

# END OF STORY



**THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE OF INTEGRITY WORKING AS JOURNALISTS ACROSS THE WORLD. YET AUSTRALIAN JOURNALISTS ARE DISPARAGED AND UNDERVALUED - NOT JUST BY THE PUBLIC BUT ALSO, IT SEEMS, BY THEIR OWN MANAGEMENT.**

I WAS SURPRISED and saddened to read that Sri Lankan newspaper editor, Frederica Jansz, has been denied humanitarian asylum in Australia. Recently sacked by the new owners of Sri Lankan paper *The Sunday Leader* for refusing to stop publishing articles critical of the government, Jansz has received several death threats, including (it has been claimed) one from Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the Defence Minister of Sri Lanka and brother of the Sri Lankan President.

Nice one. In Australia, lovely safe Australia, where 'news' has degenerated into a rolling recap of who said what on Twitter about Julia Gillard's arse, nobody would take it seriously if a frontrunner said to, say, the editor of *The Age*, as Rajapaksa allegedly said on speaker phone to Jansz, "You pig that eats shit... People will kill you. People hate you. They will kill you."

Oh, we'd be 'appalled'. The incident would trend on social media. Opportunistic blogs from both sides of the political fence would be written. But not for a bee's dick of a nanosecond would the comment be presumed to be literal. Sri Lanka, on the other hand, is a whole other kettle of cray cray. The editor who preceded Jansz, Lasantha Wickrematunge, was assassinated in 2009. Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka say the number of journalists killed in Sri Lanka over the past eight years is 39.

Thirty-nine! Holy crap. Which raises the question, why did Jansz keep going? Sri Lanka isn't a big country; its population is a smidge smaller than ours. Everyone knows everyone. If you stick your neck out, the odds are you're going to get whacked. So why keep exposing corruption and criticising the powerful? Stick to the safe stuff, lady; those fashion and celebrity cooking articles don't write themselves.

The reason is simply that Jansz is a journalist, and she's doing what journalists do the world over: risking her life in pursuit of the truth. That sounds dramatic in the context of Australia - where in mortality-rate terms 'journalist' generally carries a similar risk load to 'museum curator'. But in many countries, such as China and Pakistan, being a reporter makes BASE-jumping look like knitting. The website for Reporters Without Borders keeps a running tally of how many journalists are killed worldwide each year. It clicks over like the road toll: 50 have died so far this year; another 147 are in jail.

Nobody takes risks like that unless they believe that truth matters and that what they do makes a difference. Most of the journalists I've ever met have integrity out the wazoo. Even in my old beat of arts journalism (mortality rate comparable to 'tea lady'), that passion and imperative is very much there.

Which is why it's so depressing to watch *The Age* being sucked of its soul. I've read the Harry Potter books, and reports now coming from inside the licked-clean remains of one of Australia's quality broadsheet newspapers suggest the atmosphere is on a par with Azkaban on 'wear barbed-wire jocks Friday'. The death-eaters are in the house. It's presumably the same story at sister Fairfax publication *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

At the end of September there was a send-off for the 70 (70!) editorial staff leaving *The Age*. That's pretty much everyone I ever worked with. My friend Polly, one of the 70, showed me footage on her phone of one section of the newsroom as it is now: there seemed to be 20 desks, one lone journo. It looks like the aftermath of a disaster.

Polly [not her real name] claims that one of the new editors has never worked in hands-on journalism. He told her to think of herself as cereal. "You're the cereal in the box," he said. "My job is to make the box look good, and make sure it's positioned well on the supermarket shelf so people want to buy it."

But journalists - and excuse me while I get swearsy - are not fucking cereal.

There's a motivational story, one you've probably heard before, about two stonemasons with identical jobs. They are asked what they're doing. The first, a sour-looking fellow, grimaces and says, "I'm laying bricks." The second, an industrious and happy man, proudly replies, "Why, I'm building a cathedral."

It breaks my heart to see so many people who believed they were building a cathedral being told they're just laying bricks.

I hope Frederica Jansz finds a safe haven somewhere. I also hope it's somewhere that appreciates her. Somewhere that doesn't expect her to be 'cereal'.

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