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The Speechwriter's Way With Words

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They stand in the shadows and watch. They are the invisible poets, the hidden prophets. From their minds to other's mouths, they listen as their words echo through the auditorium. Instilling rage, stirring loyalty and capturing the sweetness of success, they craft the lyrics that will be sung. They knit the atmosphere and occasion among the purpose and reflection. They question, they encourage, they apologise, they plead. Yet they do so offstage. For them life in the spotlight is a foreign fantasy, a role they will never perform. However, they live their life on the cusp, behind the curtains. They are the political wordsmiths, the enduring speechwriters.

We have all heard the slogans; the visionary hope of the light on the hill, the false prediction of 'no Australian child living in poverty by 1990' and the question of the unknown soldier's sacred identity, and long into the pages of history they have been signed by the Chifleys, the Hawkes, the Keatings.

For, perhaps it is a case of naivety, or more sadly, gullibility, that whenever a politician stands forward to deliver a stirring set speech, under the magic of their wand, some believe that every crafted sentence, every single word, every evoking syllable came entirely from their own thought. In the clever disguise of political charm we may fail to recognise the ever-present hand of the speechwriter. A profession that is as intriguing as it is respectively hidden. The backroom boy, the press secretary, the ghost-writer draped under a veil of secrecy.

There is a story that is told by Graham Freudenberg, long-time personal assistant and speechwriter for Gough Whitlam, about the famous 1972 'It's Time' speech delivered at the Blacktown Civic Centre. Walking on to deliver the speech Gough touched the author lightly on the shoulder. It was a curious ritual that had developed between them before major speeches on which they had collaborated, an act not of superstition but of recognition of their collaboration, and then Whitlam said, 'It's been a long road, comrade, but we're here'.[1] Such a gesture sums up the remarkable relationship between the Minister and his apprentice. They are an obvious team, and yet so obviously the Minister is the one who receives the public praise or the cutting condemnation. With ownership residing within the speaker, the genius in the shadows remains simply that.

The responsibilities of speechwriters mean that they contribute to the exercising of parliamentary power, have the ability to make or break a campaign and shape national opinion, without any public acknowledgement, which seemingly defies the nature of creative copyright ownership. They are the physical, political embodiment of Menzies's 'forgotten people'.

Like the everyday men and women of Australia, they live normal, anonymous lives. Doing the dishes and the killer line for tomorrow's Question Time comes into their head. Walking the dog and the mere sight of a continuous path can lead to the perfect campaign slogan. Driving home and the dramatic conclusion for the maiden speech stares at them in lights. These authors think, plan and craft the extraordinary, while living out the simple and ordinary; the dishes, the dog, the drive home.

However, the questions of authorship and ownership arise; where in the speechmaker and speechwriter relationship does the boundaries of loyalty lie and who takes the credit for the creation? Perhaps this is summed up most appropriately by John F. Kennedy's speechwriter Ted Sorrenson, who when asked who was responsible, the President or his writer, for the classic 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country', Sorensen smiled and simply said, 'Ask not'.

Regardless, the political speech is by its very nature a display of personality. It seeks to sell, or return serve; promote your government's stance or refute the opposition. For politicians it holds an indispensable presence in public life, delivering regular speeches is a necessary and stated skill in their job description. And while life wasn't meant to be easy, when one may have to deliver up to ten a day, the practicality of speechwriters is logical.

Nevertheless, in ancient times such writers were seen, and perhaps never have lost the perception, of being morally dubious folks. Plato and the cynics criticised them for being deceivers and perverters of the truth. Something to do with the fact that they held the power to sway emotions, make lies sound decidedly truthful and produce the blunt words thatcould not come back to wound their superior.

Therefore the speechwriter's existence reveals a Barthes' paradox; that like an author, they are the origin, the creator, the writer, severed from the reader; the destination, the speaker, the known politician. Such a disconnection, between the invisible ghost-writer and the destination of the politician's narration, as his famous essay described 'occurs, [when] the voice loses its origin, and the author enters into his own death'.[2]

Essentially the unveiling of the ghost-writing profession seeks to encourage voters to take notice the next time they witness a parliamentarian stand to command the audience with their drafted words; to realise that the death of the speechwriter in the shadows is the moment of the birth of the politician in the spotlight. For it is these 'back-room practitioners', at the end of the day, who have the way with words.

Endnotes

1 Freudenbrg, G. (2005). *A figure of speech; A political memoir.* Brisbane, Australia: John Wiley & Sons.

2 Roland Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' ,

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