

Michelle Gunn

Editor-in-chief, The Australian

Michelle Gunn, editor-in-chief of The Australian, began her career as a cadet journalist at The Australian and went on to become editor of the Weekend Australian for eight years, and editor of The Australian from 2020 until her recent appointment as Editor-in-Chief of the masthead. **Marlia Saunders**, Partner at Thomson Geer, chats with Michelle about Michelle's illustrious career, her new role, and what lies ahead for the national masthead.

MARLIA SAUNDERS: Michelle, thanks for speaking with me today. Late last year, you were appointed editor-in-chief of The Australian – how has your transition to the role been and what are you finding different from your role as editor?

MICHELLE GUNN: On one level, there is no job I feel better qualified to do, because I have such an intimate and extensive knowledge of the masthead, its readers and its values. Having been editor, deputy editor, chief of staff and a reporter on the paper, I know all its nooks and crannies. I also had firm ideas about what I thought needed to be done. So overall it has been a very smooth transition. But I also realised pretty quickly that you never really know the rhythms and demands of a job until you are in it. And I have found it challenging to move away from the minute-by-minute operation of the newsroom to take on the more strategic aspects of being editor-in-chief. I am loving that aspect of the job because every new position you take on should require you to acquire new skills. But it did mean that I had to confront the more controlling aspects of my personality, and trust the incredibly talented team I have around me.

MARLIA: You are the first female to be appointed in the role in the 60 years The Australian has been published – what does it mean to you, particularly in circumstances where you have worked at The Australian for most of your career?

MICHELLE: It has been remarked upon quite a bit, particularly in the past few weeks as we approached International Women's Day. I suppose I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I feel great personal and professional satisfaction in having been appointed to the role. I worked incredibly hard to get here. And I can see that it is a positive for young women in

newsrooms around the country. It is hard to aspire to be something which you cannot see.

I have worked for male editors and editors in chief for my entire career and early on was often the only woman or one of only two women in editorial news conference. I didn't feel aggrieved about that, and a number of those men have been incredible mentors to me. I have also been surrounded by incredibly talented female journalists. The media is no longer a male dominated profession, and among its reporting ranks it has not been that way for quite a long time.

The leadership team now at The Australian is full of women. Our two deputy editors, Petra Rees and Georgina Windsor, editorial directors, Edwina McCann and Claire Harvey, magazine editor, Liz Colman, managing editor Louise Bryant, Inquirer editor Jenny Campbell, travel editor Penny Hunter ... the list is long and strong.

I am pleased about that because it does have a positive impact on the culture of the newsroom. But at the end of the day, of course, I will always hire or appoint the best person for a particular job, and that is in the best interests of both men and women.

MARLIA: What are you hoping to achieve in your time as editor-in-chief?

MICHELLE: As the country's national masthead, The Australian has a unique and incredibly important role in national debate. We take that role very seriously and we employ the best journalists to inform our readers not only what is happening on a particular day but to explore the significance of what is happening, whether that be in politics, business, world affairs, sport or arts and culture.



We have been doing this for 60 years, and the critical thing here is trust. Our readers know the guiding values of our paper and trust us to help them navigate the world. They are among the most engaged and thoughtful consumers of news in the country.

My challenge is to grow that audience, particularly on our digital platforms.

MARLIA: You've worked in the media for 30 years. What changes have you seen in that time in terms of the representation of women in the media – both in the newsroom and on the pages of the newspaper?

MICHELLE: The changes have been enormous. In the early days of The Australian we had dedicated women's pages, for example. Imagine that. Underpinning that decision, was an implicit assumption that women would not be interested in the business and world pages. This was, of course, also a reflection of society as a whole. The changes achieved by the various waves of feminism have been profound. And our newsrooms have been both the amplifiers of those changes and the beneficiaries of them.

Within newsrooms, there have always been plenty of young women journalists. In the cadet intakes of 30 years ago, my memory is that there was gender balance. There were also early female editing role models such as Ita Buttrose. However it has taken a long time to see that gender balance reflected among the senior ranks of the profession, and across all corners of it.

I also think it is important to acknowledge that the hours and dedication required to reach senior leadership positions do have an impact on family, and that the impact is a matter for men and women to navigate together. In my case, my husband's preparedness to work part-time for 16 years while our children were young, was a critical part of the equation.

MARLIA: What are your perspectives on the role of lawyers in the media sector, including what you look for in your legal advisers and the services you value most?

MICHELLE: The relationship between editors and lawyers is critical because we rely so heavily on your advice. As editors we are always trying to push the boundaries in terms of what we can publish. And by that I mean that we are always seeking to give our readers the most truthful, unvarnished, and uncensored account possible. As you know, our defamation laws and other laws sometimes make this incredibly difficult.

The very best legal advisers in my experience are those that share that ambition or at least understand the way editors think. They are the

lawyers who will help you to find a way to publish that truth, rather than focus on what is not possible. I find that the best media lawyers have an intense curiosity about news and current affairs. They are frustrated journos really, but with the brain-power, skills, and knowledge of the law to keep us out of trouble.

There is nothing better as a reporter or an editor than being in the trenches on an important story with a legal team you can trust. You talk to Hedley Thomas, Paul Whittaker, Ellen Whinnett, Damon Johnston, they all have war stories in which lawyers play a starring role.

MARLIA: Why do you think it's important to celebrate International Women's Day?

MICHELLE: It's important for a number of reasons. The first relates to the importance I think of taking stock and reflecting on just how far we have come as a society in the past 50 years.

I look at my sons, who are young adults, and the way they view the world, and I see living proof of the benefits of that social change. Gender is not an issue for them, the idea that our parliaments and boardrooms should reflect the diversity of our society is as natural as breathing to them.

So IWD reminds those of us who lived it of just how far we have come, and it serves to educate young men and women about how we got here.

But even more important I think is for IWD to promote debate about the society we wish to build now and into the future. And this is, necessarily, more contested ground.

What is the impact of identity politics on the relationships between young men and women? What further reforms do we need in regard to women and superannuation? Do the extremes of the transgender movement threaten many of the hard-earned gains of feminism? Should universities lower entry standards for women to attract them to male-dominated courses such as engineering? Quotas or targets? When, if ever, will International Women's Day be seen as obsolete?

MARLIA: Michelle, from a frustrated journalist, thank you so much for sharing your insights with us!

