

Designing a new Australian flag: a theory of evolution and reconciliation

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ABSTRACT: The history of the Australian national flag reveals a progressive series of design changes, authentication and constitutional authorisations. This process of evolutionary change, as opposed to revolutionary change, continues today. This paper outlines the Australian flag debate, the criteria for effective flag design and design proposals for a new Australian National Flag. The 'Advance Australia' flag design proposed in 1992 is discussed in detail and is assessed in the context of 1997 with particular reference to the issue of Aboriginal reconciliation.

The illustrations for this paper appear on Plates 57-59.

1 Introduction

The suggestion of changing the Australian flag usually evokes a passionate response. Why is discussion so dominated by politics, tradition, race, sentiment and guilt and why is design often removed from the argument? Is it the conservative nature of Australian society? Is it a lack of national maturity, or have the people of Australia not been presented with an acceptable alternative? This paper attempts to stimulate discussion by articulating a practical design outcome based on research investigation and vexillological conventions.

2 The Australian flag debate

Although the Union Flag was not the first flag raised in Australia, it does form the basis of our current flag. The present Australian flag has always been regarded as a colonial flag of the United Kingdom. The design chosen in the 1901 international competition was similar to many other designs which existed prior to Federation (Fig. 1). Modification and fine-tuning of the flag continued after 1901, while confusion reigned about the flag's official status.

The debate for changing the Australian national flag is a passionate one and much of the debate was well covered at the 1989 International Congress of Vexillology in Melbourne at which time Tony Burton described the present Australian flag as:

... a relic, a distillation of imperial distinction and destruction. In 1991, not to speak of 2001, when Britain has become a province of Europe, the symbols of a faded Empire speak not of enduring tradition, but of a reality long since passed. (Burton 1989)

Constructive discourse is often jaded by people's inability to separate the flag question from the republican debates in Australia. Although intertwined, they are constitutionally separate, as was the National Anthem which changed from 'God Save The Queen' to 'Advance Australia Fair' through a referendum in 1977.

The debate for changing the Australian flag started in earnest in September 1901 when the winning design was announced. Many people continued to use the Union Jack long after 1901. There was strong criticism of the judges' choice. It was argued that the competition was a cynical public relations exercise designed to make Australians feel that they had designed their own flag. In reality, the judges were briefed to choose a design which featured the Union Jack and Southern Cross. This point was not included on the published brief, which did however disclose that '... the successful design will be submitted to the imperial authorities.' This statement of imperial authorisation has been used to bolster an argument for change by claiming that the final choice for the current flag design was made by the British. Flag loyalists strongly maintain that imperial approval was simply an issue of protocol and that the British endorsement was to rubber-stamp the Australian Federal Government's decision. Australian flag historian Carol Foley articulates the significance of imperial approval:

The resolution of this issue is important for logical and for emotional reasons. If we didn't choose our present flag and if it was imposed on us by another country, then, arguably, both logically and emotionally, our attachment to it is consequentially and significantly weakened. (Foley 1996)

The Ausflag organisation has been an active voice of change in recent years and has presented a number of new design alternatives to the public, most of

which feature the Southern Cross (Fig. 2). The momentum for change has increased steadily since the early eighties with numerous design competitions taking place.

2.1 Reconciliation - indigenous Australia

The evolution of the Australian flag reflects Australia's relatively smooth political, cultural and historical development as a nation since white settlement. However, if we include Aboriginal history and culture, as we must, then white settlement itself remains as the most destabilising event in Australia's past. It is therefore not surprising that indigenous Australia is cynical about the national flag debate.

The emergence of the Australian Aboriginal flag in the early seventies brought with it a sobering element to the debate. The design of the flag is attributed to Harold Thomas, an Aboriginal rights activist and artist. In April 1997 he won sole copyright ownership of the Aboriginal flag after the Federal Court's finding challenged a Federal Government gazetted proclamation making the Aboriginal flag public property. Harold Thomas immediately expressed concern about the insensitive use of the flag and has strongly stated that he may decide to restrict its use (*Herald Sun*, 15 April 1997, p. 21). Most Aboriginal groups are pleased to have Harold Thomas as the custodian of the flag while others are concerned about the private ownership of such an important icon. They fear that the flag may be lost as a unifying Aboriginal symbol if restrictions are implemented. The Aboriginal component of the flag debate is a politically sensitive matter. With Australian Aborigines, the flag issue has become immersed in the issue of reconciliation - a situation which creates an uneasy climate for constructive design discussion.

