

WORD OF THE MONTH

JULY 2013

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faceless men

plural noun people who wield (esp. political) power behind the scenes.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In the early hours of 21 March 1963, journalist Alan Reid asked a photographer friend to take some photographs outside the Hotel Kingston in Canberra. Inside the hotel 36 delegates of the Australian Labor Party's Federal Conference were debating the party's position on a proposed United States radio communications facility in Western Australia. Standing outside the building, waiting for the decision of the conference, were Federal Labor leader Arthur Calwell and his deputy Gough Whitlam. The photographs and Reid's accompanying article in the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* the following day caused a sensation. Calwell and Whitlam were portrayed as leaders powerless against the party machine—'Leaders or Office Boys?' asked the caption. Reid described the delegates as the '36 virtually unknown men'.

Very quickly Reid's 'virtually unknown men' became the **faceless men** of Labor Party machinery. Within a fortnight, Henry Turner (Liberal member for Bradfield) referred in the House of Representatives to 'the situation in the Labour Party, in which 36 **faceless men** emerge from some dark recess where the Communist spider weaves his web'. (*Hansard*, 3 April 1963)

The Liberal Party subsequently adopted the term as a campaign slogan, irreparably damaging Labor's election chances.

It was a closed Federal conference that gave the Liberal Party one of its most effective propaganda tags—the **faceless men**'. (*Australian*, 26 April 1965)

The word *faceless* meaning 'anonymous; lacking identity' is recorded from 1822. The Australian sense of *faceless* in the term **faceless men** has a specific meaning and implies something more sinister: it refers to anonymous officials wielding undue power and influence over elected parliamentarians, party policy, and decision-making. It has been widely used from the 1960s to the present day, usually in a context critical of Labor Party factional politics and Labor's union support base. It is a negative term that resonates strongly with Australian voters.

The term has also been used outside the world of federal politics, as in this example from the corporate sphere:

Frankly these funds are big business, administered by **faceless men** in boardrooms. (*Australian Woman's Weekly*, 25 October 1972)

And more recently, in a sporting context, Rugby League footballer and coach Mal Meninga took a swipe at the '**faceless men** of influence' whom he believed were attempting to undermine his achievements and those of his team. (*Canberra Times*, 17 July 2011)

Faceless men is still often used in a political sense, and in the last few years it has appeared frequently in reference to the vexed issue of Labor leadership:

Rudd was a fierce advocate of party reform, much to the chagrin of the factions and their apparatchiks who knifed him and foisted Gillard

continued ...

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on Australia in June 2010. Many of those **faceless men** have kept the Prime Minister in power since. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 March 2013)

It has been fifty years since the term **faceless men** was first used in this sense. Evidence shows that the term continues to appear frequently in Australian English, and still packs a punch.

Faceless men has been included in a number of our Oxford dictionaries and will be included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.