

# THE ART OF SPEECHWRITING

## Introduction

Thank you, Joyce, for your kind introduction. I think I should begin by correcting a possible misimpression. My talk is titled the art of speech-writing. And, because speech writers write for speech givers, that is, people in public office or in senior business positions, it's possible that some of you have the idea that the speech-writer is a well-connected and well-respected professional. A person on the inside of important events. And maybe even an artist.

But that impression would be wrong. I regret to advise: the speech-writer is a lonely and tragic figure. Let me tell you why.

## The speech-writer

First of all we speech-writers are associated with a task many people fear more than death: the giving of speeches. I have seen people -- even in very senior roles, with years of public experience -- get extremely nervous about a forthcoming public presentation. This is especially true for people who are stepping up into a CEO level job for the first time. A very tough Australian business leader was giving his first major CEO speech at a Sydney business lunch. There was a barrage of TV cameras set up at the back of the room, and journalists sprinkled throughout. He told me afterwards that he became so nervous he had to get up, go outside and write across the top of each page of the speech: "RELAX, THIS IS NOT IMPORTANT."

That's how nervous he felt.

Another client of mine is a leader in a major public company. She's successful, able and calm. But she still bought a new suit to boost her confidence before a major speech.

Then there's the public reaction to speech-writers. When I tell people what I do, there are several responses, all of them bad. I get: "What, you mean we shareholders pay those guys all that money and they don't even write their own words?". Or it might be: "Are you telling me it's really you running the company?" Or even: "So he doesn't really mean any of those nice things he says?".

The facial expressions accompanying such remarks suggest that I am at best a corporate parasite, at worst a manipulative puppeteer....a kind of wizard of oz cranking out the words mouthed by the big corporate machine. This, as you can imagine, is not encouraging.

There's another reason why speech-writing is a lonely and tragic business. No-one else wants to do it. I got into speech-writing purely because I was one of the few people who liked it. I was in the Department of Foreign Affairs as a diplomat for ten years, and part of that time I transferred over to the foreign affairs area of the Prime Minister's department. Bureaucrats often provide the first drafts of speeches for ministers and the prime minister, for occasions such as, say, a dinner in honour of the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea.

Then I spent several years writing speeches for the CEO and Chairman of Austrade, and the Minister for Trade. Eventually I was invited to work for Kim Beazley, who was then Finance Minister. By that time, I was thoroughly burned out as a writer, and I told the chief of staff that I didn't want to spend all my time writing speeches. So he just doubled my workload - I did advisory work AND wrote most of the speeches as well. But it was a magnificent experience, because Kim became Deputy Prime Minister, and I had the opportunity to write speeches for him on topics as diverse as multicultural Australia, the history of the labor party and defence issues. It was at that time, I think, that I really learnt how to write and how to enjoy it.

In the end I married that bossy chief of staff and we now have a business, providing speeches to a number of corporate clients. My husband tends to provide the big picture and editorial role and I do the writing.

## The process of speechwriting

I do want to say a very few words about the *art* of speech writing, but first I want to talk about the *process* of speech writing -- about the basic process by which speeches get written.

This subject interests me a great deal, which is why I like to read the memoirs of former speech-writers to US Presidents. Some of you may know the TV series *West Wing*. I am a big fan, particularly because former presidential speechwriters like Peggy Noonan are

advisers on the show. It often has funny situations concerning speech writing.

From my observation, my reading and from my experience all I can say is that there is no *one* way, or even no *best* way, of writing speeches— the process varies dramatically, depending on the style and needs of each client.

Take Peggy Noonan's relationship with President Reagan. Noonan was the best of Ronald Reagan's speechwriters, but she didn't even meet the President until she had been writing for him for months. One of the chapters in her speechwriting memoir is titled: *I first saw him as a foot*. Like a lot of actors, Reagan didn't think much of writers. He thought it was all in the delivery.

