

January 2009

## Run Out of the Gallery: the Changing Nature of Irish Political Journalism

Kevin Rafter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/icr>



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Rafter, Kevin (2009) "Run Out of the Gallery: the Changing Nature of Irish Political Journalism," *Irish Communication Review*. Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 7.

doi:10.21427/D7DM85

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/icr/vol11/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Publications at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Irish Communication Review by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact [arrow.admin@tudublin.ie](mailto:arrow.admin@tudublin.ie), [aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie](mailto:aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)

---

# RUN OUT OF THE GALLERY: The Changing Nature of Irish Political Journalism

Kevin Rafter

## Introduction

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES THE evolution of parliamentary and political reporting in Ireland and builds on earlier work by Foley (1993) and Horgan (2001). It considers the changing nature of Irish political journalism and the loss of influence of the Parliamentary Press Gallery and its constituent part, the Political Correspondents Group. This analysis takes place against a backdrop of continuing very high interest in politics in Ireland. During the 2007 general election, the television debate between Bertie Ahern and Enda Kenny, the leaders of the two main political parties, had an average audience of 941,000 – a national audience share of 63.3 per cent and a reach during the programme of 1.4m viewers. The debate between the leaders of the other political parties – broadcast the previous evening to the main debate – had a national share of 38.3 per cent or 581,000 viewers. In addition, the RTÉ website, which had a dedicated area for election material, received just over 1.5m hits on the day of the main leaders' debate. Party political broadcasts, regardless of their impact, were also watched by sizable audiences – the 16 broadcasts had an average viewership of 500,000 people. Opinion poll research undertaken in 2009 showed that six in ten of all adults could recall party political broadcasts from the previous general election (Rafter, 2009). These are all significant figures.

While the leaders' debate is a unique political event linked to a general election with heightened public attention, there is ongoing evidence from continuing high viewership figures for current affairs programmes in non-election periods to suggest that the Irish public continues to turn to the mainstream media for information on politics. However, the journalistic practices which generated this political news for viewers, listeners and readers have changed significantly. After several decades of little development in the structure of the Irish media market – and also in the nature of reporting – more media outlets and increased competition have over the last 20 years introduced considerable diversity into Irish political journalism with different priorities in different organisations. For example, research has shown that the three main daily tabloids – the *Irish Sun*, the *Irish Daily Star* and the *Evening Herald* – devoted few front page headlines to the 2007 election campaign and for no more than half of the campaign these newspapers made no mention at all of the election on their front pages. The broadsheets – the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*, and to a lesser extent the *Irish Examiner* mentioned the campaign on their front page on most days during the campaign. (Brandenburg and Zalinski, 2007:177) The discussion below seeks to analyse the changing nature of Irish parliamentary and political

There were numerous complaints from opposition politicians about fair access to the airwaves. The benign relationship was illustrated in a Dáil (lower house) debate in the 1950s about the creation of a new Irish national television station, when one Member of Parliament expressed the fear that the service would become a 'play thing of party politics' (Savage, 1996: 199).

There were no political discussion programmes on Irish radio in the initial decades after independence. Indeed, the first unscripted political discussion programme was not broadcast until 1951. A weekly commentary on parliamentary proceedings was also introduced that year. Party political broadcasts were transmitted for the first time during the 1954 general election. From the mid-1950s, new ground started to be broken in relation to political reportage. Yet the coverage of parliament and the political process in print and broadcast was primarily passive and was reactive to events and announcements compared to what is available today. It was in this environment that the Parliamentary Press Gallery emerged on an ad hoc basis in Ireland. While Seán Lemass, for example, held regular briefings with senior journalists on the supply of goods during World War II, this appears to have been an exception rather than a rule. Horgan observed that 'the likelihood is that the lobby began to exist on a formal or semi-formal basis at some stage in the early 1950s, and retained its basic shape unchanged for about two decades' (Horgan, 2001: 262). The number of members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery was initially small at around a dozen while turnover was low. Reporters were the conduits to the public of parliamentary proceedings, political scoops were few, personality politics was non-existent and opinion polls were not available to fill pages or broadcast news programmes.

