

-We can't pull the wool over Parky's eyes-



Michael Parkinson . . . 'Australians are not very demonstrative' — Picture: ADRIAN BROOKS

By BERWYN LEWIS

MICHAEL Parkinson is looking a little peaked — it is 9.30am, the media are baying for interviews and he has barely finished his breakfast. What is more, he is choking on it.

"Waiter, water!"

The waiters are unaware that a toast crumb has lodged in the throat of an international media star or that he has barely had time to start his holiday in his "second home", Sydney.

Parkinson's holiday just happens to coincide with being invited to host the Bicentennial Wool Collection, an international fashion extravaganza at the Sydney Opera House on January 31.

If he chokes, who will do the commentary in front of the Prince and Princess of Wales, the international designers, the six Australian designers and the millions of viewers around the world? An Australian?

"I was delighted to be invited. It's only every 200 years. I won't be asked again," he says. "It's not a fashion show . . . it's a historical event."

"Normally I wouldn't touch a fashion show with a barge pole . . . I'd rather do something useful, but people take it seriously. I'll have the experts at my elbow. I'll ask what colour is that? Who is this Kenco? A coffee house?"

Parkinson is choking, but joking. He means Kenzo, the French couturier.

He admits that his wife of 27 years, Mary, "loves fashion".

"She has bought herself a wonderful Zandra Rhodes dress for the big night. It's sort of brown . . . but then I'm colour-blind," Parkinson says.

Rhodes is not in the collection — "I don't think she works in wool."

Colour-blind Parkinson is choking again, a drop of sweat trickling down the silvered temple of that boyish face.

"I'll tell you a story . . . (choke) . . . (former Australian test cricketer) Jack Fingleton, the third time he was on the show . . . (choke) . . . said to me, 'did you ever have anyone croak on your show?' It's never happened until now".

Paradox

Oh well, he's had a good innings after all — 29 years "on the telly".

Parkinson is no longer choking. He wants to get serious.

The Bicentennial celebrations, he says, are "more low-key" than he expected. But then "Australians are not very demonstrative people".

"They come from a rather stoic pedigree," he says.

Parkinson has an astounding grasp of the pride of our Bicentenary — the multicultural melting pot.

"(Sydney's) Circular Quay looks very

pretty now, but that awful railway line above the ground . . . it would be a marvellous Bicentennial project to put it underground," he says.

"They have this Aboriginal embassy up in Macquarie St. I saw a picture of some Japanese tourists photographing it."

"It is a wonderful paradox. The people who once owned the land being photographed by the people who now own it. Huge chunks of Australia are becoming Japanese golf courses."

"There's a resentment by some Australians about the Aborigines wanting back what they once had, or part of it, yet there seems no such resentment for giving away or selling land to the Japanese."

An acute observer, he is anxious to give credit where it is due.

"The advances in 200 years are remarkable. Look at the First Fleet — the height of technology just a few generations ago."

He flew here in just 20 hours. If it took eight months to get here, would he have graced our shores?

"I'm here to watch cricket and fulfil my lifelong ambition never to be cold again . . . it wouldn't bother me if I never went on telly again. Once you've done your own show, there's really nowhere else to go."