The South African flag, designed by Fred Brownell in 1993, demonstrates how design can contribute to racial and political consensus and avoid racial alienation. This flag demonstrates how simple, but effective design, can symbolically represent a sensitive issue and help create a climate of racial and political unity. Flags can be powerful entities with personalities and persuasive qualities of their own.

2.2 Australian icons

The correct choice and sympathetic depiction of an icon is crucial to the success of the flag. Tony Burton defined an icon as:

... an artefact or representation that calls to consciousness a sense of power of which it is merely the representation. Conversely, because it has this sacramental function, it has the ability to alter states of mind. So the image acquires power in its own right. (Burton 1989)

The Southern Cross and the kangaroo have been the two most popular icons to appear in design proposals for an Australian flag. Although the concept of simply removing the Union Jack from the current flag is logical, the use of the Southern Cross by itself has been criticised. It is seen as a symbol of 'the southern hemisphere, not just of Australia. The Micronesian flag features a four-star constellation resembling the Southern Cross on a pale blue background (Fig. 2).

The kangaroo is one of Australia's most recognisable icons. The silhouetted shape of the kangaroo is unique, strong, athletic and proud in appearance. It features on the Australian coat of arms, Australian currency and enjoys national and international exposure in corporate identities such as Qantas Airlines. An Aboriginal organisation, the Kimberley Land Council, has incorporated a kangaroo in the yellow circle of the Aboriginal flag as their logo. The kangaroo has consistently featured in Aboriginal art for thousands of years. The kangaroo was first used in an official capacity on an Australian flag in 1982 when it was added to the roundel in the fourth quarter of Australian Air Force Flag.

The Ausflag organisation has created a number of designs which feature the kangaroo. Tony Burton comments in his 1989 paper that the kangaroo, like no other icon, lends itself to recognisable and exciting stylisation and stands alone as being readily associated with Australia. Australians are recognised as chronic sufferers of cultural cringe. Some people are embarrassed at the very thought of featuring a kangaroo on the flag. Strangely, they see the icon as 'too Australian.' This attitude is surely the result of an inferiority complex entrained by the sycophantic symbolism of the current Australian flag.

3 Criteria for effective flag design

In 1992 Wayne Rankin, National President of the Australian Graphic Design Association, likened corporate identity design to flag design:

The design of a new flag is really no different to designing a corporate identity for a corporation. It will be a much more emotive issue, of course, but the technical fundamentals are the same. A new identity can effectively instil new enthusiasm and energy into a company. Hopefully a new flag will create the same enthusiasm, energy and direction for Australia. (Rankin 1992)

Corporate identity clearly projects what makes an organisation special; it 'articulates the style, ethos, activities, philosophy, work ethics and unique capabilities' of an entity (Seddon 1992). With a clear similarity between the fundamentals of corporate identity and flag design it is useful to examine the criteria used for judging the effectiveness of visual identity devices. According to Rand (1991) they are: (a) distinctiveness; (b) visibility; (c) useability; (d) memorability; (e)

universality; (f) durability; and (g) timelessness. Further insight into the criteria for effective flag design can be gained from the committee formed to report on a new National Flag for South Africa. Their unanimous view was that a new flag must: (a) promote unity; (b) be simple in design; (c) be unique and (d) be practical from a vexillological, manufacturing and marketing point of view (Brownell & Stylianides 1994). The above criteria are useful in evaluating design proposals for a new Australian flag.

4 The 'Advance Australia' national flag

The design proposal titled 'Advance Australia' (Fig. 3), features both the kangaroo and the Southern Cross. A forward moving, dark blue kangaroo is silhouetted against a red Australian sky. The leading edge of the kangaroo diagonally divides the flag into two distinct areas. The blue area of the kangaroo bleeds off to the fly edge with the Southern Cross reversed out in white in both the second and fourth quarters.

