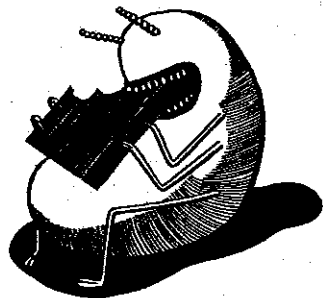


# Myth Conceptions

by Dr Karl S. Kruszelnicki



Party-room politics can be a cutthroat business. There are often shifting allegiances, leaks to the media of alleged wrongdoings, and sundry claims and counterclaims. If someone's position in the party is weakened by such shenanigans, they will tell anyone who'll listen that they've been "white-anted".

The phrase conjures a strong visual image to anyone who's done renovations, or seen them done. Termites, also known as white ants, can virtually destroy a house, living happily behind the outside cladding and eating the timber framework. The termites are so skilled in their eating habits that they can leave just enough timber (and not a skerrick more) to give the vertical frames the bare minimum of structural integrity. Each time I see termite-eaten timbers, I marvel at the skill of the termites, but I still get on the phone to a pest controller. Last time I spoke to Pest Dude, I told him we had "white ants" – and he said, "They're not white ants, they're termites – a completely different species."

Sure, ants and termites are similar in many ways, and have a "swarm" intelligence that is frighteningly competent. They are both social insects and live in colonies that can have air-conditioning, internal gardens, baby-care centres, and a rigid caste structure that ensures efficient functioning, with a queen, workers and soldiers. But their differences are much greater.

Termites belong to the order Isoptera, "iso" meaning "same" or "equal", and "pteron" meaning "wing". So when termites are in the stage of having

## Can you really "white-ant" a rival?

wings (and they have two pairs), their front wings are the same size as their hind wings, and quite separate. But ants belong to the order Hymenoptera, with "hymen" meaning

"membrane" – and their front wings are different from their hind wings, to which they are linked.

There are some 2000 to 4000 species of termites. They are basically a specialised cockroach. The 8000 to 12,000 species of ants are related to bees and wasps, not cockroaches. Ants have a body with a definite narrowing at the "waist", while termites do not. Ants have antennae that are like threads, with a definite kink or elbow; termites have antennae that look like series of tiny balls stuck together. Ants usually have compound eyes, while most termites have no eyes at all. As they grow, ants undergo "complete metamorphosis" – so each stage (egg, larva, pupa and adult) looks quite different from the other stages. But termites have "incomplete metamorphosis", which means that the early stages of the termite look like the adult, except that they are smaller.

So how did termites get to be called white ants? Well, termites are small, have lots of legs, and the commonly seen species live away from the light, so are white.

The next time a politician gets done over, he or she should really say, "I've been termitted." GW