But when Michael Waldeman worked for President Clinton, things were very different. He was part of Clinton's inner circle. It was, however, an incredibly chaotic environment. When President Clinton was preparing his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention in 1996, the speech was being rewritten right up until the moment of delivery. It was still being amended by Waldeman as he sat next to the President in the black limousine carrying him to the convention. At one point Clinton got distracted and wanted to wave to the crowds lining the streets. Hillary stopped him: "You work, I'll wave," she said. As the TV cameras panned the motorcade, the network anchor caught sight of a man furiously typing into his laptop computer. To the American people the anchor said: "Let this be a lesson for all the

young people watching...Don't leave your homework to the last minute”.

I have had similarly wide swings of experience with the speech-writing process. I have written speeches for people in a very orderly fashion. It's worked like this. They brief me on what they want to say. I read their previous speeches on the topic, to get a feel for their style. Sometimes they give me an old video of themselves speaking. They send me specific content or numbers or examples to fill out the argument. I draft the speech, they amend it, they deliver it. Easy.

But more often, it's not like that. Sometimes senior people are in the middle of complex business negotiations – so that the speech is constantly being overtaken by events. Finalising the speech takes place in a great flurry right up until the last minute. Only a few weeks ago I faxed the final version of a speech to a very senior business leader in Perth as she was running out the door to the dinner...I won't tell you about the hotel fax machine that broke down at the crucial moment...Other times, the person giving the speech is just too busy to focus on it until the last minute, or the topic gets changed suddenly, or a media report changes the political environment– all these things invariably lead to panic and change.

Sometimes, of course, the client can actually behave impossibly. There's a famous story about Defence Minister Gordon Scholes. His staff gave him a speech draft a week or so in advance. He delayed looking at it until two days before delivery. Out of his office came the

speech, with only these words written across it: “This is not what I want”.

Usually the process improves as the client and the speech-writer get to know and trust each other. The first few speeches I do for someone normally requires a lot of input from them. I need to know how and why they think, what they care about, how they like to talk, what they want to achieve. But once I know those things, it's relatively easy for me to devise good first drafts. That reduces the pain a lot.

When I worked for Kim Beazley it was like that – it was pretty easy because I had all his former speeches and media remarks to refer to and, of course, I was working with his long time staffers . And after a few months, I got to know him and what his views were, broadly speaking, on most topics. But he would nearly always improve a draft considerably.

And it's important to emphasise this: no matter how much the speech-writer contributes to a speech: it belongs to the person who delivers it. Whether it's John Howard or Paul Keating or Kim Beazley or the head of a large corporation – they get the credit, they take the blame. The speech belongs to the giver. And, if you'll forgive me for my biased position, it's not a cop-out for people to use speech-writers, it's usually a sensible allocation of time and energy. A speech-writer's task is to help their busy client communicate their messages in the most effective way.

Of course, this lack of ownership can sometimes be painful for the person who puts so much care into drafting the speech. Clinton's speech-writer Waldeman recorded that when Clinton delivered his first State of the Union Address after his re-election, Waldeman and a colleague slaved over every word. When it was well received, they were ecstatic. Afterwards, at the traditional party, President Clinton came up to them and draped an arm around each, introducing them to a old friend. "This is Jonathon and this is Michael" said the President. The two speech-writers swelled with pride. Then the President added: "They're the guys who typed my speech."

You see what I mean about the lonely and tragic figure of the speech-writer...

## **The art of speechwriting**

Now this talk is called the art of speech-writing so I guess it's time to turn to the topic of art. In Australia, of course, we resist the idea of high blown rhetoric. For us there is something deeply suspicious about a man or woman trying to move and persuade us with words. Our heroes tend to be taciturn types like Don Bradman. The less he said, the more people loved him. Prime Minister John Howard likes people to know that he doesn't use a speech-writer or at least not much – it reinforces the image of him as a plain-spoken, unadorned man.

Speeches don't stand alone. They exist in a continuum of communications from a leader – actions or words which communicate to all the stakeholders exactly what the CEO is all about. Leaders communicate in all kinds of ways. They issue internal memos, or news releases, or place messages in the staff newsletter. They announce staffing and resource decisions – a takeover, a factory closure, some outsourcing. They release performance figures. They choose to decline some social functions but appear at others – whether it's flashy dinners or staff BBQs or charity functions. Each of these decisions and actions tells us something about this leader – what their values are, what is important to them, what priorities they are pursuing. So speeches are only one of the vehicles of leadership.

