“Let’s run it up the flagpole…”

The symbolism of flags and a democratic attempt to design one

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Abstract

National flags are ubiquitous symbols on the world stage. We are used to seeing them in a variety of contexts and on an average day it is likely that a person will encounter at least one, but more likely, multiple flags. We have even put a flag on the moon. But what do flags symbolize, beyond being a visual manifestation of a nation-state? A flag can mean many things, it has an infinite number of definitions depending on the beholder. Yet, it also has a single meaning as a unifying symbol for a diverse nation. But just as flags are symbols of unity, they are also symbols of division, between and within nations. After all, in the past, flags were predominantly used as tools for identification on the battlefield.

This thesis explores the multivocality of a national flag, drawing on the theory of semiotics. It also details the origins of the national flag and outlines the five principles of successful flag design. Then, applying the knowledge gathered, it examines the process surrounding the historical ‘flag referendum’ in New Zealand in 2015-2016. This was a unique attempt at democratizing the entire process of designing and adopting a national flag. First, the designs were crowdsourced, resulting in over 10,000 proposals. Then, the citizens of New Zealand were able to vote for their preferred design from five finalists, the winner of whom was then pitted against the incumbent flag. The new flag design lost and while New Zealand did not retire its defaced Blue Ensign, it had engaged in a monumental democratic experiment. However, as this thesis concludes, the democratic nature of the process might have been exactly why New Zealand did not get a new flag. People attach strong emotions and associations to symbols, like the national flag, and therefore, from the start the competition was rigged for the flag that had the most history.
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Introduction

When I was four and living in Norway my best friend who lived in the house across from mine put an Icelandic flag in her window for the duration of twelve days leading up to Christmas Eve. Her aim was to fool the Icelandic yule lads into paying her a visit and bringing her small gifts, as they did for me, by identifying herself as Icelandic through the use of a prominent national symbol. Naturally, the ploy worked, as our mothers were co-conspirators in keeping the mythology of the yule lads alive. What this story illustrates, however, is the strong link between a national flag and the people it represents – at least for two youngsters growing up in a flag-fervent area¹ – and how early in a person’s life these connections begin to solidify.

Flags have become a metonym for their state, their nation and their people. This is perhaps even more true now in the age of globalization than ever before as people living and travelling far away from their place of origin choose to represent their national pride through the display of national symbols, which have become ubiquitous symbols on the international, the national and sometimes the sub-national stage. While the significance of a flag in a state’s repertoire of national symbols and iconography may vary, it almost always holds a place of honor and reverence amongst both the government – many countries have detailed laws concerning the treatment of their national flag – and the nation’s people. And while the overt function of a national flag may be to represent the state and the nation, it also aims, on a deeper level, to unify a diverse population under one banner.² Iver B. Neumann writes that “A good symbol should be all things to all people, anytime, anywhere. That is, of course, impossible, but the flag may be the closest thing the

¹ “There seem to be more national flags per square mile in the Scandinavian countries than in most other countries.” – Orvar Löfgren, “A flag for all occasions? The Swedish experience,” in Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America, eds. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 137.

The success of the flag as a symbol often becomes evident when the possibility of altering or replacing a national flag is brought up. Such suggestions have invariably sparked heated discussion on the national – and sometimes international – stage about the flag, its history, its meaning and its future. People who thought they had little to say on the matter may find that they do, in fact, have strong opinions about their national flag.

A recent example of such public engagement with the national flag is the New Zealand Flag Consideration Project where the NZ government proposed that the country choose a new flag by first crowdsourcing the design and then holding a two-part referendum to: a) vote on which new flag design the population preferred; and b) whether the current flag should be replaced with the new design. After a two year process and a historic referendum, New Zealanders voted to keep their national flag with a vote of 57% to 43%. While the national symbol ultimately stayed the same, the country had been engaged in, as deputy Prime Minister Bill English put it, “a robust, democratic process that has allowed us to discuss who we are and how we want to be represented on the world stage.”

