiuri</td>
<td>July 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Macquarie Broadcasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Dodson</td>
<td>July 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: the Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm Farr (n)</td>
<td>June 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Daily Telegraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda Goldsmith(n)</td>
<td>June 04</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Reuters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Grattan</td>
<td>May 03</td>
<td>Chief political correspondent: the Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Griffiths</td>
<td>May 03</td>
<td>Political correspondent: Capital Monitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Grubel</td>
<td>May 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Australian Associated Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoff Kitney</td>
<td>June 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Sydney Morning Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian McPhedran</td>
<td>June 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: News Limited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Middleton</td>
<td>June 03</td>
<td>Chief political correspondent ABCTVnews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Middleton</td>
<td>July 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: The West Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenn Milne</td>
<td>July 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: TV Network 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross Peake</td>
<td>July 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Canberra Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Shanahan</td>
<td>May 03</td>
<td>Political editor: The Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Speers</td>
<td>July 04</td>
<td>Bureau chief: SkyTV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Walker</td>
<td>June 03</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Australian Financial Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Wright</td>
<td>June 04</td>
<td>Bureau chief: Bulletin magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry-Anne Walsh (n)</td>
<td>June 04</td>
<td>Chief political correspondent: Sun Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Yaxley (n)</td>
<td>June 04</td>
<td>Political reporter: ABC Radio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(n) = Notes taken
APPENDIX 2b

FPPG Bureaux with mainstream Australian audiences
(as at July 2004)

Wire services: (national/international) - Australian Associated Press: Business sector services - Bloomberg News; United Press International; Associated Press and Reuters:

Radio and TV - Commercial TV Networks - Seven; Nine; Ten and SkyNews. Non-commercial - ABC radio/TV and SBS radio/TV; Commercial radio–Macquarie Radio and Fairfax Radio (formerly Southern Cross): Online daily - national - Crikey.com:


Regional - newspaper chains with a range of state based rural and regional mastheads - Rural Press and Australian Provincial Newspapers (APN):

Metropolitan state-based daily newspaper masthead bureaus (three with Sunday edition correspondents) - the Adelaide Advertiser (Adelaide, South Australia); the Courier-Mail (Brisbane, Queensland); Sydney Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph (Sydney, NSW); Herald Sun/Sunday Herald Sun (Melbourne, Victoria); The Age/Sunday Age (Melbourne, Victoria); The Canberra Times (Canberra, ACT); Sydney Morning Herald/Sun Herald (Sydney, NSW); The West Australian (Perth, Western Australia).
APPENDIX 3

Submission from Barker G. et al. 2002.

SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO A CERTAIN MARITIME INCIDENT

A Government campaign of censorship and misinformation, which peaked during the Tampa incident and continued through the HMAS Adelaide 'children overboard' affair, is unprecedented in recent times.

It involved the Ministries of Defence and Immigration as well as the office of the Prime Minister.

However, the high level of deliberate deception -- which came clearly to light in Senate Estimates committee hearings -- could not have been perpetrated without the involvement of senior and junior public servants.

As well as fostering feelings of distrust and resentment in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, this affair has underscored an urgent requirement for safeguards and guidelines to avoid a repeat of such blatant political manipulation of the bureaucracy.

The need for such controls was particularly acute during the caretaker period of an election campaign.

Former Defence Minister Peter Reith and members of his staff, not least former press secretary Ross Hampton, chief of staff Peter Hendy and military adviser Mike Scerfont, were clearly at the centre of efforts to prevent the truth coming out regarding false claims that asylum seekers threw children into the sea in October of last year.

However, Defence media liaison and the public affairs apparatus of the Department of Immigration bowed to political pressure to spread government falsehoods or stonewall media inquiries.

Senior officers such as the Secretary of Defence, Dr Allan Hawke, and Defence Chief Admiral Chris Barrie went along with a direction to refer all media questioning of the untrue 'children overboard' claims back to Mr Reith's office.

During the caretaker period numerous requests for information and interviews with senior military officers, including Admiral Barrie, were still referred to Reith's office.

Defence was told on numerous occasions during this time that under caretaker conventions it had an obligation to not act in a political manner and to provide factual responses to reasonable questions.