But they are an important vehicle, because they are a way for leaders to tell us stories. Speeches provide a sustained opportunity for our leaders to tell us who we are, where we have come from, and more importantly still, where we are going. When people talk about a vacuum of leadership in Australia, I think they are saying – where are the stories of us, and what we are about? How will we know where are we going as a country unless our leaders tell us?

Within that continuum, each speech must fulfil a particular role. And here's where we get to the art of a speech. For my money, nothing replaces logic. It's the logic which makes a great speech – the power of the argument. Whether it's Abraham Lincoln's Gettysberg address, or John F Kennedy's inaugural address or Nelson

Mandela's courtroom speech, or Martin Luther King's I have a dream speech or Winston Churchill's WW2 speeches – in all these speeches the language was marvellous, but it was the power of the logic which made them great.

Graham Freudenberg wrote in *A Certain Grandeur* that as far as Gough Whitlam was concerned, "His standing instruction and his standard complaint to people preparing speech material for him is : "More matter and less art." <sup>1</sup> In other words, a speech must never try artificially to generate emotion. It must have genuine weight and substance.

We live in an era of sound bites, and it's true that sometimes a key phrase will resonate with us. Ben Chifley talked about "the light on the hill". Harold Holt said we would go "all the way with LBJ". Gough Whitlam unforgettably rebuked the Victorian labour party when he said "Certainly the impotent are pure". But each of these memorable phrases arose naturally, inevitably, out of the argument the leader was proposing. They weren't phony or bogus. {By the way, as Gough was giving that speech, he was heckled, abused and booed. By his own party. Afterwards he turned to one of his staff members and said calmly; "Comrade, I think we may have ruffled some feathers." }

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Freudenberg. *A Certain Grandeur*, p67 1977 Macmillan Company of South Australia.

Nothing drives me crazy more than marketing people or glib spin doctor types who want to turn speeches into collections of sound bites.

One marketing executive wanted me to sprinkle the phrase term “it’s amazing” throughout the CEOs speeches. She said that this would help reinforce the messages of a forthcoming advertising campaign. As you can imagine I strongly resisted attempts to have the CEO deliver advertising slogans.

### The voice of the writer

One thing I am often asked is how I find it possible to write in the voice of another person. That question comes not just from interested friends and acquaintances, but from new clients as well. A lot of people arrive in senior positions having written their speeches themselves. Obviously this habit has worked well for them; they’ve been very successful. It’s very hard for them to let go and allow someone else to draft speeches for them – to read the words other people have written. That’s entirely understandable.

Of course, I try to include the language and phrases the speaker likes to use – to adapt to their way of communicating. But I do have a distinct style. It’s recognisable to me, if to no-one else. And I don’t think any writer can efface their own style or mannerisms completely. But my overriding objective is to write in a way that’s simple and logical. My husband Syd says we try to communicate in *the voice of*

*reason.* I guess it doesn't sound very sexy but that's the truth. We write speeches for people who have serious things to say, and need to present their points in a cogent, clear and persuasive manner. So from that point of view it's less a matter of trying to capture a style, than an attempt to capture a meaning and convey a message.

And I often find that speech makers lose their self-consciousness about delivering someone else's words when they are passionately committed to what they have to say. The passion and the logic take over.

One other point on the speechwriter's voice: sometimes the speech writer finds his dream speech giver. Graham Freudenberg once wrote for Arthur Calwell, but no one remembers that period. Instead, everyone remembers his great collaboration with Gough Whitlam. Don Watson and Paul Keating were also a match made in speechwriter's heaven – two emotional types with a taste for spicy phrases. Sometimes magic happens in partnership.

## Conclusion

I will now conclude for questions, but I want to make just one more observation. Most of the time speeches don't make a scrap of difference. They announce this, or analyse that, or open the other. That's when the speech writer is, well, not tragic and lonely of course, but just another person doing their job.

But sometimes speeches really do make a difference. A great speech reflects the human voice and mind working at the highest level – it can make hearts sing and minds tick over and aspirations suddenly climb higher. Speeches don't change the world very often, but sometimes they do. And that's when they become, not just works of art, but also agents of history. And it's that opportunity I think, and that possibility, that inspires speech writers and keeps them going.

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