I followed the entire process with intrigue from the other side of the world – filled with strong emotions about the flag of a country I had never even been to. After the results of the second referendum had been announced I was left with numerous questions about the design and symbolism of flags, whether their creation had to occur in organic conditions in order for them to function and be accepted, and whether there had been something inherently flawed with New Zealand’s process from the beginning. These speculations led me to the topic of this thesis, where I want to explore what national flags stands for and apply these findings to the democratic process of designing a flag that occurred in New Zealand.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the process that occurred in New Zealand, it is imperative to have a general overview of flags and the purpose they fulfill. Therefore, this paper is divided into two parts; the first chapter is a general introduction to the concept of the national flag while the second chapter will focus on the New Zealand Flag Consideration Project. The first chapter gives a brief overview of the history of flags

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and how they became national symbols, introduces the principles of successful flag design and examines the symbolism of flags. The second chapter considers the New Zealand flag debate in relation to the history of the NZ flag and discusses the *Flag Consideration Project* in itself and in context with other examples of public engagement with a national flag, finishing with an exploration of the criticism surrounding the process. To conclude, I considered the strength of the bond between symbol and symbolism and pondered what the future would hold in terms of flag (re)design.
1. The Origins, Design and Symbolism of Flags

The custom of identifying nations and allegiances through the use of flags has become so ingrained in the global culture that it can be difficult to imagine a world without them. Certainly, most people could pass multiple flags as they go about their day and not give a second though to where they came from, the design of them or what they represent, and yet each and every one of these people could, when pressed, offer up some detail about their own national flag – if not others as well – even if just to identify it.

This chapter gives a brief overview of flags as a collective concept, tracing the timeline of the flag from its early function as a military device to the emergence of national flags. It also outlines the five principles of successful flag design and finally, the symbolism of flags is examined in relation to the theory of semiotics.

1.1 Terminology

Within the field of flag study there is a very specific nomenclature relating to the structure and design of flags. As some of these terms are used throughout this paper it is important to establish their definitions first.

The area within the parameters of the flag is called a field and is generally explained in terms of the base color of the flag. The field can also be a partition or division of two or three colors. Anything that appears on the field of a flag is called a device or charge and can range from simple geometric shapes to complex emblems. Defacement is the act of placing a device on an existing flag. Flags have two sides, the obverse, what we think of as the front of the flag and the side seen when the flagpole is to the left of the flag, and the reverse. The field of a flag is divided into quadrants: the two quadrants that make up the side furthest away from the flagpole are collectively known as the fly and the two closest to the flagpole are the hoist. The upper quadrant of the hoist is known to as the
canton and is the most significant area of the flag, often referred to as the honorary position, as it is the quadrant most visible when a flag is limp on a flagpole.  

1.2 From China to Rome, Caesar to the Crusades

The scientific name for the study of flags is vexillology, derived from the Latin word vexillum, meaning flag. A vexillum was a rectangular piece of cloth, usually bearing an emblem – most often an animal – carried on a pole by Roman cavalry units as a means of identifying the different legions and their detachments. It is from these flags and standards that the modern-day flag is thought to have originated, but the practice of conveying information about an individual or group in this manner predates the Romans. Civilizations such as the Babylonians, Ancient Egyptians, Sumerians and others frequently made use of vexilloids, solid objects attached to the top of poles, for identification purposes. The totems used by natives of the Americas and Australia serve a similar purpose, signifying a “shared identity [and] mutual obligations,” and the sacred status that these objects hold for their owners carried on in some part into the way that flags are thought of today.

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Flag-like objects were also common in ancient China, where the production of fabric from silk, dating back to about 3000 BCE, made it possible to create large and durable but lightweight flags for outdoor use. These flags and banners could be dyed or painted in various colors and were used in both military and religious contexts. As military devices the Chinese used banners of different colors to signify rank and status or to communicate orders to their soldiers, of which Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*, “Because they could not see each other they made pennants and flags [as a] means to unify the men’s [...] eyes.” Flag color traditions developed even further in the Middle East during the 6th and 7th centuries when certain colors became signifiers for particular dynasties and political ideologies, increasing the number of people that could associate themselves with a particular flag and therefore bringing such flags closer to their modern-day function.

Despite the different applications of flags throughout history, their predominant usage appears to have been for military purposes, and the introduction of flags on the European continent in modern times coincided with the Crusades of the Middle Ages. The Crusaders adopted cross flags for identification – symbolizing both Christianity and the Pope’s sanction of the military operations – and over time some of these flags began to acquire territorial associations, some even surviving relatively unchanged into the modern day. The usage of heraldic symbols (coats of arms) emerged in Western Europe at the same time as, but most likely independently of, the Crusades. Heraldry had substantial influence on the design of modern flags and “… the effectiveness of the symbolism [of flags] owes something to the simplicity, distinctiveness and originality of the heraldic colours and designs.” The combination of the expansive tradition of familial identification through the use of escutcheons and the flags of the Crusades had a profound impact on how the flag evolved to become what it is today.

