

RED AND BLUE ENSIGN SCHIZOPHRENIA

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The twentieth century has seen many kinds of confusing flag events, resulting at times in a type of schizophrenia, if that is defined to mean a state of being in two minds about something.

Australia is no exception. As a result of a deliberate policy or something approaching it, a whole generation of Australains have grown up ignorant and unsure of just what is the Australian National Flag (ANF).

The choice of ANF has fallen on the Blue ensign (ABE for short), the Red ensign (ARE for short) and the British Union flag (BUF for short) depending on your age, feelings and experience.

The ARE is exactly the same as the ABE except that its field is RED. Both flags give prominence to the BUF in their respective cantons. Indeed, until recently, the BUF was the only flag allowed to fly above both the ABE and the ARE. This was because the Commonwealth of Australia was regarded by Australians as part of the British Empire. (Many say the Empire is dead; this author is not so deluded). Indeed, many Australains, as late as the early 1960s, still preferred to fly the BUF instead of the Australian ensign.

Government policy between 1901-53 was that the ARE was the only suitable flag for Australians in general to fly, as the ABE was reserved for Government use only.

As a direct consequence of that policy, there is still a great deal of confusion about what exactly is the correct ANF. A schizoid state, not helped by a continuing vague policy on flags by Canberra down to the present day. Changes in design - in 1903, 1908, 1912, 1953, 1954 and 1983 - to both the ABE and ARE compound the confusion.

The 1953 Flag Act was to settle the matter of which ensign to use for the forthcoming Royal Tour. The amendment to the Act in 1954 was to "correct an error" with regard to the Federal Star. This was supposed to settle the matter once and for all.

So everyone thought the Aussie flag problems were over. But with the establishment of the Whitlam Government came talk of an improved model. In 1972 yet another flag design contest was held. (This author submitted a design which to the chagrin of

vexillologists was not returned, photo copiers then being the stuff of science fiction). That contest went the way of all flesh and private attempts at a new ANF have since become common.

The ABE has now been changed by the substitution of Royal Blue for good old fashioned Navy Blue (Old Glory Blue for Americans) by the Hawke Government fiat in 1983. The next change is feared to be when statehood is granted to what is now the Northern Territory (but don't hold your breath).

An attempt was made to "abolish" or phase out the ARE in 1981 as part of Australian adherence to a UN scheme to standardise maritime flags. (What an ironic word!) This ridiculous and foolish enterprise foundered on the rocks of Australian maritime opinion. The Government policy is that all Australian ships over 12 metres (about 40ft) must fly the ARE. But as ships are re-registered, the ABE might be given preference, depending on ignorance or opinion. This move away from the ARE is the idea that was being promoted in 1981. All Australian sea-going craft are entitled to fly the ARE. And they should do so.

The survival of the ARE might seem to be in question. However history suggests otherwise. Despite the government stricture against display on land (it is after all just a pious hope, not backed up by force of law, and Daniel Webster once said a law without penalties is just good advice), the ARE can be found flying, on land, over the Sydney HQ of the merchant Navy (Merchant Marine). Apart from this author there is one other person flying the ARE on land. Thus the ARE will not "phase out naturally" as the bureaucrats hope.

The question that is also raised is when and where else the ARE was flown on land. It was certainly displayed during the Royal Tour of 1954. Newsreels show that as late as the week before his death in early July 1945, Prime Minister John Curtin was reviewing troops from a podium decorated (in the wrong manner) with the ARE. This was shown on ATV-10 during their broadcast of the mini-series *The Last Bastion* about two years ago. At the 1952 winter Olympic Games the Aussie team marched behind the ARE (Newsreel footage), and Sir James Hardy's last attempt at the Americas' Cup saw the ARE prominently displayed on team jerseys. The recent mini-series *The Dunera Boys* showed an ARE flying over the internment camp where Franz Stampfl MBE and others were so badly treated during the last war. Of course defenders of the ABE will say that was just another TV production company mistake.

Nevertheless, this author well remembers the 1965 Anzac Day march, to see his uncle behind the RAAF Radar Banner. Along Swanston Street, and particularly at Princes Bridge, flag sellers were at work exchanging shillings for ARE handwavers. Later in that One Day of the Year this author was horrified to see some of those handwavers lying on the ground or in rubbish bins. Apathy is another manifestation and cause of flag schizophrenia.

Recently there was a reenactment of an historical occasion from the First World War. This was the Gilgandra Cooee march to Sydney to enlist in the King's Army. The flag used then and in the reenactment was an ARE. So much for the pious wishes of bureaucrats. As ever in our society the people have spoken.

