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# Oxford Word of the Month – February: fair dinkumness

*noun*: reliability; genuineness; honesty; truthfulness.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

A headline for a recent online article reads: ‘Scott Morrison, the Prime Minister for fair dinkumness, is losing election options fast’. The article mentions a debate surrounding that most Australian of traditions, the sausage sizzle:

*At a more retail political level, the Prime Minister for fair dinkumness got himself involved in the massive Bunnings sausage sizzle ‘do you put onions on top or underneath’ controversy. (ABC News online, 17 November 2018)*

The use of the term *fair dinkumness* is an allusion to the Prime Minister’s preferred public persona as an ordinary, down-to-earth Aussie bloke. It also references the Prime Minister’s frequent use of the phrase *fair dinkum* (‘very reliable, genuine, honest, true’). The addition of the suffix *-ness* to *fair dinkum* denotes the state or condition of being *fair dinkum*; in other words, *fair dinkumness* means ‘reliability, genuineness, honesty, truthfulness’.

*Fair dinkumness* is not a new coinage, although it is rare. It first appears in 1905, about twenty years after the first Australian record of *fair dinkum*.

The earliest evidence for the term is an anonymous poem, ‘The Mulga Man’s Lament’, published in a West Australian newspaper:

*An’ we got to think fair-dinkumness was branded in at birth—But I’m damned if I’ve discovered much of it about in Perth. (Perth Sunday Times, 23 July 1905)*

The lament in this poem contains a familiar literary theme in comparing the vices of the city with the virtues of the bush. Here, *fair dinkumness* is a virtue plainly lacking in the inhabitants of the city. A sense of virtue is also alluded to in another early example of the term:

*Randwick trainer Neil McKenna offers to publicly debate with certain Sydney pressmen the fair dinkumness of hurdle racing in this city. (Sydney Smith’s Weekly, 5 January 1935)*

This appearance of the term in the patriotic *Smith's Weekly*, known for its frequent use of the Australian vernacular, was to be almost the last in a newspaper until the early 1990s.

In recent times, **fair dinkumness** is likely to occur in a political context, perhaps because politicians continue to use *fair dinkum* to signal their affiliation with core Australian values:

*Bill Shorten (waving aloft a transcript): 'I just want to table the Prime Minister's hypocrisy, the Prime Minister's lack of fair dinkumness'. (Yes, he said this.) Bishop: 'That can't be a serious question. It's impossible to table a concept'. Which rather killed that. (The Australian, 26 November 2014)*

Though it may be a concept at risk of (political) banality, **fair dinkumness** is still a term that can conjure up something important in the Australian understanding of fairness and honesty:

*Father Brian Traynor, a former provincial of the Passionists, says, 'If faith is to touch the hearts of Australians, it must come through sincerity, integrity and fair dinkumness. If the church is to be relevant, it must be a church based on relationships and mateship'. (The Australian, 18 March 2002)*

Fair dinkumness will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of *The Australian National Dictionary*.

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