

WORD OF THE MONTH

OXFORD AUSTRALIA: THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH | MAY 2015

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spill

- **noun**: the deliberate creation of vacant positions in a cabinet, political party, or organisation.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In recent months in 2015, we have seen an attempt by Federal backbencher MPs of the Liberal Party to put forward a *spill motion*. Had this motion been successful, it would have led to a **spill**, where (in this case) the position of party leader became vacant, and candidates could stand for election to the position. The word **spill** in this sense is an Australian English term, and has a long history, being first recorded in 1945:

Should Mr Makin be selected his place in Cabinet will not be filled because it will become unnecessary and this will thwart some of the more ambitious younger members of the party who attempted at a recent Caucus meeting in Canberra to secure a '**spill**' of Ministerial positions in the hope that the new ballot would throw them into the Cabinet. (*Canberra Times*, 20 August)

Spill is most often used in political contexts, and often in relation to the question of the leadership of a political party. In 1971, for example, Prime Minister John Gorton was challenged by William McMahon; when the call for a leadership spill was successful and the party room vote was tied, Gorton cast his deciding vote against himself, thus losing the leadership. Paul Keating challenged Bob Hawke twice for leadership of the Labor Party, succeeding the second time, and taking the Prime Ministership.

While federal party examples are more famous, **spills** can also happen at the state level, as in this example from Victorian politics:

Mr Hunt said last night he would not be a challenger for the party leadership and he holds no brief for any particular contender. But he said his decision to move for a **spill** of party positions, one of the most difficult of his 25 years as an MP, had been made because Mr Kennett had destabilised the party with his remarks last Thursday that the Liberals may force an early election. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 October 1986)

Spills can happen in other contexts: for example, in some organisations (often public ones), positions can be declared vacant, especially at senior levels. The following comment by ICAC Commissioner Barry O'Keefe in 1996 refers to his argument that senior positions in the New South Wales Police Force should be declared vacant so as to rid the Force of ineffective senior executives:

Consideration ought to be given to whether the new accountability requirements require a **spill** of positions and a new selection process for all senior executive

service positions. Such a process has commonly been used throughout the public service, when a major restructure or change in responsibilities has occurred. (*Daily Telegraph*, 15 August)

Spill is in our Australian Oxford dictionaries, and will be included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.



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