The nature of reportage underwent its first significant development with the arrival of an Irish television service in 1961. The nascent domestic television channel gave politicians an increasing sense of importance but there were many uneasy moments between the government and the new television service as politicians were held to account by the media in a way not experienced previously. During this period there was evidence that ministers started to develop distinct relationships with political journalists. This was best illustrated by the friendship which developed between reporter John Healy and Donagh O'Malley, one of the new generation of Fianna Fáil politicians who secured ministerial rank in the 1960s. O'Malley, who died of a heart attack in 1968, was alongside Charles Haughey and Brian Lenihan in being part of the first generation of media-aware Irish politicians. Twenty years after O'Malley's death, Healy wrote a major reassessment as a journalist, a friend and a contemporary in which he recalled the story of when O'Malley's car was stopped by the Gardai in March 1962 (Healy, 1988). 'This is believed to be the incident which gave birth to the story of O'Malley being stopped and asked if he hadn't seen the arrow direction sign to which he was said to have replied "What arrow? – I didn't even see the bloody Indians".' Healy didn't confirm or deny the veracity of the story but wrote of meeting O'Malley after he had published details of a court case where he was fined and had his driving licence suspended for 12 months.

A week or so later I was in Áras an Uachtaráin [official residence of the President of Ireland] and the shadow of a tall man came up behind me, tapped me on the shoulder and I spun around to come face to face with Donagh

O'Malley. 'Is your name Healy?' 'That's right.' 'Are you the fucker that crucified me in the *Mail*?' 'That's basically right, yes.' 'Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?'

Healy accepted, and it can only be assumed that others issued with similar invitations also accepted. It is hard to imagine such close relations between a journalist and a politician in an earlier generation. Politicians increasingly brought a new sophistication to their dealings with the media. During the 1970s the position of Government Press Secretary was created to manage the relationship with political journalists. The interactions were initially informal but as news management professionalised – and the number of reporters covering politics increased – the relationship became more formalised with regular non-attributable briefings for political correspondents. A new group of journalists started to report on politics including Geraldine Kennedy, Olivia O'Leary and Vincent Browne. They thrived in the hostile environment generated by the intense rivalry between Garret FitzGerald and Charles Haughey – respectively leaders of the two main political parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil – and on the deep divisions within Fianna Fáil over Haughey's continued leadership of the party. Leaks and counter leaks from senior political figures fed media exclusives. The longtime passive style of reporting had formally ended. By the end of the 1980s, after many years of relative stability, the Irish media market commenced a period of considerable structural change. Privately-owned commercial broadcasters – at national level, television station, TV3 and radio stations, Today FM and Newstalk – were licensed and began to challenge RTÉ's dominance of the broadcasting market. Over the same period, several UK newspapers including the *Sunday Times* and the Mirror Group introduced Irish editions. The arrival of these media outlets contributed to an increase in the number of journalists accredited to the Parliamentary Press Gallery while the traditional media outlets – RTÉ and the national newspapers – also strengthened their reporting teams in Leinster House. From around a dozen reporters in the late 1960s, membership of the Parliamentary Press Gallery was just short of 100 journalists in 2000. The numbers reached 130 by 2009.<sup>2</sup> By way of comparison, about 170 journalists are said to work each day at Westminster although information released in 2007 by the British government put the number of parliamentary correspondents, including those issued with temporary passes, at 250.<sup>3</sup>

The media has no automatic right to a place in the Irish parliamentary complex, and many journalists would admit that they are tolerated on sufferance by some politicians and officials alike. The lobby list at Westminster is kept by the Speaker of the House – in Leinster House the chairman of the Press Gallery supplies the Superintendent of the House with a similar list of names. The Parliamentary Press Gallery has autonomy over its own affairs within Leinster House. It is granted office space, desks, telephones and car spaces which the gallery committee then assigns to its members. Membership is now divided into two categories: there are 81 full members and 49 associate members. However, the distinction between the two groups

