

LAURIE OAKES - 2007

By William Birnbauer

Laurie Oakes is a rarity in the hectic world of television news reporting. In a job dominated by attractive, young - and mostly female reporters – he is bespectacled and balding with a crooked wry smile that seems to be saying ‘I don’t believe you’. Oakes has stuck it out in Canberra for decades while around him reporters and politicians have churned in and out of the long corridors of Parliament House at a rapid pace.

But perhaps the oddest thing about the veteran reporter in an era of tightly scripted and controlled political spin is that he breaks news rather than simply covering the endless door stops and highly orchestrated press conferences like many of his colleagues.

Oakes is Australia’s foremost exponent of the big scoop, and has been for decades. A rather self-effacing and modest man, he has covered every federal election since 1966. He is both feared and respected, the late eclectic political commentator, Matt Price, wrote of Oakes in 1999.

It is fair to say no other political journalist in the country has better contacts than Laurie Oakes or a better nose for where the national political debate is heading.

He understands the relationship between political contacts and journalists better than most. “People use me and I use them. It’s the way reporting has always worked. You try and make allowances for it,” he once said. Those contacts have helped him break some of Australia’s biggest political stories.

In 1991 Oakes revealed the Kirribilli agreement – a promise by Prime Minister Bob Hawke that he would stand down in favour of Treasurer and deputy Labor leader Paul Keating after the 1990 election. Hawke reneged on the agreement, sparking an unsuccessful challenge by Keating in May 1991. Keating won the leadership in December of that year.

Oakes is one of the most leaked to reporters in the country. He is the only journalist to have unveiled a federal Budget (in 1980) before its tabling. As often happens with hard news, filing the story was a frantic affair. “I had a copy in my hand for a total of 15 minutes and garbled into a tape and read the whole budget. Later I had to transcribe my own garble, which was quite difficult,” he told Matt Price.

In 1997, Oakes used leaked documents to break the ‘travel rorts’ scandal that engulfed John Howard’s government, ending the careers of three Ministers and several other high ranking politicians and staffers.

It is often said that, above all, good journalists must be intuitive, with an ability to pull together fragments of information like pieces of a puzzle and figure out the bigger picture. Some call it rat cunning.

In 1974, Oakes heard whispers about the appointment by the Whitlam government of a new foreign ambassador. Alarm bells started to ring when his usually unfailing contacts

went coy on him. He guessed that Whitlam wanted control of the Senate and was intending to send Queensland Senator Vince Gair to Ireland, creating a vacancy which Labor might win at the coming election. Gair refused to confirm the hunch. Oakes then phoned Mrs Gair at night and congratulated her on her husband's appointment. "We're very pleased", she responded, putting the story beyond doubt.

Michelle Grattan remembers it as a spectacular news break. "It led to some checkmating by Joh Bjelke-Petersen then Queensland Premier, it also prompted the Opposition to say it would block supply ... and that caused Whitlam to call an early election. All-in-all not a bad score for one story."

Possibly Oakes's most controversial scoop was when he reported on former Democrat leader, Cheryl Kernot's, affair with Labor's Gareth Evans. Kernot had written a so-called 'tell all' book about her defection to the Labor Party, but conveniently had omitted her fling with Evans, a senior Labor figure. The question of whether the story crossed from the political to the personal was a terribly divisive one.

Oakes later said he believed he had made the right call journalistically, but added "for my personal well-being, probably not. I expected to cop some (flak), but some of it was ridiculous. I didn't mind the criticism, but a lot of it was very personal. I don't whinge about it. You make your decisions and you live with them. It made me able to judge better the effects of what I do, and probably made me a bit more conscious of what I should and shouldn't do in reporting on other people."

Oakes began his professional career on Sydney's Daily Mirror in 1964 and was one of the first journalists in Australia with a university qualification, a Bachelor of Arts degree. He started doing the midnight to dawn police rounds shift, but soon after was appointed state political reporter. He was only 21. He moved to the Herald Sun in Melbourne and hit Canberra for that newspaper in 1969.

In 1978, he started his own political journal, The Laurie Oakes Report. The following year he joined Channel 10, where he stayed for five years before moving to the Nine Network. A multi-media talent, he also wrote for The Age and other newspapers, The Bulletin magazine until it closed and has provided reports and commentaries for radio stations. He has written several books on politics including a biography on Gough Whitlam. His interviews with politicians on the axed Sunday program and now on the station's news program regularly set the week's news agenda.

Grattan says his interview style with politicians on his regular TV spot varies from week to week, from being soft to scarifying. "This can be discombobulating for the interviewee who never quite knows whether he or she will get the silky Oakes or the hair-shirt treatment."