

# Oxford Australia Word of the Month

April 2008

**razor gang** – a parliamentary committee established to examine ways of reducing public expenditure.

*Australian National Dictionary Centre*

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# razor gang

## The story behind the Word of the Month

The term **razor gang** was very common in the context of the 2007 Federal election. It was introduced by Kevin Rudd early in October: 'In a newspaper interview published yesterday, Mr Rudd said a Labor Government would set up an expenditure review committee, or razor gang, to identify savings for its first budget' (*Canberra Times*, 3 October). After the election, Prime Minister Rudd warned that Labor's 'razor gang' would wield 'a meat axe' (*Canberra Times*, 21 January 2008).

**Razor gang** in the sense 'a parliamentary committee established to examine ways of reducing public expenditure' was first used in association with the Fraser Government in the early 1980s. On 5 May 1981 the *Bulletin* stated: 'Canberra reports said that Sir Philip Lynch's "Razor Gang" had recommended an overall staff cut in the Federal public service of 2 percent.' This sense of the term **razor gang** is Australian, and after the Fraser Government the term continued to be used to describe drastic cost-cutting measures by both Federal and State Governments. In 1988 the *Melbourne Age* reported:

'How these committees work provides a clue to the real power structure of the Hawke-Keating Government in crucial economic matters. The key has been the razor gang. This has become Hawke's "kitchen Cabinet".'

By 2007 the term was used in a wide variety of contexts, for example of the Howard Government: 'A \$100 million-plus plan to tackle childhood obesity has been dumped by the Howard Government's budget razor gang, despite the runaway economy adding billions of dollars to Treasury coffers' (*Australian*, 19

March 2007).

Where does the term **razor gang** come from? In the sense 'a gang of thugs armed with razors' it is first recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1957, and this sense has international currency. In Australia, razor gangs were especially associated with criminals in Sydney in the 1920s and 1930s (see the transcript of an ABC radio program on the topic at [www.abc.net.au/dimensions/dimensions\\_in\\_time/Transcripts/s485143.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/dimensions/dimensions_in_time/Transcripts/s485143.htm)). In 1927 the *Sydney Truth* (12 June) described one of these gangs:

'The Razor Gang has terrorised the underworld of Darlinghurst, that region of bohemia, crims and mystery. The razors its members carry in their hands are feared far more than the revolver of the ordinary crook.'

It is possible that the Australian political use of the term alludes to these ruthless criminal gangs, but even before the transferred Australian political uses of the term, the same transfer had occurred in 'Railway Slang' in Britain in the 1960s. The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes two British texts. First, H. Sheppard in *A Dictionary of Railway Slang* (1966), defines razor gang as 'economy men from Headquarters'. Second, G. McKenna in *Glossary of Railwaymen's Talk* (1970), defines razor gang as 'an investigating committee, searching rosters and rotas for "unproductive time"'. This is very similar to the Australian political sense, and it would be interesting to know if the British railway slang had somehow found its way to Australia. The precise political sense, however, is uniquely Australian.

metrosexual  
weapon  
of mass  
destruction  
karrack  
glycaemic  
burka  
index  
barbecue  
stopper  
senior  
moment  
Sudoku  
hornbag  
dishlicker  
witlof  
cyberstalking  
Naltrexone  
pear-  
shaped  
yakitori  
Bioterrorism