<sup>2</sup> Information supplied by Eoin Ó Murchú, chairperson of the Parliamentary Press Gallery

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons, 28 March 2007, [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com) (26 February 2009) and Westminster Press Gallery History, [www.thepressgallery.org.uk](http://www.thepressgallery.org.uk) (15 February 2009)

exists more in theory than in reality, and is best evident by the colour of their respective Leinster House identity/swipe cards. All accredited reporters receive an identity/swipe card which gives them special access to the Leinster House complex and the right to cover parliamentary debates and committee meetings. Full members have a red identity/swipe card which allows them automatic access to the gallery overlooking the Dáil chamber whereas the pink coloured identity/swipe card issued to associate members grants the holder access to the Leinster House complex but not the chamber gallery. Associate members need assistance from a full member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery or a Leinster House official to gain entry. Associate members tend to be specialist correspondents in areas such as health, education and the environment. They do not have office accommodation in the Leinster House complex and generally only attend committee meetings or ministerial question time when the proceedings have a relevance to their specialist area.

The main distinction between members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery is not, however, between full and associated members but rather between those members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery who are members of the Political Correspondents Group and those who are not. All members of the Political Correspondents Group have full membership of the Parliamentary Press Gallery but the reverse is not true. The Political Correspondents Group has no written rules – the group takes what can best be described as ‘internal soundings’ on issues of mutual interest but to progress any matter the involvement of the Parliamentary Press Gallery is required. This distinct but informal grouping best corresponds to the Westminster lobby and has frequently been described as such although strictly speaking the application of the term ‘lobby’ to Irish political journalism is incorrect as no such group actually exists. While, as mentioned above, the Irish system did not fully replicate the Westminster lobby, a certain amount of exclusivity developed around the small group of reporters who covered events in Leinster House. The sense of exclusivity was initially best illustrated by the press gallery itself which overlooks the Dáil parliament chamber. Each seat on the gallery is identified by a brass plate providing the name of newspapers including the *Irish Times*, the Irish Press Group, Independent Newspapers as well as RTÉ. The plates were fitted in the era of few reporters covering politics and of far fewer media organisations in general. It is little wonder that Foley referred to a parliamentary group of reporters that was ‘clubby and exclusive’ (Foley, 1993:21).

Writing about the Parliamentary Press Gallery, Foley observed that it was ‘these few journalists, working together, who write the first story on any event, who decide what to cover and how stories should be covered’ (Foley, 1993: 21). The main disadvantage of this arrangement is that it leads to the creation of a club-type atmosphere and creates the conditions which allow ‘pack journalism’ to prevail. The term was defined during the 1972 American presidential election campaign when Timothy Crouse saw reporters moving in packs, dining together, sipping liquor, socialising, sharing and comparing notes with other colleagues over extended time periods (See Matusitz and Breen, 2007). The danger of pack journalism is that reporters jointly covering an institution or a campaign feed off one another and reinforce their joint focus. Many of these traits are evident in the context of the Parliamentary Press Gallery where reporters spend their working day in Leinster House removed from their newsdesks and working with colleagues from rival media

organisations. Collective self-censorship can also prevail. In 2008, due to refurbishment work in Leinster House, the political correspondents rooms on the top floor of the building were closed. The occupants were relocated to external offices several hundred metres outside the parliamentary complex although a 'hot desk' arrangement was introduced to facilitate those working in the House. Nobody – this writer included – wrote about the horrendous waste of public money involved in equipping the new offices with an excessive multitude of large flat screen television monitors. It was a glaring example of public sector waste – in several small offices there was a monitor per reporter – but nobody wrote the story up. As mentioned, the political correspondents have until recently had their own rooms in Leinster House – on the top floor of what is a relatively small building. Other parliamentary reporters have offices at the rear of the parliament chamber. There is little luxury. The rooms are small, cramped and overcrowded. While there is a members bar and a members restaurant for politicians, most of those who work in the complex congregate around the main public restaurant and public bar in the original Leinster House and a coffee dock area in the newer Leinster House building. All occupants are in close proximity but unlike the Healy-O'Malley relationship described previously, those in closest contact today tend to be journalists, political advisors and backbench TDs. Ministers with full work agendas which take them in a variety of different locations are less accessible than previously and are buffeted by advisors.

