



Seeking an Emblem

Observations on the Tradition of the New Zealand Ensign

By

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Front cover illustration from the NZ Government website info@flag.govt.nz *The NZ flag – your choice to decide.*

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Tim Kerr, December 2015

So, we need a new national flag?

We are going through a voting process to decide the need – and the design – of a representative New Zealand national flag – an ‘ensign’. Before everyone rushes out to vote for a new flag it would pay to know a little about flags. They have been around for a long time, and there is considerable formal etiquette in the design, construction and flying of national flags. In the present debate about the New Zealand flag there are three objections to the current design:

1: Its lack of uniqueness fails to tell the rest of the world who we are.

2: It is too similar to the Australian Federal ensign

3: It has a British union ‘jack’ in the canton – the first or ‘hoist’ quarter of a flag.

One of the first considerations as we explore the debate is the subtle difference between a national flag, a national ensign and a standard.

A **flag** is simply an emblem or marker. For example, the Silver fern on a black background is a flag – even if painted on the side of an aircraft it is still a flag. It need not be woven nor of any particular dimensions. A corporate logogram can double as a flag.

An **ensign** is a military or naval flag indicating nationality. Our current, blue, New Zealand flag is an ensign. It was born of a naval ensign, adapted and finally recognised as the New Zealand Ensign.

A **Standard** is a military or ceremonial flag usually incorporating a badge or heraldic device such as a coat of arms. Standards can be quite ornate for they are flown only on ceremonial occasions and the cost of fine silver and gold thread, silk and other expensive materials that might make up a particular Standard become quite nebulous, a tiny part of a courtly panjandrum. Members of the British Royal family have their own standards, as does the Governor General of New Zealand.

Apparently our current national ensign fails to describe who we are. It is not unique enough. Let’s take a look at some other well-known national ensigns.

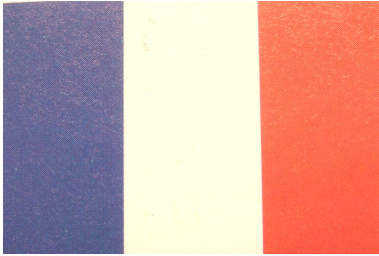
Simple ensigns so unique they would never lead to national confusion!

With a couple of exceptions, the most well-known national ensigns are simple. For example, the tricolore, which since about 1790, everyone recognises as the French national ensign. The widely recognised ensign is merely three vertical stripes blue, white and red. For all its simplicity, the ensign represents the passion of revolutionary forces, the blue and red the colours of Paris separated by white of the pre-revolutionary Bourbons, purportedly as a concession to a moderate tolerance of royalty. (Apparently decapitating the royals was not part of the original revolutionary plan.)

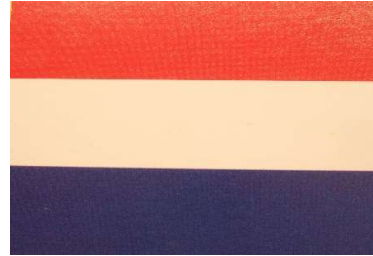
Another simple, well-known ensign is the red circle on a white background representing the rising sun of Japan. There are others, but as an isolated cluster of islands far from the centres of international economic or political activity we rarely see them.

If people are confused over similarities of the New Zealand and Australian ensigns then it will be worthwhile to consider other countries that share similar ensigns.

The well-known French tricolore is easily confused with the Dutch ensign which is merely a horizontal copy of the French Tricolore, except since it was flying back in 1572, it predates the tricolore by some 200 years.



The French Tricolore



The Dutch or Netherlands Ensign

(Note: all illustrations were copied from "Flags of the World – an illustrated guide to the flags from around the globe" by Eve Devereux.)

The only difference between the current blue, white and red Netherlands ensign and its European neighbour Luxembourg, is the shade of blue.



The Netherlands Ensign...



And Luxembourg's...



The Paraguayan ensign, also horizontal blue white and red like the Dutch and Luxembourg ensigns is distinguished by a tiny coat of arms in the white strip in the middle, but then, lacking a navy of any size you rarely see the Paraguayan ensign flying in our part of the world.

Of course, a Dutchman in distress would simply fly his ensign upside-down, which could be interpreted as the Serbia and Montenegro national ensign.... Perhaps the Dutch should have stuck to a blue white and orange ensign, which before Holland or the Netherlands was one country, represented the House of Orange, but back then the yellow component of the colour orange was less colourfast and tended to fade, just leaving the red....



The Serbia Montenegro national ensign - although with so much political upheaval, possibly not



The Italian green, white and red ensign is easily recognised by the fact that it hangs outside Italian cafes and coffee shops. It is of course quite distinguishable from



the green white and orange of the Irish ensign, which hangs outside Irish-themed pubs. The Italian ensign would never be confused with the Hungarian ensign because the Hungarians placed their red white and green strips horizontally, and there are few Hungarian restaurants or bars in New Zealand.



