A WAY WITH WORDS – THE SPIN DOCTORS BEHIND THE SPEECHES

There's one job in POLITICS *where youth and talent are more valuable than experience, loyal allies or even the right surname. But what is life like for the* 20-SOMETHINGS *whose way with words gets them* PRIVILEGED *access to the corridors of* POWER*? And why do some* SPEECHWRITERS *rise fast and far, while others burn out, or just fade away? Alumni of Westminster and Washington share briefing notes with* EDWIN SMITH.

Sport and show business: there was a time when these were the only fields in which people in their 20s routinely made it to the pinnacle, and got a taste of the glamour, power and pressure that come with life in that rarefied atmosphere.

But perhaps another profession should, by now, have been added to the list – that of the political speechwriter.

"Speechwriting is probably the weirdest job in the world," says Simon Lancaster, who began working under the then Labour cabinet minister Alan Johnson at the age of 25 and went on to write speeches for Tony Blair during his premiership. "It's a bit like being an intellectual transvestite. You have to put yourself inside someone else's shoes, describe the world as they see it, feel what they feel and tell their story. So it's like living in someone else's skin – that's what makes a good speechwriter.

"But also, great speeches are like fantasy – they can be slightly emotionally immature. Someone with a more rational mind wouldn't have written the 'Yes We Can' speech [the speech that did so much to secure the Democratic presidential nomination for Barack Obama in 2008]. They'd have said: 'You know what? The truth is that America can't always do what it wants.' So you do need to be a bit of a dreamer, and I think that's why young people might be so great at it, because they're a bit more wide-eyed."

Adam Frankel, who joined the speechwriting team of Barack Obama in 2007 aged 27, agrees. "It's almost clichéd," he says. "But there is some truth to that. If you want to have soaring rhetoric, you're more likely to find that with younger, more idealistic speechwriters than with older writers who have worked on a whole bunch of campaigns, been in and out of government and really seen the sausage-making."

Frankel says that speechwriters, even at a tender age, have the ability to emphasise certain elements of policy, to decide what to talk about and, crucially, what not to talk about. But he admits that it's not a role that comes with the power to influence government policy in a substantive way. JFK's main speechwriter, the late Ted Sorenson, was also his chief policy advisor, but the mores of that era have given way to a more specialised way of working, where every member of a senior politician's team has a tightly defined brief.

Although it might make good television, Lancaster reckons that the impression given by beltway dramas such as The West Wing and Yes Minister – "that the speechwriter is like a puppeteer" – is a myth. "And good speechwriters know that it's a myth. What they're doing is writing the speech that their boss would have written themselves if only they'd had time to do it. Basically, you're an efficiency saving."

> *"SPEECHWRITING IS PROBABLY THE WEIRDEST JOB IN THE WORLD"*

But even if real-life speechwriters don't quite wield the power of their on-screen incarnations, it's easy to see how the job is considered to be an enviable one. Who else gets to see tomorrow's history unfold from a front-row seat, or count themselves as a trusted lieutenant to one of the most powerful and influential people on the planet – all just a few short years after graduating from university?


President Barack Obama & Jon Favreau


President Barack Obama with Adam Frankel & David Axelrod

I ask Frankel about the moment in 2009, when Obama called him from the staff section of Air Force One (he would just use his surname, 'Frankel') and summoned him to the conference room. As the plane prepared to touch down in Chicago, the pair of them worked with former budget director Peter Orszag and healthcare specialist Nancy-Ann DeParle to make last-minute alterations to a healthcare speech that the President was to give shortly after setting foot on the tarmac. With comments and edits being fired back and forth across the room, Frankel tapped the changes into his own laptop and just managed to send off the final draft to the teleprompter before the entourage reached the airport and transferred to helicopters for the short final leg of the journey.

How does he look back on moments like that now, having left the White House in 2011? Do they seem real? "I remember that very well," he says, with a wry note in his voice. "You don't really have time [to take stock of the job]. But I tried to make time.

"Even when I didn't have a good reason to, I would leave the White House by walking along the colonnade [the covered walkway that runs along the outside of the White House]. I could have gone out via the street, but by walking through the colonnade, you're walking past that famous photo of JFK and RFK [Bobby Kennedy] with JK [Jackie Kennedy] and you're walking down a ramp that was installed by FDR so he could get up in his wheelchair. The colonnade itself was built by Jefferson; you're walking past a magnolia tree that was planted by Andrew Jackson. You're just surrounded by history at every step and that was a nightly reminder of what an incredible place it is to work – I tried to remember that."

When I speak to Frankel's former colleague Jon Favreau, he picks out the day of Obama's victory speech and a phone call he had with Ann Nixon Cooper, a 106-year-old African American lady who he and the soon-to-be President had met as she was queuing up to vote in Georgia. Favreau wanted to let Cooper know that she would be getting a mention in the President's victory speech – significant not least because she had lived through times when her race meant that she wasn't even allowed to vote. Now, there was going to be a black President. "She asked me: 'Will this be on television?

What channel?' I said: 'Every channel!' She started crying and I did too. That, to me, crystalised what we had done and what this was really about."

