

ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Journalists have been called the watchdogs of democracy. Reporters are expected to monitor the actions of influential people and provide unbiased reports to the public. Freedom of the press to report without interference has been called a fundamental cornerstone of democracy by the United Nations. The Canadian Association of Journalists states: “Our privilege and duty as investigative journalists is to defend free speech, inform self-governing citizens, encourage deliberation on public policy and serve the public interest.”¹ In Canada, freedom of the press is protected under section 2 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

The Press Gallery



Photo by John Yanyshyn, Visions West

Many reporters cover government issues, but some are specifically assigned by news outlets to cover legislative activities from the capital city. These journalists are often called the “Press Gallery.” By tradition, the press are seated behind the Speaker in most Commonwealth parliaments where they are out of sight and may take notes without being seen by the Speaker.

The term “Press Gallery” refers both to the seating area or gallery in a legislative chamber where reporters traditionally observe Legislative Assembly business before filing their stories **and** to the offices where they work.

In British Columbia, a gallery for reporters was built in the Legislative Assembly around the year 1900 located behind and above the Speaker’s chair. On the day it opened, a *Times* reporter wrote: “The reporters are comfortable now, can hear well, see everything that takes place and are free from the annoyance subjected last year when they were given scant accommodation on the floor of the House.”² Since that time and with the expansion of the number of Members in the Legislative Assembly, the press gallery was removed and the press now occupy the first row of seats in the Speaker’s Gallery.

Office space is also provided to press gallery members with print reporters now on the third floor and broadcast reporters in the basement of the building. They can also often be seen huddled with microphones around a Member of the Legislative Assembly in a “scrum” following Question Period.