Feedback on the Advance Australia National Flag was very positive. Dr Whitney Smith, Executive Director of the Flag Research Center in the USA, commented in a letter dated 26 June 1993:

For many years we have been watching developments in your country as they relate to the national flag and other symbols. Many of the proposals made have been very amateurish, ignoring the most basic rules of vexillography. This has also been true of many professional designers who know little or nothing about the flag as a medium and end up with something which more resembles a poster than a flag. Your design, on the other hand, meets most of the requirements and provides a very striking, symbolic, and memorable design.

Dr Whitney Smith also recommended the inclusion of a fimbriation to separate the red and blue areas which were of a similar tonal value. In a letter dated 21 May 1992 Prime Minister Paul Keating was more non-committal, referring to the proposal as an 'intriguing design.' Lois O'Donoghue, Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), said in a letter dated 20 October 1992:

The proposed new flag still represents part of the English heritage and whilst I agree that it has merit, any design endorsed by the Board would need to be more representative of the first inhabitants. The Board would also not necessarily be in a position to decide on this type of issue without wider consultation. Once again, thank you for considering the Aboriginal point of view.

O'Donoghue's opinion prompted a reassessment of the concept and inspired the development of the following 'Reconciliation' version of the 'Advance Australia' National Flag.

5 The 'Advance Australia' reconciliation flag

An 'Advance Australia' Reconciliation flag is proposed in recognition of indigenous Australians' desire for recognition of their own identity. This version of the proposed national flag design would feature a red sky, black kangaroo and yellow stars. Both flags would be endorsed and used as official Australian flags. It may be argued that the colour difference suggests division, however, the consistent design of both flags acts as a solid symbol of unity and reconciliation. The principle of multiple flag versions is well established. Australia, like many other countries, displays different ensigns for a variety of ceremonial occasions. In the future Australia may decide through reconciliation to assemble under one of the two ensigns to form the final evolutionary step.

At a meeting on 17 April 1997 with Helen Curzon-Siggers, Director of MOSA (Monash Orientation Scheme for Aborigines), reaction to the flag design was extremely positive:

The reconciliation aspect of the design shows genuine sensitivity. The concept of two flags is a thoughtful way of satisfying the requirements of both indigenous and non-indigenous Australia. The design is strong and should appeal to Aboriginal Australians. The flowing depiction of the kangaroo sits well with Aboriginal culture. Traditionally the kangaroo represents the earth. It is a strong cultural icon. The Aboriginal colours look great for the Reconciliation Flag but I agree that the red white and blue version is the right way to go for a National Australian flag. A jump to red, black and yellow would be too much for non-indigenous Australians at this stage. By this I mean, in the current hostile Australian political climate of the Native Title and Pauline Hanson debates, the timing is inappropriate.

Sharon Firebrace, State Coordinator of Australians for Reconciliation made a useful suggestion regarding the design concept at a meeting on 22 April 1997:

It is a strong design in its own right. We don't require two flags. Australia needs one national flag which in some way acknowledges indigenous Australians. Perhaps the blue could change to black in recognition of Aboriginal Australia. The issue of colour is an important one and probably requires market research.

The Firebrace opinion suggests that, as in the case of South Africa, it may be possible to achieve design consensus with one flag. The following National Reconciliation flag proposal was inspired by this opinion.

6 The 'Advance Australia' national reconciliation flag

This version of the 'Advance Australia' design proposal further acknowledges Australia's original inhabitants by changing the blue silhouetted kangaroo to black. The sky remains red and the stars white. A move away from red, white and blue may prove difficult at this point in time. However, the concept of a single unifying flag recognising Aboriginal Australia through colour and iconography is a logical one.

7 Conclusion

Australians should be proud of their current flag whether they like its British colonial design or not. It has served the country well over the years, both through times of adversity and triumph. However, it has become clear that as a nation we have outgrown it. Australia has reached a point in time where a change is not only necessary, but long overdue. To feature the flag of another country on our flag is perceived by the rest of the world as illogical and by Australians as not 'fair dinkum' (genuine). It is neither a unique design nor a national flag - it is a colonial flag. To claim that the Union Jack on the Australian flag symbolises the historical origin of our people is insulting to the extreme, especially for Aboriginal Australians. The kangaroo, Australia's most recognisable symbol, if depicted with style, should be the premier feature of our new flag. The southern hemisphere symbol of the Southern Cross should be retained although it is not unique enough to be used on its own. History will view the current Australian flag as a transitional flag which smoothly and successfully carried the country from English imperialism to reconciliation, nationhood and true independence.

