

Of clichés and catchphrases

IT WAS interesting to see Peter Kitchin's inclusion of wide-boy in his nostalgic journey to Prebble Grove earlier in the year (*Dominion Post*, August 11). It seems that wide-boy is fast becoming a polysemous term, i.e., a term with several meanings. Peter tells me he used it with the meaning of a person who appears to have money, or is clever in managing money. Like a host of other terms that we import, we have our own use for the term (and so we should).

In some parts of the world, wide-boy is associated with illicit behaviour and petty crime. In Britain, it is associated with males with a cheeky charm, stylish dress sense, and the gift of the gab and, it is suggested, it has actually replaced the term "spiv". Yet another source tells us that it is used for a working class male, often from London, who lives by his wits and wheeler dealings. We don't use it here with any criminal association, and maybe that is how manufacturers and promoters would prefer it to be used, for, worldwide, wide-boys have become cameras, deck-chairs, chests of drawers, and squash racquet designs, among a host of other new consumer items.

Similarly, we New Zealanders import concepts and develop our own terminology around these. Tall poppy is one of these, first used across the Tasman. We've borrowed the term and extended its use in expressions such as tall poppydom, tall poppyfy, tall poppiness, tall poppyitis, tall poppy potshotter, tall poppy puller, tall poppy pruning, tall poppy syndromer, and tall poppytopper. We've coined small poppy and the New Zealand Dictionary Centre has a 2000 citation of tall poppy used as a verb: "What this conference shows is you have a lot of interest in entrepreneurship. Don't tall poppy it, let them go, let them do their own thing."

In addition, we have developed our own homegrown terms for the tall poppy concept, including high-heeler, stilt person, and Ngati Aorere or cloud-piercer. And for those who deride these achievers, we have coined mana munchers. It's a versatile concept.

We are also guilty of importing and using "serial clichés", not least of all words modelled on Watergate. Our journalist and columnists quickly emulated the British trend (Cheriegate, etc) with Cornigate, Paintergate, Powdergate, and Doonegate. Will Trevor Mallard's exploits



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soon be known as Jawgate? Politics is a productive domain for clichés and catchphrases, particularly when it comes to fiscal matters. We have suffered the rhetoric of the chewing gum budget, the hip-pocket budget, the Bondi budget, the lolly scramble budget, and the Jam Tomorrow budget. We lie in unison, we're gone by lunchtime, we flip-flop, and we're haunted by an orchestrated litany of lies.

The criminal fraternity is more imaginative when it comes to clichés and catchphrases, the extension of couch potato being an apposite example. It is from this domain that we first recorded the use of couch kumara, and baked potato (a drugged couch potato). A T-bone in criminal speak is not a steak or a type of car smash as it is elsewhere — it is a Temgesic tablet, used in drug cocktails.

There are countless terms in English that are used with a new sense or meaning in New Zealand. Berm is one of these. Originally used for the ledged area along a parapet, or river bank, it has always been used in New Zealand to name the grass verge between the footpath and street. (The same verge is known in Australia as a nature strip. The mind boggles — a roadside stripshow?) Early rural colonists brought terms from British English and gave them new meanings — among the most notable being creek and paddock. But the rural population has continued to recycle words and to add new senses. Words such as run, break, and dropper, known and used by a comparatively small population group, can have up to nine distinctive uses. An office is a ledge on a steep bluff or face on which sheep can become trapped, diamonds and crowns are sheep yards. And as for a straight black — it has nothing to do with cafe culture, for it's the term used for a purebred Aberdeen Angus cattle beast.

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