



# New Zealand politics and life infused with tea terms



**Dianne Bardsley**

**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

**W**HAT is it with tea and politics? The significance of tea in the political domain is international, with the historical Boston Tea Party and the present-day Tea Party movement in the United States, but in New Zealand English and in New Zealand politics, tea has a distinctive place.

In 1900 a row over a letter erroneously printed in Hansard was described in the House as a "storm in a teapot", and in 2011 tea had John Key in so much hot water that at a subsequent public electioneering event he reportedly settled for Pimm's and ginger ale. Former prime minister, the late David Lange, in seeking a pause in the pace of social and economic reforms in 1988, famously announced that there would be a tea break. A comment in the *Dominion* of August 26 that year read: "We are invited by Mr Lange, the chief architect of our adversity, to pause and take tea ... A tea break is not going to solve anything."

An appropriate warning to politicians, it seems. One wonders why Mr Key and John Banks didn't have their private natter in a bloke's shed, sharing a few quiet ones from the chilly bin.

Tea has significance to Kiwis outside of politics. The full teapot is a hand-on-hips stance adopted by rugby players and others to show disapproval, or to seek an explanation from the referee. In New Zealand prohibition times, prohibitionists were known as cold-tea-ites and the movement itself was known as cold tea.

Specific to New Zealand tea is

specific to New Zealand too is tea tree, the name James Cook and Joseph Banks gave to manuka once they found its leaves were appropriate for brewing. Early settlers and rural workers drank billy tea, also known as bush tea, the exhortation "boil the billy" preceding the present day imperative "put the jug on".

A boil-up, a brew, or a brew-up was usually accomplished on an open fire before New Zealander John Hart invented the thermette or picnic kettle in 1930, and which was popular as a portable means of boiling water before the introduction of the thermos some thirty years later. The thermette travelled overseas with World War II expeditionary forces, those for whom tea was vital, and who nicknamed the versatile invention the Benghazi boiler after a coastal town in Libya.

Billy tea, unknown outside the Antipodes, was usually strong and often bitter, quite different from a cup of milky New Zealand railway tea which is the equivalent of present-day gumboot tea.

Communal work breaks for morning or afternoon tea in Australasia are still commonly termed smoko. There has been no shortage of disagreement about the origins of the term smoko. In popular belief, it arose from a time to smoke a cigarette, but rural tradition claims that out on the hill, the smoke arising from the fire to boil the billy was the signal for a tea break. Smoko has remained in constant use in the national lexicon, substituted with crib by farm workers, mill workers, and miners. Crib was

also the term for the food contained in a worker's crib bag or crib tin.

Once, donko was the common term for the staff tea room, the refuge from sweat and grime, where darts were thrown and newspapers separated page by page. The Dictionary Centre database contains few but nevertheless historically valuable citations for this unusual term including, "Smoko was held in the donko, where we'd adjourn after working like billyo."

New Zealanders customarily drink tea with the accompanying national fare of afghan, Anzac biscuit, Aotea biscuit, brownie, buster, johnny cake, Kiwi crisp, Maori kiss, or fly cemetery (aka blowfly cake). In the deep south, a cheese roll is a common accompaniment, known to some as Southland sushi. The recipes for these products with their oddly appealing names still appear in recipe books.

Tea roses? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, tea roses are so-called because they are tea-scented, although some claim it was from their initial conveyance to Europe on tea clippers.

To return to politics. We now have a Shearer leading the Labour Party. Bet he insists on stopping for smoko.

**Dianne Bardsley is the director of the New Zealand Dictionary Centre at Victoria University's school of linguistics and applied language studies.**



PMCA licensed copy. You may not further copy, reproduce, record, retransmit, sell, publish, distribute, share or store this information without the prior written consent of the Print Media Copyright Agency. Ph +64-4-498-4488 or email [info@pmca.co.nz](mailto:info@pmca.co.nz) for further information.

 **back**



**The Dominion Post, Wellington**  
29 Feb 2012, by Dianne Bardsley

Opinion, page 5 - 351.43 cm<sup>2</sup>  
Metro - circulation 84,047 (MTWTF--)

ID 135595799

PAGE 2 of 2



**Boil-up:** The New Zealand invented thermette was also known as the Benghazi boiler.