### **The Briefing System**

The political correspondents in Leinster House attend a daily private briefing given by the Government Press Secretary. With coalition administrations increasingly formed as a norm in the Irish Republic, the briefings are given by government press officers from the different political parties in office. In the 1997 to 2002 period, the daily briefing was attended by the Government Press Secretary who was seen as representing Fianna Fáil, the largest party in the coalition, while the Progressive Democrats were represented by their appointee as Assistant Government Press Secretary. After the 2007 general election, with the Green Party joining Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in a new three party coalition arrangement, the daily briefings were attended by representatives of each party.

The daily briefings are not recorded. They are held in private at varying times generally between five and seven o'clock. The content is usually off-the-record with attribution to 'government sources' although occasionally the material with permission may be credited to 'a spokesperson for the government'. But the spokespeople are rarely named. In terms of journalism practice, few exclusives emerge from these secretive briefings. A reporter with a scoop will never take the story into the briefing to tip off competitors about what they would otherwise read with journalistic envy the following morning. The truth is that journalists do their business in private with their own sources. Politicians and their advisors also naturally brief journalists individually – and that is where the real business is done. The briefings – in this writer's experience – tend largely to be information flow events where the press officers make a series of announcements to a captive audience, such as the cabinet has approved certain appointments, made certain appointments and authorised certain policy actions. There is an opportunity for questions and to tease out issues related to running controversies but, in general, the government

---

spokesperson rarely departs from a prepared template of answers obviously agreed in advance. The briefings are to the advantage of print journalists who can reproduce everything said by the spokepeople while without sound or pictures broadcast reporters are left to paraphrase the material for their audiences. The absence of cameras plays to the advantage of the spokesperson as one writer explained in the Westminster context: 'Spin-doctors are learning that by their body, by the way they emphasise or downplay words and phrases, they can influence how the newspapers report something. You cannot do that when cameras lenses and microphones are fixed on you' (Ross, 1999). The exclusion of specialist correspondents plays to the advantage of the government when their area of expertise is the main political subject of the day. The Irish system is far less formalised than its equivalent at Westminster where members are issued with a booklet, *Notes on the Practice of Lobby Journalism*, which for many years advised that 'the cardinal rule of the Lobby is never to identify its informant without specific permission.'

The system at Westminster has undergone considerable change in recent times. In the mid-1980s the Westminster lobby system was embroiled in controversy amid accusations that government spokesman Bernard Ingham was using the private briefings to damage ministers as part of internal warfare within Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration. The lobby was faced with the refusal of the newly established *Independent* to join and the subsequent withdrawal of the *Guardian* and the *Scotsman*. By the early 1990s all three newspapers had returned to the daily briefing system when the new John Major government agreed to allow previously unattributable lobby briefings to be credited to 'Downing Street sources'. There has been further change since the 1997 election of the New Labour government. For a variety of reasons Alastair Campbell was a very different official spokesman. For one, he attended cabinet meetings. This gave him first hand access to the material about which he was briefing lobby members. Significantly Campbell ended the 70-year-old Westminster system of secret unattributable briefings for a selective group of journalists. He also broke up the closed shop that was lobby reporting. Under the new regime the briefings were on-the-record and non-Westminster journalists and foreign correspondents were invited to attend. The New Labour government also introduced monthly televised prime ministerial media conferences. None of these changes at Westminster has, as yet, been incorporated into the arrangements at Leinster House. There are strong arguments in terms of transparency and accountability for considering the new Westminster system. However, in reality recent developments have served to significantly lessen the central importance of the Parliamentary Press Gallery and its constituent Political Correspondents Group in Irish political journalism.