This submission includes some detail of what was clearly false information given to media by Mr Hampton and others in response to questioning.

Your Committee will already have access to the public statements of Mr Reith, Mr Ruddock, Mr Howard and others. And your committee will have ample evidence from other sources about the timing of warnings given to the Government -- including by senior military personnel -- that there was no evidence of children being thrown overboard and that the photographs released to the public had been seriously misrepresented.

We invite the Committee to view the answers given in response to journalists' questions -- by ministers and/or staff and officials -- against the backdrop of what it has since been revealed, they knew at the time.

The following material is illustrative rather than comprehensive. Many dozens of journalists are angry about having been lied to.

As Press Gallery President Malcolm Farr observed in the Sydney Daily Telegraph on October 13, 2001:

"There has been a deliberate program of censorship on a scale which would not be out of place during a war. But this has not been a war. It has been a matter of immigration policy."

The following exchanges between journalists and Ross Hampton illustrate the point:

OCTOBER 10

J: Given the controversy and Ruddock's uncertainty we're seeking more clarity about events?

H: Those who seek to cast doubts on the navy's information as supplied to the government in this are doing a great injustice to the navy. The information has been supplied and stands.

OCTOBER 12
occur under a future Labor Government.

Its purpose is to help set the record straight and to secure the development of guidelines to protect those honest public servants and politicians who still believe in open and accountable government.

If the government wants the media to convey a positive image of an increasingly recruit-starved military force to the mums and dads of Australia it should consign the Reith doctrine to the dustbin of history.

As for defence media it should never again allow a minister or a minister’s staff to cower and abuse it to the extent witnessed during the Reith period.

National security should never be confused with political self-interest.

Attached to this submission are some relevant articles, including several detailing a new information regime in Defence.

We have also attached some written questions put by the Sydney Morning Herald to Defence Force Chief Admiral Barrie, Defence Department Secretary Dr Allan Hawke, Mr Reith and Mr Ruddick.

There were no revelations from Mr Ruddick’s office, despite the specific nature of the questioning.

Significantly, one question directed to Admiral Barrie and Dr Hawke asked if they had knowledge of an “official cover-up of the circumstances surrounding the incidents of October 7/8, notably in relation to the false claim that children were thrown overboard?”

There was a single response from Mr Tim Bloomfield, at the Public Affairs and Corporate Communications Division of the Defence Department, stating that all the matters raised should be directed to Mr Reith.

There was an unwillingness by officials to provide honest responses to questions even though Mr Reith and the rest of the Government were in caretaker mode just before the federal election.

Geoffrey Barker, Australian Financial Review
Andrew Cennell, Sydney Morning Herald
Cinema Dobell, ABC Radio/Radio Australia
Mark Forbes, The Age
Chris Hammer, SBS TV
Finn Kelly, ABC 7.30 Report
Ian McPhedran, News Limited
Jim Middleton, ABC TV News
Craig Skskan, Sydney Morning Herald
APPENDIX 4

DEFINITION OF NEWS VALUES IN: Masterton (1998, pp.92-98)

**Consequence**: a measure of the importance of the information to those who receive it; how it affects their finances, their way of life, their education, their future. [Another common term used for this is *impact*].

**Proximity**: a measure of where the information comes from. Information that originates in the audience’s locality is usually more newsworthy than that from a distance. People want to know about their own community first, but there are social and cultural proximities that have little relationship to geographical distances.

**Conflict**: any form of conflict/confrontation, not just the physical violence associated with war. It includes any difference of opinion, including physical (war or sport), legal (court cases or crime), intellectual or psychological (protest groups or individuals expressing their contrary views on any subject).

**Prominence**: Whether statement or an action is news or not, depends on the social position or status of whoever says or does it. What a president/prime minister/prominent public figure says or does makes news; what an unknown citizen says or does, does not, unless it becomes news for some other reason.

**Novelty**: Items about events, issues or people that unusual or different. [Another terms for this news value are *unusual, quirky, extraordinary* - but not necessarily sensational which covered in consequence/impact].

