

# Malcolm Colless: a determined man of News Corp



Malcolm Colless with daughter Doone and wife Christine.

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Malcolm Colless was a rare beast: a journalist with an old-school pedigree and a head for business that swept him from the dusty corridors of Sydney's Trades Hall to senior positions in newspaper management.

As a reporter he had a nose for a story and as an executive and director of News Limited (as News Corp Australia was then known) he had a heart for the business. As a mate, raconteur and a luncheon companion, he was peerless.

Colless — who died at his Mosman home in Sydney on Tuesday night from a suspected heart attack, aged 73 — had a lifetime of overcoming obstacles, which he met with courage, determination and good grace.

At the age of two, Malcolm had to fight back from the ravages of polio, which blighted his early years and, later in life, again affected his health and limited his mobility.

Its legacy, though, was a zest for life and an immovable resolve to be a master of his craft. This transcended into a rare combination of bon vivant and relentless news hound, a skill he honed during his time as industrial roundsman for *The Australian*. It was an ability that was a dangerous mix for unwary politicians during Colless's time as Canberra correspondent for the paper.

In 1977, he scooped the press gallery in an early-morning edition through engaging a source in a solid evening of entertainment in which he was able to obtain off-the-record confirmation that the then governor-general Sir John Kerr — who had controversially sacked the Whitlam government two years earlier — would resign.

Harder than getting the story was convincing sceptical senior editors to run it, considering the extent of the entertainment involved. He ultimately won out, staking his reputation on its accuracy.

On the job in Canberra, Colless at times would go off the radar while obtaining information for a story. Former News executive Warren Beeby, who was Canberra bureau chief at the time, recalled issuing him with a pager.

“Malcolm hated it,” Beeby said. “I paged him one afternoon, but to no avail. My attention was then diverted to the office fridge that was making strange noises. When I opened the freezer, there was Malcolm's pager, vibrating in solitude against the ice.”

As a media executive, Colless felt the blowtorch to the belly, no more so than in Melbourne when he was appointed chief executive of the newly acquired Herald and Weekly Times in 1988.

Victoria was moribund under the John Cain Labor government, carrying unsustainable levels of debt and high unemployment, and with the highest youth unemployment in Australia.

In addition, any forward motion in the state — whether it was attempts to ease restrictions on shopping hours or the introduction of Sunday newspapers — was viewed with disdain, not to mention blanket opposition from the unions.

To overcome this situation required the skills of a master tactician, a diplomat and a frontline infantryman. It also took great courage and unswerving determination, which Colless brought to the table in spades.

Into this recessed economy, under Colless's stewardship, HWT launched the *Herald Sun* — a paper formed by the merger of Melbourne's *The Herald* and *The Sun News-Pictorial* — and launched not just one, but two Sunday newspapers, later to be merged into the *Sunday Herald Sun*.

Colless held a multitude of senior positions at News Corp Australia, retiring in 2007 as director of corporate development. During his 16 years in that position, he played a major role in establishing pay-TV and online platforms that are now an integral part of news media subscriptions.

Colless began his career in 1962 on the *Daily Mirror* in Sydney and later worked on *The Times* in London before returning to Australia in 1972 to work on *The Australian*.

It was during his time on the *Mirror* that Colless met Christine Kenna, a secretary to barrister Kevin Murray, who at the time was representing Geoffrey Chandler in the coronial inquest into the mysterious deaths of - Gilbert Bogle and Margaret Chandler on the banks of the Lane Cove River in 1963.

Kenna and Colless were married in 1966, although Christine jokes that at the start Malcolm may have been more interested in a name for his contact book, rather than his little black book.

He moved into management in 1982, where he worked initially as general-manager of *The Northern Daily Leader* at Tamworth, taking over from a young Matt Handbury.

Colless went on to Channel Ten in Adelaide, then spent three years in China from 1985 where he set up a bureau for *The Australian* and investigated business opportunities.

His friends from politics, media and business paid tribute to him yesterday. News Corp executive co-chairman Rupert Murdoch said: "Malcolm was a highly valued colleague and important member of our team, as well as being a great friend".

News Corp Australasia executive chairman Michael Miller said Colless was a true News man, passionate and loyal.

"He worked his way up from a cadetship on Sydney's *Daily Mirror* to become a distinguished executive and, at the time of his retirement, the longest serving director of News Limited," he said.

“What set Malcolm apart was his understanding of the importance of relationships and networking for both journalism and business success; he had the best contact book in the country.

“Malcolm literally knew everybody and I believe the respect with which he was held in Canberra and in business circles played a significant role in the development of News.”

Former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett said Malcolm was an old-time journalist who was well connected and focused.

“He got out and met people and built on relationships in the great traditions of the game,” Kennett said.

“He had a respect for his craft — a quality in rare supply these days — and was blessed with a great sense of humour.”

If Colless had one regret, it was that he never worked as an editor; he stepped over that position by going straight into management.

He should not have been concerned. His vision and flair inspired many others and has made a lasting impression on the game.

He is survived by his wife, Christine, daughter Doone and grandson Jake. Funeral details are yet to be announced.

*Malcolm Colless. Journalist, executive. Born Kings Cross, May 21, 1944. Died Mosman, Sydney, October 31, 2017.*

*Ian Moore was the founding editor of the Sunday Herald Sun under Malcolm Colless.*