### **Bertie Ahern and New Media Strategies**

Media coverage of parliament – what is said in the Dáil and Seanad (upper house) chambers – has been in decline for some time. Over two decades ago, the distinguished academic and then Fine Gael member of the Oireachtas, Maurice Manning argued that, 'The decline in the quantity of Oireachtas coverage is now a fact of life and the trend towards even less coverage is likely to continue' (Manning, 1988). The trend did continue. With its 'newspaper of record' ethos, the *Irish Times* is the only national newspaper that still allocates fixed editorial space to the

proceedings in parliament. The reduction in parliamentary coverage has been driven by a multitude of facts – some are economic and relate to the cost of maintaining a large staff in Leinster House and others are news-related and focus on the long periods when the routine business of parliament means there is little hard news. In his history of British journalism, Andrew Marr was brutally honest in offering an explanation for the decline of parliamentary reporting at Westminster: ‘the quality of what is said in the Commons is mostly so banal that the average Briton, with today’s choice of enticing media, shopping opportunities and so on, would rather have a nail driven slowly through the forebrain than be forced to read or watch it’ (Marr, 2004: 139). Having spent almost 13 years in the environs of Leinster House as a political journalist with a number of media organisations, this writer can testify that there are few great speakers in contemporary Irish politics, not to mind great speeches. Moreover, what it said rarely carries consequence as the chamber is not a place where meaningful discussion happens; if anything considerable indifference hangs over the chamber. News rarely happens in the chamber and the explanation is obvious because if politics is about power – and political stories are about power – then parliament is increasingly irrelevant as far less power resides in parliament.

The twin factors of Ireland’s adoption of a social partnership model and Bertie Ahern’s 11-year tenure as taoiseach added significantly to situation. The development of a social partnership model in the post-1987 period integrated employers, trade unions and other civic society and vested interest groups into a decision-making arrangement with the government of the day. Between the cabinet room and the conference hall, where the social partners reside, national policy decisions are now discussed and agreed. The role of parliament has been to rubber stamp a done deal. Media organisations, therefore, tend to pay more attention to the words of business and union leaders than those uttered in the Dáil chamber by senior political figures. Ahern, who was elected taoiseach for the first time after the 1997 general election, was one of the champions of this form of public policy decision-making. Moreover, Ahern displayed little interest in the proceedings of parliament and spent as little time as possible in the chamber. A political arrangement with the Labour Party relating to parliamentary privileges allowed Ahern to effectively skip attending the Dáil every Thursday. So with the Dáil generally sitting three days a week, Ahern was essentially involved in parliamentary life for a limited number of hours during two days each sitting week.

Alongside the social partnership process, Ahern moved his engagement with political journalists beyond the traditional confines of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. In the 1994 to 1997 period, when he led Fianna Fáil in opposition, the Ahern media strategy targeted local news organisations and the tabloid press. This policy continued after Ahern was elected taoiseach as Fianna Fáil sought unmediated access to voters. Daly has written about the strong relationship which developed between Fianna Fáil and the *Nems of the World*. The Irish edition of the Sunday tabloid published 120 political editorials between March 1997 and December 2000 of which 88 (73 per cent) were written by Fianna Fáil politicians (see Daly, 2002). Ahern was also selective in making himself available for media interviews. Time was provided to newspapers for end-of-year interviews but there was little availability outside this controlled downtime for news stories which guaranteed lead-story treatment and prominent inside page space. There was also a strong preference for light entertain-



ment shows against appearances on news and current affairs; and unfortunately the national broadcaster – keen to have the interview – facilitated this strategy. Ahern made more appearances on light entertainment shows such as *The Late Late Show* than he did on current affairs programmes like *Prime Time*.