**Human Interest**: People often want to know about other people, even if they are not important people. In some countries this includes items about children and animals. This focuses on almost anything, which stirs human emotion in any way. It can be a category that includes those items which are published because of emotion, not serious effect or content.
APPENDIX 5

Australian Federal Police Investigation of Government Information
(Question No. 2107)

Senator Ludwig asked the Minister for Justice and Customs, upon notice, on 22 June 2006:
With reference to the unauthorised leaking of government information by members of the Australian Public Service, can the Australian Federal Police (AFP) provide the following information broken down by year for each of the past 4 calendar years, including 2006:
(1) How many leaks were referred to the AFP for investigation
(2) Were any changes made to the AFP’s organisational structures to specifically improve the handling of such referrals and any subsequent investigations; if so, can details be provided of the changes that were made
(3) What resources were consumed to conduct the investigations, including money expended and staff hours
(4) How many staff were assigned to these investigations
(5) How many staff dealt with these investigations on an on-going or permanent basis, broken down by: (a) sworn officers; and (b) staff other than sworn officers.
(6) Were any external legal services used in relation to these investigations; if so, what was the name of each service provider and the value of the services purchased.
(7) For each department and agency investigated, can the following details be provided: (a) the name of the department and/or agency; and (b) the number of leaks from that department and/or agency referred for investigation.
(8) How many investigations: (a) had been carried over from the previous year; (b) remained ongoing at year-end; (c) were concluded during the year; and (d) were referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions for prosecution during the year.

Senator Ellison—The answer to the honourable senator’s question is as follows:

(1) There were 36 referrals from Departments/Agencies relating to unlawful disclosure which were accepted for investigation by the AFP over the previous four years. This number is broken down year by year in the table at answer Number 7.
(2) With the introduction of the functional model in 2004, unauthorised disclosures are now investigated under the Economic and Special Operations function. Prior to 2004, these matters were investigated and managed at various AFP offices located around Australia. The move to the functional model has enabled a functional oversight of these investigations and ensures the availability of resources as required.
(3) The money expended on these matters, including salaries and all associated on costs was $2,160,940. Staff hours expended was 20,980 hours.
(4) The number of staff allocated to investigations of this nature varies depending on the investigation and the particular phase of the investigation. The matter would be allocated to a case officer who would be supported with resources as required.
(5) The AFP works under a functional model where staff are flexibly allocated to investigations across a range of crime types. There is no pool of dedicated staff investigating leaks specifically; however, the AFP headquarters investigation team undertakes the primary share of leak investigations due to the clustering of government agencies in Canberra. All criminal investigations are investigated by sworn staff; however, some enabling services and operational support, for example, forensic examinations, are provided by unsworn staff.
(6) The AFP did not utilise external legal services in these investigations. The Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions (CDPP) is the AFP’s legal service provider for prosecuting unlawful disclosure matters.
(7) The following is a list of the name of the department and agency; and the number of leaks from that department and/or agency referred for investigation:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPARTMENT/AGENCY</th>
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<td>Australian Broadcasting Authority</td>
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</table>

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

233
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<tr>
<td>Civil Aviation Safety Authority</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth Superannuation Administration</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime and Misconduct Commission</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence Security Authority</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Employment and Workplace Relations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Finance and Administration</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Health and Ageing Care</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Transport and Regional Services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Women's Affairs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Gallery of Australia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Indigenous Policy and Coordination</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of National Assessment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Police Integrity</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Seniors Office</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Police</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) For the four-year period:

(a) 23 investigations in total were carried over from one calendar year to the next during the four year period under examination.

(b) Refer to (a) above.

