

## MICHELLE GRATTAN - 2007

By William Birnbauer

“How do we look, cobber?” Every night, just after midnight, the resilient Michelle Grattan would phone *The Age*’s news desk from her Canberra office, wanting to know how her team’s first edition stories stacked up against the competition.

“What do the others have?” she’d ask. “What’s the Oz got? What’s the SMH led with? How about the Fin?”

The night editor would take her through the other newspapers’ best political yarns, knowing that Grattan would chase a story or an angle the bureau had missed in time for the second edition. Satisfied that all the bases were covered, she would press for an article that had been placed on a back page to be moved forward.

These discussions would take anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour, and by the time Grattan had refreshed a story or woken and interviewed a politician and filed her piece, it would be well after 1 am. Then there’d be further discussion, before she’d announce that she was off to feed the horses. Remarkably, she would be on the radio later that morning, apparently with only a few hours sleep.

The late Creighton Burns, the editor of *The Age* who mentored Grattan in politics at the University of Melbourne, once recalled: “Many politicians grumble about her late-night telephone calls, but most are grateful that she has cared about getting it right.”

Peter Bowers, a former veteran national affairs journalist with Fairfax, coined the term ‘Grattanus interruptus’ to describe the occasional consequence of her persistence.

Grattan, eminent political reporter and astute analyst of national events, is Australia’s answer to Helen Thomas, doyen of Washington reporters. Without ego or histrionics, she has mapped the ups and downs of national political and economic life for almost four decades. She checks her facts, then checks them again.

Former national editor of *The Age*, Michael Gordon, says: “No newspaper journalist in Australian history has written more stories about national politics; no journalist has gone to greater lengths to ensure those stories are fair and accurate.”

Grattan, who was tutoring politics at Monash University at the time, joined *The Age* in 1970 when the legendary Graham Perkin was editing the newspaper. “I suspect he did it against his better judgment,” Grattan commented when receiving her lifetime achievement award.

She became chief political correspondent in 1976 where she stayed until being appointed editor of *The Canberra Times* in 1993, becoming the first woman in Australia to edit a daily metropolitan newspaper.

Creighton Burns lamented her departure from *The Age*: “Readers of this newspaper and students of national politics will certainly suffer serious withdrawal symptoms in the coming weeks. And the Lord alone knows how Michelle herself will manage. For she has been writing about national politics for *The Age* for more than 21 years - six days a week and mostly 50 weeks a year. For 17 of those years she has been chief political correspondent in Canberra. For her, stopping now must be like a small death.”

She rejoined *The Age* in 1995 as political editor, then wrote about politics for *The Financial Review* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* before returning to *The Age* in 2002.

Grattan received the Graham Perkin Award for Australian Journalist of the Year in 1988, and in 2004 she was made an officer of the Order of Australia. She won a Walkley award for journalist leadership in 2006. She won the Quill lifetime achievement award for 2007, jointly with another veteran of national politics, Laurie Oakes.

“Tough but fair, that’s certainly Michelle,” Oakes commented, adding that he was in awe of her phenomenal energy. “Some of us are slowing down a little as we get older, not Gratts. She’s there in *The Age* office in the press gallery every night; she’s back at 7am to sort through the political entrails for Radio National listeners ...”

Oakes recalled that during a marathon 18-day trip following Prime Minister Kevin Rudd around the world, a press conference was to be held in a factory in Beijing. Rudd waited

patiently until Grattan was off her mobile phone before addressing the media. “The Chinese officials looked on in wonderment,” Oakes remembered. “Apparently this is not quite how things happen over there.”

And it’s fair to say it’s also generally not how things happen over here. Except when they involve one of Australia’s most respected and credible journalists.