More significantly for political reportage, Ahern operated a media policy that can be defined as being ‘on-the-run’. His style of leadership involved a near permanent campaign strategy with a full weekly diary of engagements in various constituencies. He was permanently ‘on-the-road’, visiting schools and community centres, opening factories, hotels, public houses and, even in 2007, a bathroom showroom. The strategy was to move the centre of political activity not just out of the Dáil chamber but also away from Leinster House. The media organisations followed so much so that many political reporters now do most of the work outside Leinster House. With the coverage of politics moving beyond parliament the traditional briefing system for members of the Political Correspondents Group has been considerably weakened. If reporters wanted a direct response from Ahern they got it on the road in the form of the so-called ‘doorstep’ interview. Ahern would speak to reporters either as he entered an event or on his way out afterwards. Reporters would form a scrum-of-sorts adjacent to the Taoiseach. Five or six questions would be asked by five or six different reporters. It would be hard to envisage a De Valera or a Costello operating such a system but the doorstep suited the rolling news agenda of the broadcast media. Bulletins were freshened up with the latest sound clip from the Taoiseach. The door-step also suited Ahern – they were short and allowed for sound bite responses demanded by the hourly news reporters – and avoided the type of inquiry that is characteristic of a sit-down interview, traditional media conference or experienced across the chamber in parliament from his political opponents. Ahern could claim to have been widely available to the media but the terms of his availability and accessibility made it easier for the government to control the news agenda.

### **The Rise of the Pundit Class**

The coverage of Irish politics and major political and parliamentary events changed significantly during the era of social partnership and Bertie Ahern’s tenure in office. But the changes did not just arise from the downgrading of the Parliamentary Press Gallery and the increased use of the doorstep interview to deliver a media message. There have also been changes in journalism practice. Whereas traditionally readers and viewers received hard political reporting and straight coverage of parliament, they are now treated increasingly to political reporting as commentary and adversarial political journalism which entertains as much as it informs and educates. Colour writing and gossip columns now take precedence over straight political reporting. Without doubt, the rise in the number of reporters has led to greater competition of which Horgan somewhat optimistically recorded, ‘the lobby’s growth in size – has contributed to a much greater competitiveness among political journalists which will in the future, with luck, result in better political journalism for the benefit of the public’ (Horgan, 2001, p. 270).

It is, however, uncertain if the growth in the membership of the Parliamentary Press Gallery has been matched by a corresponding increase in reporting standards. As far back as 1988 Manning was expressing concern:

And I would claim that there is a minority of people in the lobby who don't understand politics at all and are much more interested in using the lobby pass to get a story about the scandal of some personality that will help to sell their newspaper ... The fact is that personality and the theatre of politics mean much more in terms of selling the paper than substance ... (Manning, 1988).

There is little doubt that Manning's assessment has become the norm although it has to be stressed it is a norm that is not unique to the coverage of Irish politics. Indeed, Conboy has argued that 'there is a great deal of analysis of the processes involved and probing of the rhetoric of politics rather than a straightforward reporting of political events and policies as facts' (Conboy, 2004: 170). Some of this change may be attributed to a media response to the increased news management skills of politicians and their advisors – a reaction to spin – as well as the lack of ideological distinction between the main political parties in Ireland. But part of the change may also be due to the coexistence of less hard news and more media outlets, with the latter factor providing a commercial profit and ratings drive towards news generation in both publicly and privately owned media organisations. During his period as spokesman for Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell concluded, 'there's frankly not that much massive news around most days' – and resultingly to fill editorial space there has been an expansion in commentary and what can be called the 'pundit class'. More media time is now devoted to mediated political commentary by so-called – and self-styled – experts who are given a standing on par with, and often above, elected politicians. The contributions of serving Members of Parliament now compete for media space with former politicians, failed politicians, lobbyists and public relations consultants.