In the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, the aristocracy in Europe began adopting flags to represent themselves and their realms, often adapting the design of their coat of arms to suit the form of the flag by transferring some of the elements, such as

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11 *ibid.*, 17.
14 *ibid.*, 19-21.
charges and colors, from the shield to the cloth. These flags, or versions of them, were soon taken up by seafaring explorers and merchants as a means of identifying, specifically from a distance, where they came from.\textsuperscript{18} and flags have played a significant role at sea since then. It is these early European flags that were precursors to the modern flag; while they fulfilled many of the same functions as the flag does today, they were not national flags as we have come to understand them.\textsuperscript{19}

\subsection*{1.3 The birth of the nation-state and the origin of the national flag}

The late eighteenth century was a period of tremendous change and political upheaval in the West. On one side of the Atlantic Ocean, the American colonies were at war with the British Kingdom for their independence and on the other, the French bourgeoisie were revolting against the monarchy. In the midst of these tumultuous events, both the newly created United States and French Republic adopted new flags.\textsuperscript{20} It is at this point in history that the nation-state is considered to have come into existence and with it, a national flag belonging to all the people rather than just the aristocracy, appearing “as a statement of the ‘modern’ mass-participant nation of citizens, illustrating people’s desire to express a new kind of ‘sameness’, nationhood and citizenship.”\textsuperscript{21}

Just as the geopolitical landscape of the world has changed hard and fast in the nearly two and half centuries since, national flags have come and gone at just the same rate as there is an intimate link between the formation of nation-states and the appearance of new national flags which are “… used to legitimise sovereignty and to illustrate distinctiveness.”\textsuperscript{22} In her text on the origin of the European national flag, Gabriella Elgenius identifies and classifies the European flags into four categories based on the circumstances that they originated from, as symbols of: i) warfare; ii) revolution; iii) independence; or iv) state-reconstitution.\textsuperscript{23} In my opinion, this classification system is not unique to European flags and most, if not all, national flags can easily be categorized in this way. Flags of warfare are the earliest flags, those whose origins predate the birth of the nation-state and are rooted in military or naval symbolism. Revolutionary flags and flags of

\begin{footnotesize}
\bibitem{18} Elgenius, “The origin of European national flags,” 19-20.
\bibitem{19} Leepson, \textit{Flag}, 8.
\bibitem{21} \textit{ibid.}, 15
\bibitem{22} \textit{ibid.}, 26
\bibitem{23} \textit{ibid.}, 27
\end{footnotesize}
independence are in many ways two sides of the same coin, both created at time of change as nations acquire sovereignty but under radically different circumstances: one in a time of dissonance and the other in amity. Finally, flags of state-reconstitution often appear as the merging or separation of two flags as unions between nations are formed or dissolved.

1.4 The principles of flag design
Flags convey meaning through the use of symbolic graphical elements and so their design is imperative to their function. Ted Kaye, a leading vexillologist with the North American Vexillological Association (NAVA), has defined the five principles of good flag design as the following:

1. Keep it simple: the flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory...
2. Use meaningful symbolism: The flag’s images, colors, or patterns should relate to what it symbolizes...
3. Use 2-3 basic colors: Limit the number of colors on the flag to three, which contrast well and come from the standard color set...
4. No lettering or seals: Never use writing of any kind or an organization’s seal...
5. Be distinctive or be related: Avoid duplicating other flags, but use similarities to show connections...

The standard color set, as defined by Kaye, referred to in principle three is red, blue, green, black, yellow and white. He goes on to say that when designing a flag, one should “separate dark colors with a light color, and light colors with a dark color, to help them create effective contrast.” 25 This is essentially a simplification of the first rule of composition in heraldry, the rule of tincture. In heraldry, the standard color set is divided into two groups, ‘metals’ and ‘colors’ and elements cannot be placed upon or next to one another if they have the same property. White and yellow, argent and or respectively, are classified as metals and everything else as colors. The rule of tincture led to the development of a practice known as fimbriation, where a thin line of the opposite property is used to separate two colors or two metals from one another. This creates contrast and allows for increased visibility. The rule of tincture is widely, although not universally,

25 ibid., 8.
applied in modern flag design (see image 2) and over eighty percent of modern national flags remain faithful to it. 

