

# Oxford Australia Word of the Month

June 2009

**Callithumpian** – 1. (often used to indicate a lack of adherence to any religion) a member of an unspecified nonconformist religious sect. 2. (often used to indicate a lack of adherence to any political party or creed) a member of an unspecified political party or creed; a holder of any unspecified belief.

*Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*

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# Callithumpian

## The story behind the Word of the Month

In 1892 the *Sydney Truth* newspaper asked: 'What are **calathumpians**? There are four of them in New South Wales. Who founded that religion? It is not known in England.' The next time we encounter the term **calathumpian** is in the *Adelaide Advertiser* in 1903 as the name of an Australian Rules Football team called the '**Calathumpian** Rovers'. By 1925 in the *Sydney Truth*, the Australian sense is becoming clearer: 'Whether Mr Hartigan is a Catholic, Congregationalist, or **Calathumpian** doesn't matter a tinker's cuss to the average Australian.' In later uses (and usually with the spelling **Callithumpian**) the term is sometimes used as the equivalent of a generic 'religious beliefs of any kind': 'Tony Abbot has not disguised the fact that the objective is to reduce the rate of abortions in Australia. What's wrong with setting up an anti-abortion counselling service—whether the counsellors are Muslim, Catholic or **Callithumpian**?' (*Australian*, 2 January 2007).

By the 1970s, **callithumpian** broadened from its earlier religious focus, and came to be used also to refer to beliefs (especially political) of any kind. Here is a very typical political instance: 'He hoped that the euthanasia debate would not become politicised as it was not about "Labor, Liberal, National Party, **Callithumpian**"' (*Australian*, 30 September, 1996). The following example alludes to economic views: 'Results from these formal models always rest heavily on the model-builder's assumptions—including their prior beliefs about whether the economy works in a neoclassical or Keynesian or **Callithumpian** way'

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 June 2007).

All these uses of **callithumpian** are Australian. The word exists in American English, but there it has a very different meaning. It designates a band made up of discordant instruments 'such as tin horns, bells, rattles and similar instruments'. Such bands are used in merrymaking on occasions such as New Year's Eve or the Fourth of July, and in the past they were sometimes used by a community that disapproved of a marriage or was jokingly celebrating a marriage—much like the European charivari.

The Australian and American uses, with such different meanings, go back to an identical British dialect word **gallithumpian**. The **gally** part of the word probably means 'to frighten, scare; to confuse with noise', and **thump** means 'to beat'. This would explain the origin of the raucous sounds of the American **callithumpian** band. It does not so easily explain the Australian **callithumpian**. The *English Dialect Dictionary* provides two clues. First, in Lancashire, Dorset, and Devon in the nineteenth century, the **gallithumpians** were 'a society of social reformers'. Secondly, in Dorset and Devon in the eighteenth century the **gallithumpians** were 'disturbers of order at parliamentary elections'. It was from these political and social rebels that the Australian **callithumpians** developed, although they were often people (unlike their British forebears) who did not want to make known the precise nature of their political, social, or political beliefs.

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