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# Oxford Word of the Month – September: hip–pocket nerve

**noun:** an imaginary nerve that reacts whenever demands are made on one’s money (especially in contexts such as government proposals to increase taxes).

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

The first evidence of the term **hip–pocket nerve** occurs in a speech by Prime Minister Ben Chifley in 1947. In May of that year, during a tax debate in the House of Representatives, Chifley responded to a comment on aggregate taxation by the member for Fawkner:

*The average citizen is not interested in what the whole of the community pays; his sole interest is in what he pays. Accordingly, I shall bring the honourable member for Fawkner right down to earth. As members of Parliament receive an allowance of £1000 a year, I propose to examine the case of a man in receipt of that income, because it will bring home the facts to a very sensitive nerve in the human constitution—the ‘hip–pocket nerve’.* (Reported in *The Australian Worker*, 21 May 1947)

The **hip–pocket nerve** gets its name from the pocket in the back of a pair of trousers, just behind the hip, that traditionally contains a wallet. Chifley’s point is that we are all sensitive to demands on our wallet, especially those coming from government. Australian governments of all persuasions are acutely aware of this around the time of the annual Federal Budget:

*While this year’s Budget will be hitting the **hip–pocket nerve**, the Government is taking solace in the knowledge that it has up to two years to win over the electorate.* (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 1986)

Did Ben Chifley coin the term **hip–pocket nerve**, or was he using a term he already knew? In the absence of earlier evidence we can’t rule out the possibility that it is Chifley’s coinage. What is clear is that its first recorded outing in a tax debate foreshadowed the context of bureaucratic impost in which this Australian term is still chiefly used:

*This week’s Geelong city council decision to lift rates an average 8 per cent will leave ratepayers, whacked heavily about the **hip pocket nerve** in recent years, even more disillusioned.* (*Geelong Advertiser*, 4 June 2005)

**Hip-pocket nerve** is included in the recently released second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (2016).

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