

POWER OF WORDS



Graham Freudenberg at his desk, armed with a pen, in a scene from Ruth Cullen's *The Scribe*

A documentary throws fresh light on Graham Freudenberg's passions and skills as a speechwriter for the Labor side of politics, writes Troy Bramston

Graham Freudenberg has always been nocturnal. He would usually arrive at the prime minister's office in the afternoon and not begin writing speeches for Gough Whitlam until after dinner. It would be a long and slow process, fuelled by beer and tobacco, and he rarely finished before 3am. Freudenberg would write in longhand and dictate to secretaries. As he paced the room, the output sometimes slowed to just three words a minute as his mind searched for the perfect formulation. An average speech would require six cans of beer but a great speech would demand 15.

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.

In a career spanning almost 50 years in a profession that he essentially pioneered in Australia, Freudenberg, 84, has written speeches principally for Arthur Calwell, Whitlam, Bob Hawke, Neville Wran, Barrie Unsworth and Bob Carr. And he has been called on by countless other prime ministers, premiers and party leaders to contribute to their speeches too.

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".

Alongside still photos, archival footage and re-enactments — actors portraying Lincoln at Gettysburg or Hamlet on the stage — our subject reads several of the speeches he has written and tells us how they came about.

As an 11-year-old, Freudenberg was captivated by Winston Churchill's speech claiming victory in World War II. He was so moved by the Churchillian rhetoric over the radio — "This is not victory of a party or of any class. It's a victory of the great British nation as a whole"

— that the young Freudenberg was moved to write his first speech.

strength to the politicians

to fix up the problems

and put everything right

Two decades later, Freudenberg was tasked with writing what remains one of the finest speeches delivered by an Australian politician: Calwell's response to the announcement by Robert Menzies that Australia would send combat troops to Vietnam in 1965.

In a systematic examination of the conflict, argued logically with compassion and principle, Calwell opposed the deployment and made several startlingly accurate predictions. He said the US-led intervention would fail to meet its objectives and they would become "interminably bogged down in the awful morass of this war" before being defeated or deciding to withdraw.

When the drums beat and the trumpets

sound, the voice of reason and right can be

heard in the land only with difficulty.

But if we are to have the courage of our

convictions, then we must do our best to

make that voice heard. I offer you the

probability that you will be traduced,

that your motives will be misrepresented,

that your patriotism will be impugned, that

your courage will be called into question.

But I also offer you the sure and certain

knowledge that we will be vindicated; that

generations to come will record with

gratitude that when a reckless government

wilfully endangered the security of this

nation, the voice of the Australian Labor

Party was heard, strong and clear, on the

side of sanity and in the cause of humanity,

and in the interests of Australia's security.

Freudenberg was 31 when he wrote that speech. He told me recently that of the 1000-plus speeches he has written, this is the one he is most proud of. "It was a great issue and a great purpose," he said.

"It was not just to analyse the war and to explain Labor's attitude to the war, but to keep the party together. The essential dilemma was how to denounce the war without denouncing the US. Arthur accepted it very gratefully and delivered it very well."

Freudenberg worked as a newspaper and television journalist before joining Calwell as his press secretary in 1961. Following Disraeli, he went into journalism thinking it would be a stepping stone to politics. "I regard myself as a politician," he says in the film. Conceding that he never really enjoyed dealing with the press, the role happily developed into speechwriting. He is responsible for writing some of the most consequential speeches in Australian political history. He was "never alone" when writing speeches because he had the "companions in thought" for whom he was writing and "a host of orators" from history who charged his mind and provided a "cultural companionship". 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. The closest partnership Freudenberg formed was with Whitlam, whom he called "leader" after joining his staff as opposition leader in 1967. One of their first collaborations was a stinging rebuke to Labor's dysfunctional Victorian branch, which had stalled the party's electoral progress. The speech urged them to modernise:

We construct a philosophy of failure which finds in defeat a form of justification and a proof of the purity of our principles. Certainly, the impotent are pure. The party was not conceived in failure, brought forth in failure or consecrated in failure. Let us have none of this nonsense that defeat is in some way more moral than victory.

