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Legislative Strengthening Program (LSP)

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF PARLIAMENTARY PRESS GALLERIES

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The Role and Function of Parliamentary Press Galleries

USAID's Legislative Strengthening Program in Iraq has prepared this analysis and comparative information of a press gallery. This effort is in direct response to LSP's Objective 5: Strengthened COR Outreach, specifically its Task 5.3.d. of its *Year Two Annual Work Plan*.

Introduction: Media in democracy

The media play a key role in maintaining the transparency and accountability of democratic institutions. Every day television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the internet provide citizens with updates and analyses of the personalities, events, and issues relating to politics and governance in their country. The public observes events through the eyes of the journalists, who are expected to produce accurate and fair reports on legislative processes.

Democracy relies on an informed public. A media dedicated to providing the public with accurate factual information as well as informed analysis and opinion is therefore essential for a democracy. Without adequate coverage, a democracy can be left open to manipulation and distortion, and citizens will be left without the ability to make real choices.

This document briefly examines the role and function of parliamentary press galleries in various legislatures. Using examples from Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia and the United States, this paper highlights various understandings of press galleries, their membership and governance practices, and their facilities and activities.

What is a parliamentary press gallery?

Despite working for different media organizations and being competitors within the media industry, journalists who report on the government share similar interests and concerns. They all need relevant information from government departments and agencies as well as open access to the political actors and events they are covering. As a group, the collective efforts of parliamentary reporters can more effectively exert pressure on government officials to ensure that they get this information.

In parliaments and legislative bodies around the world, the term 'press gallery' refers simultaneously to a group of journalists or media organizations that cover the government; the formal association that unites them and affords them accreditation, access and facilities; and the physical space where political journalists are allowed to sit or gather to observe and then report speeches and events.

Journalists

As a group of journalists assigned to cover the parliament and government, the parliamentary press gallery is often the cornerstone of a country's political media. It is an important link between citizens and their politics.

In Canada, Parliamentary Press Gallery journalists investigate and report on matters including the policies and priorities of the federal government, legislative debates and votes in the House of Commons, decisions by the Supreme Court of Canada, visits by foreign dignitaries, and the activities of important federal political personalities, including the Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Opposition Parties, and the Governor General of Canada. In Australia, the Canberra Press Gallery, officially called the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, is the name given to the approximately 180 journalists and their support staff, including producers, editors and camera crews, who report the workings of the Australian Parliament.

Association

In both countries, as in others, the expression “press gallery” also refers to the association of gallery journalists that represents their professional interests in dealing with the parliament. The Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery is a formal association with established rules and responsibilities. It is tasked with overseeing and assisting journalists in their work on Parliament Hill. The association provides accreditation to journalists and grants them access to the parliamentary precincts, administers parliamentary press gallery services and facilities, and acts as a representative unit for journalists in their dealings with politicians, political parties, and the officials that oversee the operation of the parliament.

The U.S. Senate Press Gallery is designed more as a support organization for journalists who cover the Senate. The gallery provides seating for the press overlooking the Senate floor, as well as workspace and telephones for reporters covering the Senate. Gallery staff monitor floor action, coordinate media coverage at Senate hearings and press conferences, are available to answer questions and take phone messages for reporters, and generally assist the media.

Space

“Press Gallery” also refers to the physical space allocated for political reporters. This is generally one of the galleries overlooking the floor of the house and can also include separate offices in the legislative or parliamentary buildings accorded to the various media outlets, as is the case with the Strangers Gallery in the British House of Commons or the Canberra Press Gallery in the Australian Parliament. In Canberra, the press galleries are enclosed viewing areas above the chambers of the Senate and the House of Representatives, which the Speaker and the President have allocated to the media.

Membership

Membership in a parliamentary press gallery typically includes press accreditation, access to the parliamentary buildings and grounds, access to media facilities and services provided by the government or by the press gallery association, and regular updates and schedules of parliamentary events.

In many parliaments, the Speaker of the House is the final authority on who may gain access to parliamentary buildings and facilities. However, speakers sometimes grant the press gallery independence over its own membership. In Canada, journalists apply directly to the Parliamentary Press Gallery itself. This represents one of the Parliamentary Press Gallery’s most important administrative responsibilities as an association: deciding which journalists may receive parliamentary press accreditation and the benefits of Press Gallery membership.

This independence supports the notion that members of the media must have independence from government officials if they are to objectively and impartially report on political actors and events. For example, if a speaker had full control over press gallery membership, he could exclude journalists that are critical of the government or his own political party.

In New Zealand, the Speaker of the House grants full, associate or temporary membership to the parliamentary press gallery depending on the frequency of access needed by a working journalist to fulfill his political reporting duties. Journalists who only occasionally require access to the parliamentary complex to conduct interviews or attend press conference are not granted membership to the press gallery; the Speaker grants them access on a case-by-case basis. Similarly, membership in the press gallery is not necessary to cover the Canadian Parliament. Journalists may apply directly to Parliament to gain access to the grounds and buildings, simply as members of the general public.