Acknowledgements

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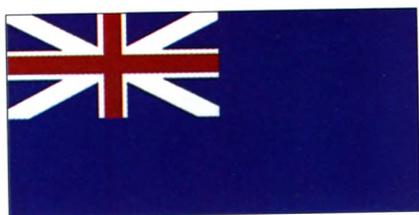
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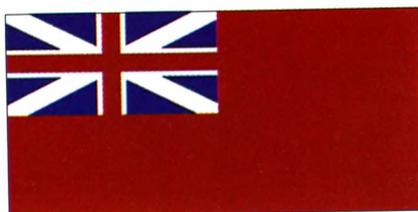
Brian Seddon has had extensive professional design experience in Australia and North America where he managed design activities for notable business, industrial, government and institutional clients. As an academic staff member at the Monash University College of Art and Design he has had a special interest in visual identity devices.

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Plate 57



THE BRITISH BLUE ENSIGN



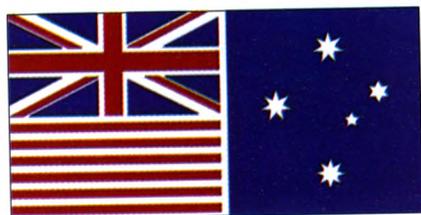
THE BRITISH RED ENSIGN



THE ANTI-TRANSPORTATION LEAGUE FLAG



COLONY OF VICTORIA FLAG



THE HERALD FEDERAL FLAG

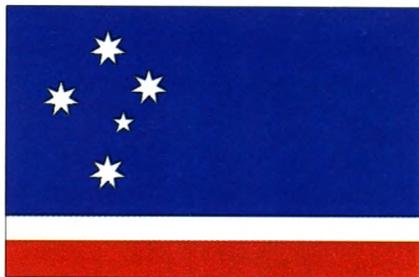


THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL FLAG

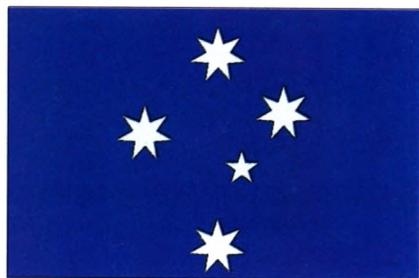
PRE-FEDERATION FLAG DESIGNS WHICH PRECEDED THE CURRENT AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL FLAG

Figure 1

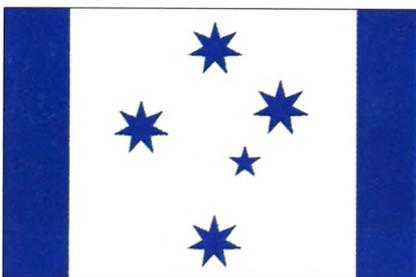
Plate 58



WAYNE STOKES



AUSFLAG



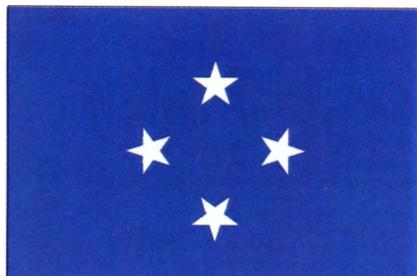
TONY BURTON



KEN DONE



HAROLD SCRUBY & TONY BURTON



NATIONAL FLAG OF MICRONESIA

SOUTHERN CROSS DESIGNS PROPOSED BY AUSFLAG COMPARED WITH THE MICRONESIA FLAG

Figure 2

Plate 59



'ADVANCE AUSTRALIA' NATIONAL FLAG



'ADVANCE AUSTRALIA' RECONCILIATION FLAG



'ADVANCE AUSTRALIA' NATIONAL/ RECONCILIATION FLAG

'ADVANCE AUSTRALIA' FLAG DESIGNS BY RUSSELL KENNEDY

Figure 3