But it was Whitlam's policy speech for the 1972 election that many regard as the high point of his collaboration with Freudenberg. "The policy speech is a unique Australian institution," he says in the film. "A ritual, a contract, a mixture of high endeavour and porkbarrelling." Before Whitlam gave his night-time address at the Blacktown Civic Centre, beamed live to homes via television, he touched Freudenberg on the shoulder and said: "Comrade, it's been a long road, but I think we're there."

The decision we will make for our country on the second of December is a choice between the past and the future, between the habits and fears of the past, and the demands and opportunities of the future. There are moments in history when the whole fate and future of nations can be decided by a single decision. For Australia, this is such a time. It's time for a new team, a new program, a new drive for equality of opportunities: it's time to create new opportunities for Australians, time for a new vision of what we can achieve in this generation for our nation and the region in which we live. It's time for a new government — a Labor government.

That speech helped catapult Labor to power after 23 years in the political wilderness. Cullen interviews fellow Whitlam-era staffers Carol Summerhayes, who often took Freudenberg's early-morning dictation, and press secretary Eric Walsh. They describe what it was like working with "Freudy". Cullen is no stranger to political office; her father, Peter Cullen, worked for Labor senator and powerbroker Pat Kennelly, as well as for Whitlam in opposition. Freudenberg describes the decade he worked for Wran, the most brilliant politician of his time, as "years of tremendous fun" that affirmed his belief in "the excitement of politics" after the Whitlam government had "ended in tears". Going from Calwell to Whitlam to Wran, and then on to Hawke, Unsworth and Carr, was, he insists, the result of "friends and flukes". But as Hawke makes clear in the film, there is nobody else he wanted to craft his speeches. "When the drafts came up, you almost immediately had the feeling that it was you," he says. This shows Freudenberg's versatility — an ability to sync his style with the speaker. He wrote Hawke's twin speeches marking the 75th anniversary of Gallipoli, delivered on that most hallowed ground in 1990.

Because of the courage with which they fought, because of their devotion to duty and their comradeship, because of their ingenuity, their good humour and their endurance, because these hills rang with their voices and ran with their blood, this place Gallipoli is, in one sense, part of Australia ... As the dawn emerges from the blackness of night, let us hope that the nations of the earth are emerging from the selfdestructive practices of enmity and will build, in sunlight, a world of peace.

Freudenberg laments the loss of the genuine public meeting, where audiences were not vetted and politicians parried interjections, and greatness often came through the ability to deliver a speech that persuaded a hostile audience. He also worries that with attention spans increasingly limited, speeches are no longer such a central part of politics. It is no wonder that recent prime ministers and opposition leaders have rarely delivered a great one. The Scribe serves a purpose beyond illuminating the art of speech. Freudenberg explains the importance of parliamentary democracy and the value of the party system, and defends the "majestic" task of "the getting of votes" at election time. The film offers an antidote to the prevailing cynicism throughout the world about government.

"I thought politics was an honourable profession," Cullen told me. "I am dismayed by how negatively people view politicians given the hard work that goes into it. It is at our own peril if we don't participate in politics. Democracy is very precious. I want to give politics a good name and I think that people like Graham, with his intellect and integrity, do that."

Freudenberg, knowing what it is like to be on the highest mountain and in the deepest valley in politics, has never lost an essential faith in politicians or the capacity of the political process to advance a nation and its people. "If parliamentary democracy is to survive then we must respect the men and women who attempt to keep the show running," he says.

Cullen has made an absorbing documentary set against a jazz-infused soundtrack that pulls back the curtain on the political process and elevates one of its most significant backroom figures and virtuoso craftsmen.

The Scribe restores a degree of faith in government while capturing politics at its most thrilling and dispiriting.

"Anyone who thinks they've got the formula for how politics works doesn't know politics," Freudenberg says. "It's the unpredictability of it that makes it exciting and sometimes glorious. More often, of course, pretty awful. That's its fascination — its fatal fascination."

The Scribe will premiere at the Canberra Writers Festival on August 26 and screen at the Antenna

Documentary Festival in Sydney in October.

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