

Click [here](#) if you are having trouble viewing this message.



# Oxford Word of the Month – March: bush politician

**noun:** 1. a person regarded as a ‘know-it-all’. 2. a politician from a rural area of Australia and seen to represent rural values and interests.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In Australia, *bush* has been the most significant term in describing the Australian landscape. Bush and the meanings that have accrued to it over the years of European settlement in Australia have captured something of Australia’s values and character. *Bush* has also produced more compounds in Australian English than any other word, and one of these is **bush politician**.

The term **bush politician** dates back to 1870. Early uses of the term often refer to people who talk at length (and often tediously) about particular issues, and who proffer unwanted advice. For example, in 1875 the Melbourne *Leader* described a minister visiting his electorate and being ‘bored to death by one of those **bush politicians** who imagine that their advice is valuable and their company desirable, while they are regarded by other people as bores of the very first magnitude’. (28 August) And in 1899, the *Singleton Argus* commented that ‘[t]he **bush politician** is always prepared ... to teach the leading statesmen of the day in matters of public policy’. (16 February)

The term **bush politician** also suggests the idea of a self-made or self-educated person. It also likely bears some relation to the Australian English terms *bush lawyer* ‘a person claiming legal knowledge without qualifications for it; an argumentative person who offers seemingly legal and often specious arguments in support of a case’, and *bush liar* ‘a person who tells tall stories’.

This sense of **bush politician** continued into the 20th century, but increasingly referred to someone who was an elected official, although still implying that they were concerned with a narrow range of issues, and generally not formally educated. When John ‘Black Jack’ McEwen became Prime Minister in 1967, the press said of him:

*In those days [when he was first elected to parliament] he could be described as*

*the typical 'bush' politician, unable to see beyond the price of wool, wheat, butter or meat. (Canberra Times, 19 December)*

In recent years, **bush politician** is applied to elected politicians of all stripes, although more often, unsurprisingly, members of the National Party. In current use it is not usually a negative term, but implies simply that the person is from the bush and an advocate for rural interests: 'The ALP is working hard to win back the vital seat from [Kalgoorlie Liberal MP Barry] Haase, who describes himself as a typical **bush politician**.' (*West Australian*, 15 October 2001) Recent uses of the term also suggest that the typical **bush politician** of today has learnt his political skills the hard way:

*Many senior Nationals deeply dislike Turnbull over the way he acted on carbon pricing when he was opposition leader in 2009, but none more so than Barnaby Joyce. One sees himself as the smartest guy in the room; the other is a clever **bush politician**. (Melbourne Age, 15 September 2015)*

The term is now largely one with positive connotations in Australian English.

We are currently researching the term **bush politician** for future inclusion in our dictionaries. *Bush lawyer* and *bush liar* are both included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (forthcoming 2016).

Share our Word of the Month:



Click [here](#) to unsubscribe from our Word of the Month. Read our [privacy policy](#).