I experienced the media circus called Queensland. Protocol, if it can be called that, for the media masses has radio journalists kneeling down at the front so that the TV lot can get an uninterrupted view of the politician.

A seminar earlier this year on women in the media, Jane Singleton recounted her experiences at press briefings in Queensland. Protocol, if it can be called that, for the media masses has radio journalists kneeling down at the front so that the TV lot can get an uninterrupted view of the politician.

This proves rather unfortunate for any woman journalist who, as Singleton did, finds herself kneeling in front of the bulky personage of Russ Hinze, for example. You’re a target. Sexual innuendo is only too predictable and, by all accounts, not always only innuendo. And the predominantly male media contingent is unfussed about it.

Women have yet to be taken seriously as journalists. Certainly, a few make it to the top. But none is exempt from the discrimination and harassment of a still conservative and predominantly male profession.

Singleton is undoubtedly one of Australia’s top journalists. Yet the degree of thinly-veiled disdain and outright hostility directed towards her by politicians and colleagues alike is breathtaking.

In an interview with former Queensland Premier Bjelke-Petersen, for the ABC’s Nationwide in Brisbane: she countered his usual “Don’t you worry about that” with “But I am worried” and pressed on. This style earned her Petersen’s wrath, and the Queensland cabinet was eventually banned from speaking to her. Former Queensland Liberal leader Terry White described her as a superb interviewer, but felt she’d been “mauled” by her.

Then there’s the prime ministerial plug-pulling incident. While working on ABC Sydney radio 2BL’s City Extra (she’d left Brisbane due to the difficulties mentioned), Singleton cut short an interview with PM Hawke because she felt nothing would be gained by continuing. (If only it happened more often!) Eventually she was sacked. She was also unceremoniously dumped from her next job as Sydney presenter for the ABC nightly current affairs program The 7.30 Report late last year. The 7.30 Report still has a female compere but has left current affairs behind, transmogrifying into thirty minutes of soft-centred human interest.

Singleton’s credentials are solid. She started her career as a cadet at The Age. At 22 she went to China during the Cultural Revolution, then worked in Hong Kong as sub-editor on the South China Morning Post.

She moved to Latin America and worked variously on the English-language daily The Brazil Herald (becoming editor when the former editor was picked up by Interpol), continually battling government censorship; and as correspondent for the UK Financial Times and Economist and the US network ABC. She escaped Brazil, after the government withdrew her visa, in the boot of a car — arriving in Chile two days before Allende was killed.

Back in Australia, she initially worked part-time on ABC radio in Albury, NSW, while labouring on the farm with husband David Singleton. A full-time job with the ABC in Longreach, Queensland, focussing on rural politics followed; then she moved to Brisbane eventually to become Queensland compere for Nationwide. She compered City Extra (from 1984) in Sydney until sacked after the Hawke “incident”. In January 1986 she returned to TV to compere The 7.30 Report which she left late last year.

She now has a morning talk-back/ current affairs program on commercial radio 2GB, replacing radio “personality” John Laws.

An ABC staff member who attended protest meetings after her sacking from The 7.30 Report sums up attitudes to Singleton: “The fact is she wasn’t liked by male management. Because she is uncompromising, because she doesn’t have that cutey, coy approach to the men she interviews, she put a lot of people offside.”

On every occasion ABC listeners and viewers made their support for Singleton known to management — something management chose to conceal. The media lapped up the controversy. But very few articles looked at her as a journalist. Rather, they focussed on her image for womanhood.

In 1984 when she started on City Extra, a headline declared her a “shapely ‘Miss Clark Kent’.” In the Sydney Telegraph she was described as “brittle-voiced”, a “dark and alluring, tough-minded interviewer”. She is also, apparently, “less tough, more womanly, more wifely” than her TV persona, according to another journalist. “Her personality has a charge in it that is certainly sexual, but not seductive, her conversation intimate, but not imperious or cheap”.

Radio 2GB’s promo for Singleton’s new program doesn’t disappoint either. The camera starts at floor level, following a shapely pair of stockinged legs and feet (presumably Singleton’s) in a shapely pair of shoes, down a corridor. The voice-over assures us that Singleton will be as hard-hitting and uncompromising as ever. The imagery assures us that none of this will be at the expense of the “feminine” qualities.

Jane Inglis