

WORD OF THE MONTH FEB 2013

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Canberra bashing

– **noun:** **1** the act of criticising the Australian federal government and its bureaucracy. **2** the act of criticising the city of Canberra or its inhabitants.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Like other capital cities around the world, *Canberra* is used allusively to refer to the national government and its bureaucracy. This sense is attested from at least 1960: 'The television invasion did not happen without letters to the newspapers, or raised voices in Canberra'. (Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, p. 71) In this sense *Canberra* usually has negative connotations. In the following example it is turned into an adjective that is formed on the verb 'Canberra-ise':

[Bob Katter] intends to ignore the norms of parliamentary life by refusing committee work, and possibly even missing parliamentary sittings, so he does not become "Canberra-ised". (*Sunday Mail*, 23 May 1993)

In this context to be 'Canberra-ised' means to become habituated to life as a federal politician and to living in Canberra. It implies that this is undesirable, and may even have a corrupting influence.

The first written evidence for **Canberra bashing**, in the sense of criticising the federal government, appears in 1976: 'Even Federal Liberal MPs from Tasmania feel that their electoral standing is increased by regular outbursts of "**Canberra bashing**".' (*Sun-Herald*, 19 Feb.) Much of the early evidence for the term seems to be associated with state government criticism of the federal government:

For a Premier [Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen] and a party that has made an art form of **Canberra-bashing**, their failure to make the fringe benefits tax an election issue suggests a structural breakdown in a once fearsome election machine. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Nov. 1986)

The **Canberra-bashing** ahead of the Council of Australian Governments meeting next month continued yesterday with the WA Premier. (*Australian Financial Review*, 31 Jan. 1994)

The association of the federal government and Parliament with the city of Canberra and its inhabitants has led to the development of a further sense of **Canberra bashing**, as this comment by a Canberra resident reveals:

Canberra-bashing is Australia's pre-eminent blood sport. Illogically and unfairly, we are held responsible for the deeds and misdeeds of the politicians whom you elect! ... Bash "the Feds", not the people of Canberra. (*The Age*, 28 Aug. 1992)

The history and development of the nation's capital as a planned city have led to a common belief outside the ACT that Canberra is boring to live in and dull to visit, full of national monuments and too many roundabouts, and lacking a nightlife. It is perceived to be populated by politicians and overpaid public servants (often referred to as *fat cats*) living off the taxpayer, and this also leads to its disparagement by the rest of Australia. The idea that Canberra lacks a soul and a sense of community was highlighted and refuted by the former Australian Capital Territory Chief Minister Jon Stanhope following the devastating bushfires of 2003:

continued ...

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We don't have to worry ever again about any outrageous slur that's made about this town, any suggestion of **Canberra-bashing**, any suggestion that we're any less a community than any community in Australia because we all know now with enormous certainty that it's garbage. (*Canberra Times*, 1 Feb. 2003)

Despite this spirited defence of Canberra the bashing continues. March 2013 marks the Centenary of Canberra, and its creative director Robyn Archer has often been called on to defend the nation's capital from the 'national sport' of **Canberra bashing**:

This is me, checking into an Australian airport. **Canberra-bashing** buffoon: 'Morning Ms Archer, where are you off to today?' Archer: 'Canberra.' **Canberra-bashing** buffoon: 'Oh you poor thing. Roundabouts. Bloody awful weather. Bloody pollies. Fat public servants.' (*Canberra Times*, 5 Apr. 2012)

Canberra bashing still appears to be alive and well; whether the Centenary celebrations change attitudes towards the nation's capital remains to be seen.

Canberra bashing will be included in the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.