

Press freedom is your freedom

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It appears there will be no annual garden party for the parliamentary press gallery at 24 Sussex this bright June. The risk of frostbite is too high.

That's not a bad thing.

Why should the Prime Minister socialize with the journalists who write about him and his government? Or to slightly misquote my acerbic and beloved late mother-in-law, "What good does that do him or them?"

One might argue that a bit of civility and an hour of two of small talk might provide some welcome perspective all around. But in reality, the garden party would likely do the Prime Minister more good than the journalists.

Politicians and the press should be at arm's length. In fact, must be at arm's length. Both work for you, and in order for the press to do its job properly, two things are necessary: independence (a cozy relationship with the Prime Minister does not work in the best interests of readers) and the freedom to ask questions and witness events.

A severe chill in relations has descended recently because reporters refuse to sign a list requested by the Prime Minister's Office as a prerequisite for asking questions at press conferences.

"A plague on both their houses" would be an understandable reaction from readers frequently frustrated by both the press and politicians.

But that frustration has roots in the knowledge that their best interests depend on both parties doing their jobs. The current, mutual displays of pique would be merely petty

if they did not jeopardize the right of Canadians to get answers from the Prime Minister and his ministers about the decisions they're making and the direction they're taking the country.

When the Prime Minister refuses to answer questions from the parliamentary press gallery, he's not refusing Susan Delacourt or Les Whittington or Tonda MacCharles, he's refusing to talk to *Star* readers.

When government ministers are ordered not to talk to the press about Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, or the government's decisions to abandon the Kelowna Accord and to disregard the Kyoto agreement, they are not avoiding reporters, they are avoiding voters.

And when reporters and photographers were forbidden to see and photograph the casket returning Capt. Nichola Goddard, the government was not excluding the press, but you.

"Imagine my surprise when I was told that the ban against being present at the return ceremony includes the public," wrote Jim Doyle, of Ajax, in a letter to the editor.

Exactly.

And as Capt. Goddard's father Tim noted during his eulogy, "I would like to think that Nichola died to protect our freedoms, not to restrict them."

In our system of democracy, the government has a role to play, the opposition has a role and the press has a role as watchdog.

The scales are heavily weighted in the government's favour because of the power concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office.

In the American system, the president chooses reporters at his press conferences, but they can then go to senators and congressmen who operate more independently than our Members of Parliament.

However, the Prime Minister has restricted press access to cabinet ministers and the message to backbenchers to stay mum has been loud and clear. And it will be difficult for the press to play the role of watchdog if the Prime Minister is also the person who decides which journalists get to ask him questions.

If those who ask the tough questions are ignored, the press may begin to self-censor and pull its punches.

The scales are further loaded if you consider the number of communications advisers and staff and consultants employed by the PMO and cabinet ministers to help the government get its message out.

The job of the parliamentary press gallery is to ask questions on behalf of citizens who can't be in Ottawa to ask those questions themselves.

And the Prime Minister is accountable to them. Answering questions from the press is not a favour or a courtesy or a quaint custom. It is his obligation and your due.

That said, the deep freeze does have some benefits for both the press and the reader.

If the usual suspects are not answering questions, new sources will fill the vacuum

because space is a constant.

Many readers worry the press is not independent enough — that political reporters are in thrall to agendas controlled by politicians and spinners.

So if the silent treatment means the press has to talk to more people and dig a little harder and deeper for information, the readers will benefit from fresh perspectives, new voices and stories that might otherwise have remained untold.

The natural and necessary friction in the relationship between the press and the government is energizing.

However, on the down side the seemingly limitless number of challenges to press freedom is daunting and exhausting.

Institutional pressures to keep you from knowing things you are entitled to know are growing and relentless.

Access to information laws are Orwellian jokes; privacy laws and security fears are being exploited to bolt more doors and seal more files. The *Star's* lawyers fight more requests for publication bans on the identification of witnesses and court testimony every year.

That's why reporters refuse to sign this list for the Prime Minister's Office. And that's why it matters.