

WORD OF THE MONTH

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headland speech

- **noun**: a significant political speech, especially one setting out major policy.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In 1995, John Howard, then leader of the Opposition, delivered a series of speeches. He called these his **headland speeches**, in which he set out key policy directions and visions for the Liberal Party on issues such as the role of government and national identity. The first was delivered to the Menzies Research Centre, and perhaps intentionally cast itself within a Liberal tradition (echoing Sir Robert Menzies' famous 'Forgotten People' speech). The *Melbourne Age* reported:

In a week of discussion by the leaders about Australia's future constitutional and parliamentary arrangements, Mr Howard will deliver what he terms a '**headland speech**' on government tomorrow, in which one theme will be the importance the coalition attaches to the environment as an issue. (5 June 1995)

Prime Minister Paul Keating responded by ridiculing 'Mr Howard's so-called **headland speech**, describing it to ALP members in the caucus room as the political equivalent of "Cape Fear" or "Cape Barren" '. (*Melbourne Age*, 7 June 1995) However, the speeches proved successful for Howard, and he went on to win the 1996 election.

The term quickly gained some traction in the Australian political landscape as speeches delivered by leaders or aspiring leaders. Other politicians went on to give **headland speeches**. Federal politicians who have delivered them include Peter Costello, Kim Beazley, Brendan Nelson, Julia Gillard, and Kevin Rudd. The term is not exclusively used at the federal political level; state leaders, including Geoff Gallop, David Bartlett, and Isobel Redmond, have also given such speeches.

While the list above suggests that **headland speeches** might be delivered by politicians from either side of politics, it is clear that Howard's precedent has led to successive Coalition leaders being expected to deliver their own visionary **headland speeches**, perhaps in an effort to invoke Howard's legacy. Tony Abbott's September 2012 speech on the economy was described in the *Australian Financial Review* as looking 'very much like Howard's "**headland speech**" strategy in 1995'. (28 September 2012).

Where does the term come from? A *headland* is 'a point of land jutting out into the sea'. It is a point of reference that is at once a highly visible landmark and a place from which to survey one's surroundings. Howard perhaps intended his speeches to be figurative headlands, staking out a clear vision and policy direction for the nation. As a Sydneysider and someone who spent his holidays at Hawks Nest on the northern coast of New South Wales, he perhaps drew inspiration from the prominent headlands of the coastline, and

thought the geographic metaphor might resonate with many people.

Recently there is some limited evidence that the term may be used outside party politics. Professor Marcia Langton in her Boyer Lectures of 2012 referred to the former Rio Tinto chairman Leon Davis as having given a **headland speech** that had 'shifted the [mining] industry's paradigm'. (*Crikey*, 22 February 2013) However, the term otherwise continues to be strongly associated with politics.

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



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