The rise of the Irish pundit class largely coincided with the advent of the peace process in Northern Ireland and the reduction in the hard news that the contemporary conflict generated. The space vacated by coverage of Northern Irish affairs has been filled in part by political punditry which has focused on the corruption revelations of the 1990s and the various tribunals of inquiry established to investigate unethical links between politics and business. In order to justify their existence, the pundit class need something to talk about. The spotlight on political scandals has played to their natural instincts to focus on the ease of process over complex policy issues. It is not unsurprising that in this environment, where pundits need material to talk about, opinion polls have come to dominate coverage of politics. It has been commented upon that during the 2007 general election, 'the treatment of individual poll results during the campaign is quite ritualistic' (Brandenburg and Zalinski, 2007: 177). But it is true that even in non-election periods the significance given to opinion polls has increased dramatically, and rather than assist the quality of political debate, the reporting of opinion polls results tends towards over-interpretation of small statistical changes. For example, during the 2007 general election the broadsheet newspapers all proclaimed a bounce for Fianna Fáil on 11 May; a severe slump on 15 May, and a last minute recovery on 21 May. 'The *Irish Daily Mail*, for example, saw the poll on 11 May as spelling 'doom for Enda' and the one on 15 May as leaving 'Ahern rocked by poll slump', despite virtually identical figures for both parties in each of those polls' (Brandenburg and Zalinski, 2007: 177).

## Conclusion

The role of the Parliamentary Press Gallery has changed fundamentally since Foley wrote his treatment of its historical evolution in 1993. The factors driving these developments are varied and include the shift in power away from parliament, the attitude of Bertie Ahern towards parliament, changing news values and definitions of what constitutes news and the rise of pundit-driven media. The consequences for the Parliamentary Press Gallery are significant. Its power and influence has been lessened as has that of the Political Correspondents Group. The one change which could be introduced – and progressed by the gallery itself – would be to dispense with the secretive briefings between government representatives and a self-created elite cabal of reporters. Writing before the recent innovations at Westminster Farrell described the similar systems in London and Dublin as operating: ‘...a lobby system in which regular briefings are only given to a select group of accredited journalists usually on a non attributable basis. This creates a much more secretive form of Cabinet-media relationship, frequently characterised by leaks, often inspired and manipulated’ (quoted in Horgan, 2001). In an era when the proceedings of parliament are available on television, radio and the internet, it is an anachronism that a formalised secretive media system – that runs against what journalism is supposed to be about – should continue to prevail in Leinster House. It would be preferable if both sides dispensed with the secrecy and followed the Westminster model of open access of all accredited journalists to a televised briefing system.

## AUTHOR

Kevin Rafter is head of the Department of Film & Media, The National Film School, Institute of Art, Design and Technology. Dun Laoghaire, and an experienced political journalist. Author of several books on Irish politics, his doctoral thesis on Democratic Left will be published as a book in 2010.

## References

- Brandenburg, H. and Z. Zalinski (2007) ‘The Media and the Campaign’ in M. March and M. Gallagher (eds), in *How Ireland Voted 2007*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brennock, M. ‘Politicians are not all doing it for themselves’, *Irish Times*, 16 August 2008.
- Chubb, B. (1992) *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, Third edn., London: Longman.
- Cockrell, M., P. Hennessy and D. Walker (1984) *Sources Close to the Prime Minister*, Macmillan.
- Conboy, M. (2004) *Journalism: A Critical History*, Sage.
- Daly, P. (2002) Unpublished research paper for MA in Political Communications, Dublin City University.
- Foley, M. (1993) ‘The Political Lobby System’, *Irish Communications Review*, vol. 3, pp 21–30.
- Healy, J. (1998) ‘The Wild One’, *Magill* March and April edition.
- Horgan, J. (2001) ‘“Government sources said last night...”: the development of the parliamentary press lobby’, in Hiram Morgan (ed.) *Modern Ireland in Information, Media and Power Through The Ages*, UCD, pp 259–71.
- Manning, M. (1988) ‘Reporting the Oireachtas’, *Magill*, March and April edition.
- Marr, A. (2004) *My Trade – A Short History of British Journalism*, London: Macmillan.
- Matusitz, J. and Breen, G. (2007), ‘Addressing the Negative Aspects of Pack Journalism to Media Reporters’, paper presented at *National Communications Association* conference, November.
- Rafter, K. (2009) *Political Advertising*, Dublin: Broadcasting Commission of Ireland.
- Ross, F. (1999) ‘Where the cameras can’t go’, *New Statesmen*, 18 October.
- Savage R. (1996) *Irish Television: The Political and Social Origins*, Cork: Cork University Press.