(c) 31 investigations were concluded in the period between 2003 and 2006

(d) 7 investigations were referred to the CCCP for prosecution during the four year period
APPENDIX 6: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION INDEX: *Banana Republics and the Freedom of Information Index*. Johan Lidberg, PhD Candidate, School of Media, Communication and Culture, Murdoch University, Perth, WA Paper presented to the Journalism Education Conference, Griffith University, 29 November to 2 December 2005 pp. 18-20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very far-reaching promise</td>
<td>Relatively ambitious legislation</td>
<td>Relatively ambitious legislation</td>
<td>Very low legislative ambition</td>
<td>Very low legislative ambition</td>
<td>Very low legislative ambition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOI system part of constitution</td>
<td>FOI system explicitly backed by constitution</td>
<td>FOI system backed by constitution</td>
<td>This Act is not on the users’ side. This is clearly illustrated by the ‘conclusive certificate’ function which effectively allows a minister to block most requests</td>
<td>Act delegates much of the interpretation to the ‘Information Board’ consisting of the Permanent Secretaries to the most influential departments</td>
<td>Act delegates much of the interpretation to the ‘Information Board’ consisting of the Permanent Secretaries to the most influential departments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive legal protection of sources</td>
<td>No legal protection of sources</td>
<td>No legal protection of sources</td>
<td>No legal protection of sources</td>
<td>No legal protection of sources</td>
<td>No legal protection of sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All information perceived public and accessible within days at very low cost</td>
<td>Most information perceived public within 30 days</td>
<td>Most information perceived public within 20 days</td>
<td>Most information perceived public within 20 days</td>
<td>Most information perceived public within 20 days</td>
<td>Most information perceived public within 20 days</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing costs</td>
<td>Processing costs</td>
<td>Processing costs</td>
<td>Processing costs</td>
<td>Processing costs</td>
<td>Processing costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No agencies exempt from Act</td>
<td>Several agencies exempt from Act</td>
<td>Several agencies exempt from Act</td>
<td>Several agencies exempt from Act</td>
<td>Several agencies exempt from Act</td>
<td>Several agencies exempt from Act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act applies to private sector</td>
<td>Act applies to private sector</td>
<td>Act applies to private sector</td>
<td>Act applies to private sector</td>
<td>Act applies to private sector</td>
<td>Act applies to private sector</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act does not apply to private sector</td>
<td>Act does not apply to private sector</td>
<td>Act does not apply to private sector</td>
<td>Act does not apply to private sector</td>
<td>Act does not apply to private sector</td>
<td>Act does not apply to private sector</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One important reason for Sweden’s high score is the extensive legal protection for media whistleblowers. The US and SA scores are close to 50% and must be regarded as a pass. Two things stand out: Sweden’s source protection regime and that the SA Act applies to the private sector. The Australian and Thai FOI systems fail the test. These two legislations were never meant to work, not even in theory. They promise little and deliver nothing.
### The Spin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Result backs 'the promise' virtually no gap, 'promise' – 'spin'</strong></td>
<td>Respondents see themselves as access facilitators and hold information on behalf of the public</td>
<td>Very positive attitudes towards source protection</td>
<td>Gap between 'promise' and 'spin' indicating a 'spun' version of how FOI works in practice</td>
<td>Respondents see themselves as access facilitators and hold information on behalf of the public</td>
<td>Very positive attitudes towards source protection</td>
<td>Respondents see themselves as access facilitators and hold information on behalf of the public – but more hesitant to this concept compared to Sweden and SA. Very positive attitudes towards source protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gap between 'promise' and 'spin'</strong></td>
<td>Respondents see themselves as access facilitators and hold information on behalf of the public</td>
<td>Gap between 'promise' and 'spin' indicating a 'spun' version of how FOI works in practice</td>
<td>Extensive gap between 'promise' and 'practice' indicating a very 'spun' version of how FOI works in practice</td>
<td>Majority of respondents say that the government owns the information and do not see themselves as information access facilitators</td>
<td>Great hesitancy towards source protection</td>
<td>Greatest gap between 'promise' and 'spin' in the project. Very hard to conceive how such a weak legislation could deliver the level of access indicated by the result of 'the spin'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Overall Analysis**

