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Colourful politicians gain immortality spicing up the lexicon



THERE are several ways in which the political domain has contributed to the uniqueness of vocabulary and usage in New Zealand English. Like the populations of many other countries, we like to refer to our politicians in a familiar and informal way, while not always being complimentary.

Not surprisingly, the most colourful politicians, the ones who have polarised voters, or those who have introduced controversial legislation, are the ones who have spawned most new terms or usages. Premier Richard Seddon generated a variety of terms. Known as a legislative larrikin in the House, he was referred to in his term in office, and since, as King Dick, and Seddonism, Seddonite, and Seddonland were spawns that developed.

He also popularised the phrase God's Own Country, first used in a poem by Thomas Bracken in the 1890s. The phrase "since Dick Seddon was a boy" was used for decades to represent the passing of a lengthy period of time. (Long before bread was sliced.)

William Massey, prime minister during World War I, was immortalised in the lexicon with terms that related to war and domestic unrest. Massey's Cossacks was the name given to special constables used during a waterfront strike, and he gave his name to boots and coats as part of army issue. Musterers continued to wear Bill Masseys long after the wars.

He is best remembered, however, throughout the country in the naming of Massey University.

Red Fed Bob Semple, another of the colourful variety, left his name

while works minister (then Public Works) around World War II time with the Semple tank (a bulldozer-like tank designed to defend our shores) and Semple's temples (war-time army huts used later as homes for returned servicemen farmers).

Finance ministers who introduced unpopular fiscal policies and budgets, such as Arnold Nordmeyer (with the Black Budget of 1958) and ruthless Ruth Richardson (with the Mother of all Budgets) have contributed to our political phrasal data.

Robert Muldoon, rumoured to be as cold as the freezes he placed on prices and wages, retained loyal supporters who were commonly known as Rob's Mob.

Muldoonism recorded a period of our political history associated with doom and gloom for many, along with the fated Think Big policy.

WE HAVE had the Tight Five, the Fish 'n' Chips Brigade, and Rogernomics. We have had Peter Dunne described as the town bike of politics in a *Dominion Post* column by Sir Robert Jones. No other country has had a McGillicuddy Serious Party or a Pull Yourself Together party for which to vote. Winston Peters, described as a spinster, has immortalised the winebox. We're unique.

An article in the *Guardian Weekly* early this year examined a report that has been made of the language used by British politicians and civil servants. The report, entitled *Bad Language: the Use and Abuse of Official Language*, is particularly critical of the use of terms that distort meaning.

The public administration select

committee, which administered the report, focused on euphemisms such as downsizing and efficiency savings. But "officialese", obscure terminology, and jargon which mislead and confuse were censured most strongly, for these are seen to prevent individuals from understanding policy and accessing public services and benefits.

Can we say the same about the language used in our public service and in the House? Do we all know what a sub-optimal paradigm shift is? (Or what the education minister means by the benefits of national standards?)

But what is said in the House often bemuses as well as confuses. In the prime minister's statement to Parliament on February 9 this year, he said: "In particular, we will not be developing any proposals for a land tax ... Since there is only a certain amount of land, and it can't be moved overseas, a land tax appeals to economists as an efficient way to raise revenue." But politicians are also remembered for how they speak.

At the end of 2009, John Key was given *The Dominion Post's* Merit Award for Prime Ministers with English as a second language for Keyisms such as texts, Afghani-stanians, lewid, and scuttlebug.

Making the mark on a national language is not always intentional, but better, perhaps, than being forgotten.

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