Image 2: Examples of flags that adhere to the rule of tincture and/or use fimbriation. From the left: South Africa, Luxembourg, Namibia.

Image 3: Examples of the combination of partitions, ordinaries and other devices. From the left: Jamaica – partition per saltire plus a saltire (ordinary); Papua New Guinea – partition per bend, a device on each partition; Albania – no partition, device in center; Panama – partition per cross/quarterly, device in two quarters.

The first and second principles are in reference to the partition of the field and the devices placed upon them. Devices can range from simple geometric shapes, known as ordinaries, to complex depictions of fauna, flora and other objects. Partitions, ordinaries and other devices can be used together or independently (see image 3), but it is best to keep the application of them as simple as possible as not to make the design of the flag over complicated. Kaye explains that “usually a single primary symbol is best” and that it is best to focus on the use of simple shapes and few, but representative, colors. The fourth principle further stipulates that writing and complicated seals do not function well on flags.

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26 Pastoureau, *Heraldry*, 44.
29 ibid., 6.
(see image 4) as they become indiscernible at distance and appear backwards on the reverse of the flag.30

![Image 4: Examples of flag that break the fourth principle. The complexity of the shield gets lost at a distance and it would be hard for a child to replicate the image. From left: Belize and Mexico](image)

Finally, as the fifth principle explains, in addition to conveying meaning about a nation through the use of national symbolism, a flag can also connote other flags through the use of colors, shapes and symbols, placing the nation in a wider context, thus implying “heritage, solidarity, or connectedness”31 with other nations (see image 5). However, it is important that the design of a flag remain distinctive, as flags that are too similar can easily be mistaken for one another, especially in low-light conditions or from a significant distance. Furthermore, elements placed on the fly become obscured when a flag hangs limp on the flagpole and so differentiating elements are best placed on the hoist.32

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30 Joint Commission on Vexillographic Principles, “The Commission’s report on the guiding principles on flag design.”
31 Kaye, Good Flag, Bad Flag, 12.
32 Joint Commission on Vexillographic Principles, “The Commission’s report on the guiding principles on flag design.”
1.5 Flags as ‘symbolic containers’

From its origins to its modern-day application the flag has come to embody many different things and, as alluded to before, a national flag is not only a representative of the state or the nation, but also its people, who come to attach their own meanings to the flag. Successful flags are at their core empty vessels, capable of unifying a population in spite of their differences because of their adaptability and ability to represent different things to different people. Jonathan Leib and Gerald Webster explain the multivocality of a flag in the following manner:

... flags are ‘symbolic containers’, with most country flags today symbolizing membership in a national citizenry. National flags therefore ‘condense’ a range of meanings and emotions pertaining to a group’s perceived common historical experience, real or imagined cultural homogeneity, and efforts to define a similarity of outlook for the future.36

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34 ibid., 100.
In the theory of semiotics, defined as “the study of signs and symbols and how they are used,” a sign is composed of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the object or ‘physical evidence’ of the sign – in this case, the graphical element or the physical cloth object of the flag – and the signified is the meaning the sign conveys. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is in most cases arbitrary and its meaning is learned. The interpretation of the sign lies with the individual as the “mental concept of the sign [is] based on the user’s cultural experience of the sign” and therefore the sign “does not have a single definable meaning, but its meaning can vary depending on the reader of the sign.” The same sign can then elicit radically different emotional responses from different viewers.

The current debate in the United States over the symbolism of the Confederate battle flag and whether it should be flown is an excellent example of how the same sign can be interpreted in different ways. Some say it is a racist and oppressive symbol while others attach it only to Southern pride and history.

In order to be successful, a national flag needs to have meaning beyond simply being an image with which a state represents itself. It must trigger an emotional response from the interpreter of the sign, as “in itself, a flag does nothing; if it doesn’t work emotionally, it is nothing more than a piece of cloth.” Citizens attach significance to their flag and are able to interpret it based on both their own relationship to the flag as well as the context the flag has been placed in, as the context in which a sign appears is integral to how it is read and understood. A flag draped over the coffin of a fallen soldier versus one that is being waived by fans at a sporting match between rival countries will have immensely different connotations, as will the same flag when it is flown at full- or half-mast. As the society or culture changes, the flag can be renegotiated, as “the meanings and emotions that are condensed within flags are constructed, enforced or contested over time.”