Only Sweden shows consistency between 'promise' and 'spin'. All other countries display gaps to various degrees. A high spin score and low promise score indicates that the respondents are projecting a ‘spun’ version of FOI that the Act does not back up. What really stands out is that the Australian ‘spin’ is the only one were most respondents thought that the government owns the information. This is crucial in explaining Australia’s poor Index score.
### Appendix 6 ctd. p.3/3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Practice (Max score 68)</th>
<th>Sweden [47] Comment</th>
<th>SA [0] Comment</th>
<th>US [0] Comment</th>
<th>Australia [12] Comment</th>
<th>Thailand [incomplete] Comment</th>
<th>Overall Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information generated and released within days in two cases</td>
<td>The requests generated no information</td>
<td>The requests generated no information</td>
<td>The requests generated no information within the framework of the Act</td>
<td>The reason for the incomplete score for Thailand is that the three journalists necessary to implement 'the practice' could not be recruited. The recruitment attempts went on for close to a year and exhausted all available contacts and channels. This indicates a great hesitancy among Thai journalists towards using FOI.</td>
<td>The most important finding is that only the Swedish study generated any information. Had the US and SA requests generated information, or even been handled according to the Acts, these two countries would have scored OK</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high FOI knowledge level among public servants</td>
<td>All three departments that received the FOI requests in severe breach of the time frame for decision making as set out by the Act. At the time of writing the breaches vary between 1 month to 6 months and counting</td>
<td>All three departments that received the FOI requests in severe breach of the time frame for decision making as set out by the Act. At the time of writing the breaches are 6 months and counting</td>
<td>Two requests were terminated after very costly processing costs were quoted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last case was appealed and reached the Highest Admin court within a year at no cost to appellant – information not released</td>
<td>Last request received incomplete access after 9 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| FOI Index score Out of 10.0 | Sweden 8.2 | SAfrica 4.0 | US 3.7 | Australia 3.5 | Thailand Incomplete | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|--------|-------------|------------------|
Senator Robert Ray,
Chair,
Committee of Privileges,
Senate,
Parliament House
27/1/04

Dear Senator Ray,

The Press Gallery Committee is grateful for your invitation to make a submission on issues and events associated with the visit to Parliament House by President George Bush on October 23, 2003.

The committee in particular appreciates being able to address point (1) (B) of the reference to the Committee of Privileges.

The visit was marked by several unnecessary, damaging and ultimately humiliating preferences given to American media over Australian media. Australian officials surrendered authority to the Americans to the extent that in one episode a group of visiting reporters was exempted from a security check within Parliament House which local reporters -- all of them accredited members of the Press Gallery -- had to go through.

There were baffling instances of Australian officials, understood to have been from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, chastising Australian reporters for even being near American journalists. The National Press Club, founded and supported by Australian journalists, was policed to prevent this feared intermingling. Quite simply, the behavior of many Australian officials was daft and incompetent.

Arrangements which apparently had been settled during discussions (gatecrashed by the Press Gallery Committee because no one invited us) held before the visit were simply dropped with no explanation. One serious example of this was the barring of local tape recorders and microphones from a picnic with Prime Minister John Howard and President Bush.

The Press Gallery Committee in November raised some of these matters with Speaker Neil Andrew. Speaker Andrew assured us
he had been unaware of the problematic measures and was himself upset by some instances.

Speaker Andrew was primarily concerned with the unauthorised filming of proceedings in the House of Representatives by a US television crew. He has investigated that matter but has not made public his findings.

It is understandable that the Government and the federal bureaucracy would want to provide appropriate hospitality, on behalf of the Australian people, to a visiting head of state. It is reasonable that visiting media should receive assistance and access to special facilities.

It is another matter to censor, harry and demean Australian journalists in a craven capitulation of sovereignty to those visitors. And that's what happened during the 21 hours President Bush was in Canberra.

Attachments to this submission deal with some of the more disturbing issues and instances from that visit. We of course would be prepared to give any further assistance the Committee of Privileges might consider useful.

Malcolm Farr,
President of the Press Gallery Committee
James Grubel
Secretary of the Press Gallery Committee
Appendix 8

Table 5: Journalists’ Attitudes to News Media Functions (1996)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function Description</th>
<th>Non-pol. journalists (n=979)</th>
<th>Non-Fed. pol. journalists (n=56)</th>
<th>Fed. press gallery journalists (n=33)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get information to the public quickly</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide entertainment and relaxation</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigate claims and statements made by the government</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentrate on news which is of interest to the widest possible public</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss national policy while it is still being developed</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly sceptical of their actions</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be an adversary of businesses by being constantly sceptical of their actions</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates a statistically significant difference occurs, based on t-tests of means (p<.05).

** Indicates a statistically significant difference occurs, based on t-tests of means (p<.001).

(Henningham 1995 p.327)

HENNINGHAM ASJPS 1995 Vo; 30 pp 321-334