But the people are not always clear in making known their wishes with regard to flags. As late as the early 1920s soldiers returned from the first world war took to the streets of Melbourne, determined to belt the living daylight out of anyone revolutionary enough to say they would only salute the ARE/ABE rather than the BUF. Several non-socialists were silly enough to fail to remove their hats to the BUF in the presence of the returned men. Sometimes the policemen on duty assisted, rather than prevented, the ensuing thuggery. For these Anzacs any attempt to raise a cheer for the ARE/ABE was seen as treason. Those who cheered the ABE were Bolsheviks, no-hopers or worse yet, Irish!

Indeed, the various shades of Aussie socialists and communists displayed the ARE rather than the ABE. On the one hand they weren't allowed the ABE, anyway. On the other, there was their antipathy to the BUF symbol of British capitalist imperialism. Finally the ARE was at least regarded as Aussie and it was RED! For the CPA, singing *The Red Flag* was a fine amalgam of socialism and nationalism, for their own ANF was red.

As we have seen, many Australians gave pride of place in their hearts to the BUF. They had been brought up hardly seeing either the ABE or the ARE. When they did manage to see them they were told or made to feel that these ensigns were useless elaborations of the BUF. These extra flags with the Union canton had been designed to keep the malcontents happy.

Real people of course saluted the REAL ANF. Being British was most important, being Australian came a poor second - if at all. Besides, both ensigns were really British colonial flags. Why should people put up with the monkey when they could deal with the organ-grinder? Display of either ensign was superfluous and a waste of time.

So what effect did the 1953 Flag Act have on Australia? Obviously very little. It was only with the success at the 1972 Olympic Games and the America's Cup victory that the majority of Aussies were turned out of their trance about matters vexillological. Mind you, there was no shortage of commercial help in beating the national drum. The Bicentennial year, the Great Australian Flag Debate and the Brisbane Empire Games all helped keep the question of the national flag in the public mind.

The explosion of national sentiment, whether artificial or real, did not of course mean a victory for the advocates of the ABE. With the America's Cup came the Boxing Kangaroo design and a whole flood of 'roo designs for an ANF. The Eureka advocates, the ANFA Association, the looney-tune designers with their blowflies and Japanese rising suns, and the drunken AUSFLAG hedonists all chipped in. Australia's flag schizophrenia remains.

With a large ethnic community of different loyalties, a huge section of the population are non-committal on flag matters (several incidents involving ethnic flags and opposition to them have occurred recently, some without ending up in court).

In sum, the wishes of the people are now very disparate and hard to fathom.

This has brought in turn an era of polls and surveys, to find out what the nation thinks about an ANF. Usually it is about the current design. Sometimes other would-be designs are tested for approval. As a result of the previous history, of choice between an ensign and the BUF, there is no doubt of the confusion in the public mind.

That uncertainty has been compounded by two disturbing developments, and strengthening in turn overtones of schizoid nationalism.

The first is the Great Australian Flag Debate itself. The debate itself means that people are no longer sure. The ground shifts beneath them.

The second, more disquieting in its consistency is the inability of people to get the features of the current (1983) ANF/ABE right. When shown the ARE, they get

completely confused because most have only seen this in a book. Just as artists of the period 1901-54 could never agree on the colour of the ANF, let alone the number of stars, their position or the number of their respective points, so modern artists fall into the same trap, with the colour of the field changed by decree in 1983 to royal blue from navy blue (even this detail is sorely abused). One Melbourne radio station uses its call-sign to replace the BUF canton on the station's logo - an infringement, incidentally, of the law that the ANF/ABE not be used for commercial purposes.

No wonder then that 60% of respondents to one of these flag polls identified the New Zealand National ensign as the ABE. Foreigners have even greater trouble, as shown by Professor Guenther's survey published in *Crux Australis*, no. 22. Flagmakers themselves have been caught out by the 1983 change. Several still make navy blue ANF flags; some are making them with a sort of UN sky blue! All adding to confusion.

The final state of affairs is best summed up by John Matheson (Father of our beloved Maple Leaf flag) when writing in his book that his country was not really in search of a flag but that the flag was looking for a country. Australia, like Canada in 1964, is in search of itself. There is no shortage of possible flags from which to choose, and that is perhaps another sign and factor in prolonging Australia's flag schizophrenia - a schizoid condition that started in 1901.

It is now 1989 and the ICV is being held in Australia for the first time and yet that schizoidism persists. Australia is afraid to be itself, trying desperately to be anything but Australian. It succeeds in being confused. Such schizophrenia goes beyond individuals wanting to be British and not at the same time, beyond being adult and child at once.

It is shown in our attitude to the flags themselves. People will talk about the ABE, but not about the ARE. They will rail about the BUF, but not about the Stars and Stripes.

The conclusion inescapable is that question of a RED ANF and/or a BLUE ANF is the touchstone to understanding Australia's flag schizophrenia. When that issue is finally settled, the other aspect, of State flags, might also be resolved. The time to end schizoidism, even, and especially in Australia, is now.