

Power of Words

A documentary throws fresh light on Labor scribe Graham Freudenberg's passions and skills as a speechwriter.

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In Ruth Cullen's compelling new documentary, The Scribe, we are treated to a masterclass on the importance of language, the power of words and the craft of speechwriting by the doyen of Australian political speechwriters. The wordsmith moves from the politics backroom to the front of the camera to explain his life's work.

Cullen – an accomplished writer, director and producer – takes us on a journey that delves into Freudenberg's professional life as a journalist, press secretary, speechwriter and author who struck up unique partnerships with some of the giants of Australian politics.

"Words are central to my life," Freudenberg says in the film. Among his formative influences while growing up during the pre-war years in Brisbane were Benjamin Disraeli, Abraham Lincoln, Edmund Burke and William Shakespeare. He read widely and admired the spoken word: "I fell in love with the English language."

The film was shot mostly at Freudenberg's home on Bribie Island in Queensland in 2015 and last year. Seeing him seated at his desk, pen in hand, surrounded by books, portraits and busts of great political figures, provides an intimacy as you are drawn into his private realm to hear him talk about his continuing passion: the art of speech. Freudenberg explains that his tool is a pen rather than a typewriter or computer, as he has not been able to make the connection between the "mind and the machine".



Graham Freudenberg with, from left, Barrie Unsworth, Neville Wran, Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, Bob Carr and Paul Keating.

The key to an effective speech, Freudenberg argues, is that it must have a persuasive argument at its core rather than simply be a series of one-liners stitched together. There must also be a deep respect and appreciation for the audience. He did not always enjoy the writing process. "I approach every speech with a sense of dread – that this is the speech I cannot do," he says.

He stresses that the person for whom the speech is written owns the speech. But the speeches have been so good, and Freudenberg so self-effacing, that Whitlam, Hawke, Wran and Carr have never been reluctant to ascribe credit. Yet he rarely saw any of his speeches delivered in person because he did not want to be spotted by journalists, which would detract from the delivery of the speech.

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