The Swedish national flag and the British Union Jack, for example, both went through a period of redefinition in the late 20th century as they were appropriated as

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39 ibid., 21
40 ibid.
41 Leib and Weber, “Rebel with(out) a cause?” 38.
43 Crow, Visible Signs, 14.
symbols of far-right nationalist movements within their countries before being ‘taken back’, so to speak, by the average citizen as well as the government who did not want such negative associations with their national symbol.\footnote{Nick Groom, “Union Jacks and Union Jills,” in \textit{Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America}, eds. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 77 and Löfgren, “A flag for all occasions?” 136-137.}

Just as flags have the ability to unify, they are also naturally divisive.\footnote{Eriksen, “Some questions about flags;” 7.} One of their main functions, after all, is to differentiate one nation from another. However, sometimes the division does not end at the border and national flags come to symbolize the division within a nation or are used as tools to categorically exclude a minority group. When the national flag was appropriated by far-right nationalist movements in Sweden, it began to take on the meaning of a ‘true Swede’; those who flew it, especially in certain contexts, were identifying themselves as being of Swedish (or otherwise Nordic) heritage and not immigrants.\footnote{Löfgren, “A flag for all occasions?” 136.} The Swedish example is by no means unique and this application of the national flag serves as a stark “...reminder of the limits of the flag’s multivocality; it may mean different things to different people in different contexts, but it still carries with it the basic function it had on the battlefield, namely separating ‘us’ from ‘them’.\footnote{Neumann, afterword, 174.} Any flag can come to symbolize this division, but in some cases, the design of the flag may be, at its core, divisive, employing colors or symbols that have associations with a particular religion, territory, ethnicity or history which represents only the dominant group of the society and excludes others.\footnote{Eriksen, “Some questions about flags;” 5.} National flags based on the British Blue and Red Ensigns, for example, are relics of the colonial era.\footnote{Marshall, \textit{Worth Dying For}, 45.} As of 2015, 45 of the 54 Commonwealth nations had opted to replace their former flag with one sans the divisive Union Jack in the canton (see image 6) and the 2016 flag referendum in New Zealand, discussed in the following chapter, was an attempt at doing the same.\footnote{Claire Trevett, “Lochore: Give flag vote a chance,” \textit{NZ Herald}, May 6, 2015, accessed December 13, 2017, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11443754}
Image 6: Selected flags from twenty Commonwealth nations, illustrating how they have been redesigned to remove the Union Jack from the canton.
2. A Democratic Experiment at a National Flag

New Zealand, like many former colonies, is a nation of two dominant cultures: those of European ancestry and the Māori, native New Zealanders of Polynesian descent. Proportionally, they compose 71.2% and 14.1% of the overall population. Many that feel that the national flag is not representative of both cultures and associate it heavily with the colonial history of the country, arguing that it is a naturally divisive symbol. Others simply think that the design is not distinctive enough – most often citing similarities to the Australian national flag – or that it is not a strong enough symbol for the nation to rally under. Discussions about the possibility of changing the New Zealand flag have surfaced regularly in the last half-century and a referendum in 2016 – the end point of the two year Flag Consideration Project – is the closest the nation has been to replacing a national symbol that predates even the country’s independence.

To gain a clear understanding of the motivation behind and the results of the Flag Consideration Project, this chapter begins by examining the history of the New Zealand flag and the population’s relationship with it. It then situates the New Zealand flag debate amongst historic examples where there has been public engagement in a discussion about changing a national flag. Finally, it will discuss the Flag Consideration Project itself and its results.

2.1 The flags of New Zealand

New Zealand has had three official flags since first adopting a flag in 1834: the Flag of the United Tribes of New Zealand, the British Union Jack and the current national flag (see image 7). The Māori also have their own flag and while it does not currently have an

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official status in the country, it is flown at certain sites such as in front of Parliament on significant days.55

![Image 7: The three official flags of New Zealand. From left: The Flag of the United Tribes of New Zealand, the Union Jack and the New Zealand Blue Ensign.]