The Hungarian Ensign

Another well-known European ensign belongs to the largest, most populated and economically wealthy country in Europe. It consists of three horizontal strips of black, red and yellow. Despite the ensign being an unlikely colour combination to paint a kitchen, the country's little neighbour, Belgium has chosen the same colours for its ensign, only they have arranged their black yellow and red strips vertically, like the French.



The Federal Republic of Germany's ensign.....



And that of twice-invaded little Belgium...

Slovakia and Slovenia have the same white, blue and red ensign as Russia, only they distinguish their ensigns with their respective coats of arms.

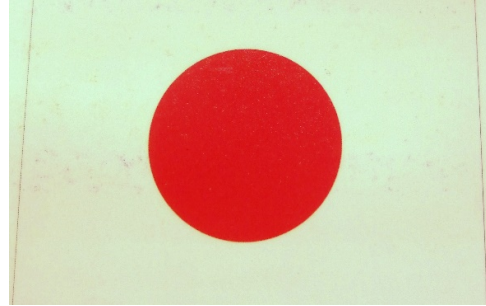


Slovakia



and Slovenia

Of the well-known national ensigns, one of the most distinguishable is the Japanese ensign. The red dot represents the rising sun. A simple and significant design, especially as the International Date Line was set at longitude 180 degrees by a group of Brits in Greenwich. Thereby allowing the Japanese to claim that Japan really is one of the first countries to see the rising sun.



To sum up, a national ensign does not have to be 'unique' to say who we are, many ensigns look like many others. Few give a fig what other countries ensigns look like, know nothing about, and care little, of any symbolism purportedly reflected in their design.

So what about the origins of our own national ensign?

The first 'official' New Zealand flag was flown before the country even had a flag. Under the strict British maritime laws of the 1830's a vessel entering a British port without displaying its country of registration could be impounded and the cargo seized. New Zealand-built and manned vessels simply could not register because they were not wholly built in a British dominion or colony. We weren't British back then! After the *Sir George Murray*, a New Zealand-built vessel was seized by Sydney port authorities in 1830, a Maori-owned trading vessel avoided arrest and seizure by flying a *korowai* a distinctive Maori garment in lieu of a flag of registration. Thus the first New Zealand flag, a *korowai*, predated British colonisation.

During the 1830's the official British Resident, James Busby recognised the need for a flag, mainly to encourage some cohesiveness amongst the numerous internecine northern Maori tribes, but also a flag that could pass as a flag of register. After several years of considerable pomp and delay one of three sample flags was chosen by the principal chiefs of the northern region (that is, Thames valley northward). The flag became to be known as the 'Flag of the United Tribes of New Zealand'. As a way of uniting differences within the constantly warring northern tribes and as a national flag of registration it was very effective. So effective it became recognised as the national ensign until 1840 and the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. When the treaty was signed New Zealand became initially a dependency of New South Wales, then in 1841 a separate British colony and the Union 'Jack' the official ensign.

New Zealand goes blue

In 1865 during the few years that New Zealand was a British colony the Colonial Naval Defence Act was passed stating that 'all vessels belonging to, or permanently in the service of the colonies' should wear the blue ensign, with the seal or badge of the colony in the fly. At the time New Zealand did not have a seal or badge, so simply flew an unadorned blue ensign. This was not acceptable. The secretary of the General Post Office, to wit Mr. G Elliot suggested sewing four stars¹ representing the Southern Cross on the fly in lieu of an ornate seal or badge. A brilliant idea, except the Southern Cross is not unique to New Zealand, so his boss, the Postmaster General overruled the idea and

¹ Four stars, because little *Epsilon Crucis* would be in the wrong position within the Southern Cross when viewing the ensign from the obverse side – which, of course, is 50% of the time!

recommended sewing *New Zealand* on the fly. The ridiculous suggestion (as it would be 'back to front' on the obverse side) was too long and elaborate to fit on the fly, so the letters NZ in red on a white ground were suggested. There were lots of other suggestions and edicts far too complex to cover in this article. In the end, the New Zealand maritime ensign was distinguished by the addition of the four stars of the Southern Cross on the fly. It did not end there. Edicts were issued by naval, colonial and NZ Parliamentarians on all sorts of ugly variations and laws related to flying the various interpretations of the naval ensigns. Perhaps the most significant 'rule' being that the blue ensign must not be flown on land. By 1900 New Zealand had decided that the National Ensign would be based on the naval blue ensign. It has to be emphasised that the blue ensign was chosen partly because of the ubiquity of British naval blue ensigns within New Zealand. The Maori preferred red – and indeed, fly the red ensign on their own official occasions - although the wonderfully symbolic and artful Tino Rangatiratanga flag is gradually replacing it.

So who had it first New Zealand or Australia?

Like the pavlova, Phar Lap, Bjelke Petersen, John Clarke and Split Enz, we had the ensign first. The current New Zealand ensign was approved under the New Zealand Ensigns Bill, 1900. One source of the origin of the design has been tracked down to (Sir) Albert Hastings Markham² a British naval officer who in 1869 suggested adding the Southern Cross. It was adopted as the New Zealand maritime flag by proclamation in the same year. However, the idea was probably quite ubiquitous by this time as our Mr G. Elliot had suggested the same design back in 1865.

