

WORD OF THE MONTH

AUG 2013

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Kirribilli deal

noun: (also **Kirribilli agreement**) a (usually secret) agreement between two parties regarding leadership succession.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In the lead-up to the 2013 Western Australian election, the local Perth daily reported that Premier Colin Barnett had 'sensationally confronted ... suggestions from within his party that he struck a "**Kirribilli deal**" with Troy Buswell in 2008 to hand back the Liberal leadership'. (*West Australian*, 6 March 2013) The result of the election—a resounding victory to the Premier and his party—suggests that voters were not swayed by speculation about a **Kirribilli deal**, a term that may be becoming established in Australian English.

The original **Kirribilli deal** took place in 1988 at Kirribilli House, the official Sydney residence of the Prime Minister. It is located on Kirribilli Point, a tip of land in Sydney Harbour in the suburb of Kirribilli. The name is said to derive from an Aboriginal word *kiarabilli* meaning 'good fishing spot'; another theory suggests that 'Kirribilli' is an adaptation of *Carabella*, the name given by James Milson, an early settler, to his first house built there.

In 1988 the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, met at Kirribilli House with his deputy and Treasurer Paul Keating. In the presence of two witnesses Hawke agreed that, in the event of another election victory, he would resign in Keating's favour during his next term of office. The secret deal came to grief when the Prime Minister did not keep his side of the bargain. It was a famous falling-out. Keating failed in his first leadership challenge, went to the backbench, and took the leadership from Hawke six months later. The secret agreement was made public in 1991 and the term **Kirribilli deal** entered the written record. Here is the first evidence:

He [Senator Richardson] had backed the Keating challenge after he had learnt of the **Kirribilli deal** even though he doubted Mr Keating could win. (*Australian Financial Review*, 6 June 1991)

Kirribilli deal subsequently became a byword for secret political deals and broken promises. When leadership succession became an issue for another Prime Minister and his Treasurer—John Howard and Peter Costello—in the 2000s, the Hawke–Keating history was an obvious point of reference:

'We don't enter into Kirribilli conspiracies', he [Peter Costello] said, referring to the **Kirribilli deal** between former Labor prime minister Bob Hawke and then treasurer Paul Keating regarding the handover of power. (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, 6 May 2002)

Four years later there were still rumours of a deal between Howard and Costello, and at this time we can see the term beginning to take on a transferred meaning—a leadership succession agreement similar to the original but between different parties:

Peter Costello has sparked another wave of leadership speculation by refusing to rule out a secret '**Kirribilli deal**' with John Howard. (*Australian*, 6 July 2006)

From the mid-2000s onwards the term, also found in the variant **Kirribilli agreement**, has been applied to other players and other succession

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scenarios: 'There may not be a **Kirribilli agreement**, but there certainly is the understanding that the Beattie Government is grooming deputy Anna Bligh for future greatness.' (*Townsville Bulletin*, 20 May 2006) The term also spread beyond the political sphere into sport:

A move to the boundary line this season has prompted speculation that Roos had reached a '**Kirribilli agreement**' with assistant John Longmire and is preparing to hand over the reins. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 May 2008)

Although **Kirribilli deal** and **Kirribilli agreement** are still sometimes used in reference to the original meeting at Kirribilli House in 1988, the evidence of the last five years shows that they are now being used more generally to refer to leadership or job succession deals.

Kirribilli deal and the variant **Kirribilli agreement** are being considered for inclusion in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.