

## "Good Morning Fran"



When the world seems to be losing its head, you look for some rationality and calmness. Many Australians are trying to make sense of what is happening in their country and meanwhile the parliamentary world has descended into farce. There are two forces at large: Australia is becoming a high wage, low skill country which, outside of mining, is unsustainable and daily we witness the disintegration of one of the central pillars of national politics: the Australian Labor Party.

When things are this serious, comedy, which was the preferred way of making sense of the news for many of us, suddenly seems to be not funny at all.

Every morning on ABC's Radio National two highly competent professionals make sense of what is going on. Because these two are old-fashioned, competent, have been there and done it all, they are eminently believable and trustable in a world seemingly spiralling downwards. When Fran Kelly asks Michelle Grattan: "The Treasurer says this is a responsible budget, but is it a political budget?" The country literally hangs off the answer because Michelle Grattan will tell you the truth. She will define what the truth is. She will weave out the grey areas and, most of all, give you an unbiased and objective position on things that matter.

Kelly expertly sets up her colleague and they have rapport that comes from years hoofing around parliament house with tape recorders and notepads. But something much more than the normal conversation between journalists occurs when they speak each day.

Times define what is important and which people are authoritative. Kelly and Grattan represent a congruence of important forces of their age. Thankfully both have survived the kind of superficiality and fluff which is so often a part and parcel of the media. They have also out-performed and out-paced the boys club through sheer diligence and hard work. Grattan has also defied traditional conceptions of age and retirement. In a period of tokenism, neither Kelly or Grattan got where they are through favouritism or political correctness, they did it their way and represent a kind of triumph of feminism because they are not predictable and give all sides of a question consideration. If they get something wrong, it is because they got it wrong. For the most part they are wise, competent professionals who have tremendous value, influence and respect. And more than this Grattan, particularly, has become I think, a unique, valued, trusted national figure, more important for her counsel, opinion and knowledge than any appointed public figure I can think of.

There was a time, not so long ago, when the hounds were baying for Grattan. She came to Canberra the year before Gough Whitlam was elected to office in 1971. As the great Alan Ramsey retired dutifully, some expected Michelle Grattan to do the same or to move over for some younger journalist. But just as no-one has been able to adequately fill Ramsey's shoes, no-one could fill the giant hole of Michelle Grattan if she had retired.

Thankfully there was the example of Helen Thomas, White House correspondent for 67 years, so respected that she occupied front seat centre in the White House Briefing Room. Thomas retired from the Press Gallery at the age of 90, so let us hope that Michelle Grattan, will also continue on for a good many more years. Every reader of the **Sydney Morning Herald** knows that you cannot replace someone like Ramsey, neither can you replace Grattan.

Grattan's career is illustrious. In 1993 she became the first woman editor of a metropolitan daily in Australia when she was appointed Editor of the **The Canberra Times**. I get the feeling that management did not suit her. She was too interested in pursuing the story. There are hundreds of thousands of words in newsprint courtesy of Michelle Grattan. Her footprints around the parliament have worn the stones.

The daily five minute interview with Fran Kelly is essential morning fare. There is always a slight pause after Kelly's questions. What newsprint cannot convey is the polished, fresh, precise quality of Grattan's impromptu answers. Grattan might go on for hours but her journalistic discipline means you get synthesised answers made for the medium. Kelly sets up much of the discussion and then adeptly follows on with a series of clarifying questions that Grattan is all over.

The Kelly –Grattan daily interview is an invaluable tool for understanding our times. Collecting them and listening to them back is a unique way of catching up and of figuring out what mattered that day. The pair are so clear and so experienced, and they anticipate and complement each other so well. When you think of a word that sums up Grattan's discussion, elegant comes to mind. Often Kelly will do an interview with a controversial or outspoken politician, for example, the gravelly Senator Eric Abetz, then on comes Grattan as the honest broker. Kelly is almost asking: Should we believe Abetz? Grattan never disappoints with her sense of fairness and clarity.

I have been in a few journalists offices in the old and new parliament house. Current **Fin Review** Editor Stutchbury's office looked like someone had ransacked his room, Ramsey had neat piles on every available horizontal space including the floor, I imagined Grattan's office is incredibly neat, well ordered and in control. But I was wrong she is nearly as ramshackle as Stutchbury. But the thing is that you can find a paper from 1980 or 1990 there buried below the surface. That's the mark of her commentary. She has been on the watch for a long time. Thank God just this once we didn't address the selection criteria or follow the norms of who or who should not be working.

After over forty years in the Canberra Press Gallery, and with Grattan's level of discipline and hard work, you start to see the future. You start to see patterns. You start to anticipate what leaders will do. Its four minutes to eight and thanks to Kelly and Grattan, you walk out into the world, with the four points of the compass in clear focus. It's up to you to plot your path and your direction. What more could you ask for from professional journalists?