Having impressed everyone on his path from a scholarship at the private Jesuit College of the Holy Cross to an internship on John Kerry's ultimately unsuccessful presidential bid ('This Favreau kid is really incredible,' said one staffer), Favreau was brought on board by Barack Obama in 2005 when he was just 25 years old. He was anointed as the White House director of speechwriting when his boss took office in 2009, and later moved Obama's chief campaign advisor David Axelrod to say: "Barack trusts him... and Barack doesn't trust too many folks with that – the notion of surrendering that much authority over his own words." It was Favreau who was credited with coming up with those three words that are already part of history: 'Yes We Can'.

President Barack Obama & Adam Frankel

President Barack Obama & David Axelrod

> *"IT WAS FAVREAU WHO WAS CREDITED WITH THOSE THREE WORDS: 'YES WE CAN'"*

But he has also done more than anyone to glamorise the role of the speechwriter, taking that combination of youth, drive and informality – so prevalent on America's West Coast and the multibillion-dollar companies of Silicon Valley – and bringing it a little further eastwards, to the more traditional surroundings of the Capitol.

Favreau garnered a reputation for crafting presidential addresses not from the thick-carpeted comfort of the White House, but instead decamping to a branch of Starbucks in Washington DC and hammering away on his laptop for hours at a time. His appearances in various magazines' power lists, from *Time's* '100 Most Influential People in the World,' to *GQ's* 'Most Powerful in DC' and *People's* 'Most Beautiful People in the World' helped to raise his profile, as did being romantically linked to the actress Rashida Jones and the *Maxim* model turned White House staffer, Ali Campoverdi. There were also a couple of moments of youthful exuberance that political opponents tried to turn against him, such as when a shirtless beer-pong game with a colleague was captured on camera, or when a picture of him groping a cardboard cut-out of Hillary Clinton made it onto Facebook.

By contrast, Favreau's British counterparts have, mostly, been keen to avoid the limelight. David Cameron's current main speechwriter is Jessica Cunniffe. Devoutly Christian, and nicknamed 'The Voice of God' after encouraging Cameron to speak publicly about his own faith, the 29-year-old is almost invisible online, choosing to use an image of the singer Morrissey as her profile picture on LinkedIn.

One of her predecessors, Ameet Gill, was recently – and quietly – promoted to the role of 10 Downing Street's director of strategy. He too has kept a low profile, but if the fortunes of former speechwriters such as Ed Miliband (who started out as Harriet Harman's speechwriter), Nick Clegg (formerly Leon Brittan's wordsmith) and George Osborne (who penned orations for William Hague) are anything to go by, his name could become more familiar in the future.

During his time as speechwriter, Gill played second fiddle to Clare Foges – a raven-haired former ice-cream van driver (yes, really). She was writing speeches for David Cameron aged 27 but now, aged 34, is out of government, having quit only weeks after helping the Tories to an unexpected majority and a second term in office. Westminster eyebrows were raised when she fired a parting shot in the form of a Times op-ed that was widely seen as being critical of her old boss.

But if reaching the top of the game at a young age is one trait associated with speechwriters, then moving on after just a few years in the role is another. It's not that the remuneration is so bad as to drive people away. Lancaster reckons a British speechwriter in Whitehall could expect to start on a salary of £50,000 or £60,000, while Favreau was paid $172,200 for his role at the White House. Of course, the numbers pale in comparison to those found on paychecks in the world of finance, but for a public servant in their 20s? Not bad.

No, the main issue with political speechwriting is the hours – long and unsociable. "You're working 14 hours a day," says Lancaster, who now runs Bespoke Speeches, a company that hones the words of FSTE 100 business leaders. "Your phone is ringing throughout the weekend, and you can't really do that as you get older. I couldn't do it now with two kids."

"The average cycle for speechwriters is just a couple of years," says Frankel, who left the White House after more than four years in the job and is now head of external affairs at Andela, a business that connects US companies with people working remotely from countries such as Nigeria.

"Speechwriting is one of the very few creative jobs that also requires a huge amount of output. You want to keep being fresh and original, which becomes hard to do after a fair amount of time. Looking back, I think a lot of other presidential speechwriters would agree."

Sure enough, his former colleague takes a similar view. Favreau says: "At that point, [when he left in 2013, after working with Obama for eight years] it was a quarter of my life. It was tiring, you didn't really have weekends, I wasn't able to plan holidays. I decided I had to move on, settle down and have a normal job."

Favreau explains that he wouldn't have changed a minute of his time working for "the best boss ever", but is now happy running his own business out of LA., Fenway Strategies, named after the home ground of his beloved Boston Red Sox, which provides speeches for companies, executives and celebrities who don't want to "spit out the usual rehearsed, canned lines". His business partner is another former White House speechwriter (and fellow shirtless beer-pong enthusiast) Tommy Vietor. The pair are also working on a screenplay for a political drama based on their experiences of life on the Hill.

Favreau says his new job is "a lot more relaxing", doesn't have quite as many tight deadlines and has enabled him to swap holing up in a local Starbucks for working from home with his dog. And there are other perks, such as rubbing shoulders with people in the entertainment industry and at dynamic Silicon Valley companies. "But," he admits, "it can certainly never match the adrenaline of the White House."