On the Federation of the Australian states, a nation-wide competition to design an Australian Federation ensign was conducted. One of the five winners of the competition was William Stevens, ship's officer on SS Taieri, a New Zealander. It was first flown 3 September 1901, amongst the moaners and groaners - predominantly NSW chauvinists - who complained that the winning design looked like the Victorian State flag; which it did.



The Victorian state ensign - which upset the NSW'ers

What about the Union Jack? – The symbol of colonial oppression!

Many elements of flags and ensigns are mere symbols of what they supposedly represent. For example, the Southern Cross is visible anywhere in the Southern Hemisphere. It is not uniquely New Zealand. The blue fly may represent our nation surrounded by ocean. Maybe... but blue ensigns' just happened to be more abundant in New Zealand than red ones – and more easily acquired. The British Union 'Jack' ensign does not represent 'colonial oppression'. New Zealanders – the native tribes of the three islands of New Zealand – signed a treaty guaranteeing them independence and protection of the British Government under the reign of Queen Victoria. It was not the 'British Colonial Oppressors' who fought the wars of the Taranaki, who provoked and destroyed the

² The claim that Sir Albert Hastings Markham 'designed' the NZ ensign was probably not an entirely original proposal as the claim was published in a book by his descendants ME & TA Markham, *The Life and Times of Sir Albert Hastings Markham* Cambridge University Press, 1927.

Kingitanga movement in the Waikato. It was the New Zealand Government, albeit using British forces, 10-20 years after the signing of the Treaty. Of course Britain had delivered its fair share of colonial oppression, it inherited the British East India Company and its activities in India, it did very well out of the inhuman Atlantic-Americas slave trade, but give the country its due, it also led the anti-slavery campaign. By the standards of colonial governments, in fact of virtually any government of the era, Britain was benign. Britain's greatest contribution to the world was the evolution of its governance, the development of a constitutional monarchy, the reining in of Royal prerogative, the Magna Carta and the right of habeas corpus, the principle of Common Law, case law and the use of precedence, Parliament and the limitations of royal taxation, the issuing of Government bonds, the adaptation and development of commercial law and the corporate enterprise, the concept of the statutory independence of judges, the Bill of Rights, the general acceptance of payment for goods and services rather than bribes.

Countries around the world have benefited from adapting the British parliamentary system. Plenty of other countries haven't. The Union 'Jack' in the canton of the current New Zealand ensign represents not just Britain's so-called colonial oppression, but hundreds of years of its own strife and development culminating in a system of governance that suits New Zealand. That British emblem – the Union in the canton tells the world that this country – Maori, Pakeha and all those from different countries and religions that settle here know and will respect our law. What else would be a unique symbol of New Zealand? A white feather? A kiwi? Maybe a kiwi....

The Guild of Embroiders'...

Traditionally flags and ensigns were constructed, each colour a separate piece of wool or hemp or some other hardy cloth. And, of course, ensigns should be reversible, that is, look the same from either side. Thus each piece had to be cut, folded and hemmed, by hand. The time and labour involved meant flags were valuable, contributing to an etiquette for flying them. For example, flags only be flown in daylight. Flying a flag all night when it is not clearly visible halves its effective life, and as witnessed by the disappearance of the five alternative NZ designs on display in Dunedin, easier to steal under cover of darkness.

Of course since the advent of sewing machines in the late 19th century, fewer flags need be sewn by hand, and they can be more complex. The tricolore would probably not be so simple, so magnificent, if the French had held off their revolution until the 1890's!

Nevertheless, the four options for an alternative New Zealand Ensign dominated by an intricate white feather are ridiculously complex to sew.

A new, unique Ensign that tells the world who we are!

As a 'flag' any of the suggested alternative designs to the current New Zealand ensign would be OK. After all, a flag is simply another word for a logo. Print 'em on vinyl and stick 'em on the billboards, aircraft and airport buses! Zip bolts of woven polyester through a screen printer and flog them off in a Two Dollar store!

As an *ensign* though, the four proposed designs are more of a challenge. The silver fern? Oh, use a bit of white, or grey.... Whatever. Sew each little tuck, fold, and branchlet... Yeah, well, it still looks like a white feather.... Oh, the army boys won't mind, everyone will know we are Kiwis, eh?

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About the author

Tim Kerr has written articles for a number of travel and recreation magazines and has occasionally contributed articles to *New Zealand Memories*. He edits a regular newsletter for the Canterbury Branch of the NZ Shareholders’ Association.

Tim states he had no particular feelings towards national flags and despises the chauvinism associated with national ensigns. However, he strongly believes the silver fern (or white feather) replacements for the current New Zealand ensign are unworkable and will soon date. He feels the fifth suggestion is technically OK, but a bit pointless – the symbolism utterly lost on non-Kiwis. He also feels the little black flag with the so-called silver fern is pretty good – for supporting national sports teams, but not as an ensign.