In New Zealand, full, associate and temporary members of the press gallery must be bona fide journalists employed by outlets that regularly publish a substantial volume of parliamentary or political material. The accredited individual must be a journalist exclusively or substantially involved in political and parliamentary newsgathering. They must not be involved in any lobbying, advertising or publicity activity intended to influence a matter before the parliament or the executive.

In the South Africa Presidential Press Corps, membership is open to bona fide South African journalists or journalists working for South African media institutions who have been nominated by their respective editors.

Press gallery associations should be diverse in both demographics and the types of media represented. While the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery once was a close-knit group of newspaper publishers, editors and reporters, today it consists of a wide variety of journalists and media organizations. This has brought greater political neutrality and diversity to the news and information content that Canadians receive about the federal Parliament.

In the United States, press galleries now admit applicants who earn their living from their journalism, including Internet reporters and bloggers, as long as they are not backed by advocacy groups. The New Zealand parliamentary press gallery now includes far more women than in years past and welcomes Maori and Internet journalists as they emerge.

Governance

Press galleries often have constitutions, codes of conduct, or bylaws that govern the practices and behavior of its members. Along with membership and accreditation criteria, the constitution of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery also outlines its self-disciplinary measures for unethical or unbecoming conduct. The South Africa Presidential Press Corps has a code of conduct that governs adherence to journalistic principles and ethics, observance of on/off record or embargo agreements, protocol in briefing rooms, and standards of behavior in relation to state functions. Those who violate the code are subject to sanctions ranging from reprimand to exclusion from briefings or suspension from the press corps.

Facilities and benefits

For members of parliamentary press galleries, adequate workspace and communications infrastructure are essential to effectively report on parliamentary activities. In Canada, members of the press gallery benefit from free office space in the parliament buildings in most jurisdictions. In many jurisdictions, the gallery enjoys free stationary; free photocopying, free fax machines, free government publications, free parking, and access to the parliamentary dining room. They also have facilities for holding news conferences and lock-ups where they may examine the budget or other important documents.

In New Zealand, full and associate members of the press gallery are entitled to a seat in the gallery in the Chamber of the House, access to parliamentary library facilities, use of the internal mail delivery service, and access throughout the Parliamentary complex. They are also given office accommodations that include workstation space, telephone and power connections, and access to photocopiers.

In South Africa, media companies bear the responsibility for the financial and logistical arrangements of running the Presidential Press Corps. The government provides certain facilities such as a briefing room and a limited range of working and filing facilities. It is understood that the government will bear minimal financial burden for the functioning of the press corps.

The U.S. Senate Press Gallery employs staff to answer phone calls and take messages for gallery members. The staff takes notes and updates a log inside the Senate chamber to allow reporters to follow floor action while pursuing their coverage throughout the Capitol complex. The staff also provides bill texts and reports of pending legislation and disseminates press releases to accredited reporters. It also saves seats for members at press conferences and committee meetings.

Activities

Unless the parliament is in session, members of parliamentary press galleries may spend little time in the actual gallery overlooking the floor of Parliament. Office space within the parliament building often includes television studios and radio booths where gallery journalists spend most of their time compiling stories and communicating with editors.

Gallery journalists attend regular press conferences. U.S. Senate leadership often holds pre-session press conferences to discuss the legislative agenda and other current issues. Credentialed reporters may also request Senators to come from the floor to be interviewed.

Gallery journalists in various parliaments may also receive weekly or daily briefings by senior officials. Such briefings are conducted at a centralized venue at a stipulated regular time. They are typically on the record, unless indicated otherwise.

Relationship with politicians

Politicians and press gallery journalists often have a complicated relationship. They depend on each other for their livelihood. Press gallery journalists must have access to politicians to get the information they need for their news stories. Politicians also need press gallery journalists to communicate their messages to citizens.

The two groups have a symbiotic relationship, but there is also potential for conflict. If coverage is less than positive, politicians may feel that press gallery journalists are exercising bias or being unfairly critical. Politicians will go through various efforts to control the messages they communicate to press gallery journalists. In extreme cases, they may even try to limit the press gallery's access to them.

In Canada such practices have caused deep conflicts and led prime ministers to claim that press gallery journalists had become the opposition to the government. In 2006 Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper alleged an anti-Conservative bias on the part of some press gallery members and attempted to manage press conferences by dictating which journalists would be allowed to ask questions. The gallery journalists staged a protest as a group and walked out of a news conference. Harper delivered his statement to a single camera in an almost empty room.

Both the government and the press gallery suffer from such a conflicted relationship. Only with a cooperative relationship can both sides do their jobs sufficiently, and only then can citizens be well informed.

Gallery reporters should have a depth of knowledge about the parliament that other reporters in the country don't have the time to attain. They also have a wide reach into the homes of citizens; reports on the parliament by gallery reporters can end up in newspapers and on television stations all around the country. They are critical to helping government present information with background and explanation in ways that citizens can understand.

Thus, the government needs the press gallery as much as gallery journalists need access to government documents and staff. As part of a press gallery association that coexists peacefully with government and has access to politicians and legislative processes, journalists can do a much better job.

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