### 2.1.1 Historic flags

New Zealand’s first flag – the Flag of the United Tribes of New Zealand – came into being out of necessity. New Zealanders relied heavily on trade with Australia and as British maritime laws stipulated that ships must fly an ensign indicating their origin, merchants from New Zealand, which did not have a flag, were in danger of having their ships and goods seized. In 1833 James Busby, a British consular representative to New Zealand, began to explore the possibility of adopting a flag to solve the naval trading issue and on March 20, 1834, twenty-five Māori tribe leaders from the Northern Island gathered at Waitangi to vote on their preferred flag from three possibilities that Busby had prepared. The United Tribes Flag received twelve votes, becoming the first official flag of the nation.56

The United Tribes flag’s tenure, however, was short lived. In 1840 New Zealand joined the British Empire and it was replaced as the national flag by the Union Jack.57 At sea the Union Jack can only be flown by British Navy vessels58 so New Zealand merchant ships sailed under the British Blue Ensign (a blue field with the Union Jack in the canton) until 1867, when the abbreviation NZ was added to the fly. In 1869, the abbreviation was replaced by a four-starred Southern Cross in red, fimbriated with white. This flag was

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58 Marshall, Worth Dying For, 43.
intended for maritime use only but quickly came to be used on land as well, in conjunction with, or sometimes instead of, the official Union Jack. The naval ensign continued to gain popularity in the three decades after it was introduced and in 1902 it became the official national flag of New Zealand, 59 forty-five years before the country gained full independence from Britain in 1947.60

2.1.2 A flag for the Māori
As a minority, the Māori have had a torrid relationship with the national flag since New Zealand became a British colony. The Union Jack, in particular, became a symbol of oppression to many of the natives.61 Some Māori tribes continued to represent themselves with the United Tribes flag, meant to symbolize their independence from the Crown, while others who were supportive of the British crown began using a Red Ensign defaced with the name of their hapu, a Māori family unit (see image 8).62 In the 1980s, inspired by the success of the Australian Aboriginal flag – created in 1971 and recognized as one of the official flags of Australia in 199563 – prominent activists decided that the Māori needed a similar unifying symbol. This led to the creation of the Māori national flag (image 8), which was first unveiled at Waitangi in 1990. It was given the name Tino Rangatiratanga, meaning absolute sovereignty. Almost two decades later, in 2007, the Māori flag ignited a debate when Transit New Zealand refused to allow the flag to be flown on the Auckland Harbor Bridge on Waitangi Day on the basis that it was not a national flag, despite having granted permission for the European Union flag to be flown there that same year.64 This event and the debate that followed led to the recognition of the Tino Rangatiratanga as the preferred Māori flag by the government in December 2009. The flag does not have an official status, but it can be flown complementary to the national flag.65

61 “Union Jack.”
65 “National Māori flag, The.”
2.1.3 The flag debate

The possibility of changing the national flag has been raised with regular intervals throughout the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st and yet polls conducted on the matter since 1973 all show a strong preference of the public to retain the Blue Ensign flag. Support for the existing national flag polled highest at 86% in 1984 and lowest at
62% in 2008\textsuperscript{66} when the debate surrounding the national Māori flag from the previous year was likely contributed to the waning support. The leading opposition to the retirement of the current flag is the Returned Services’ Association who suggest “…that generations of New Zealanders have fought and died…” under the flag, and that it would be disrespectful to those veterans to change it.\textsuperscript{67} Prime Minister Key, however, argues that soldiers abroad were represented by a number of different symbols – including but not limited to the national flag and the national symbol the Silver Fern – but that ultimately what they were fighting for were “…the values and principles that underpin [New Zealand]: for democracy, for freedom.”\textsuperscript{68} These are things that the flag represents and not the flag itself; the values the soldiers sought to defend would continue to be represented by a new flag.

As the history of the flag illustrates, it has been a divisive symbol from the beginning, particularly because of the presence of the Union Jack in the canton and its relation to the colonial history of New Zealand. This is one of the most commonly cited reasons for changing the flag, but the other prevailing reason people want to see it changed relates to the design of the flag, particularly in terms of Kaye’s fifth principle of flag design. Because the flag is based on the British Blue Ensign there are a number of other flags, national and territorial, that share the majority of the design features and the four-starred Southern Cross on the fly is the only aspect that differentiates it from the rest (see image 10). The New Zealand flag has on occasion been confused with the Australian flag, and at international events government officials as well as others have experienced being sat under the Australian flag by mistake.\textsuperscript{69} The debate reached a turning point in 2014 when Prime Minister Key, a longtime proponent of a new flag for New Zealand, announced he intended to hold a referendum on the matter. He hoped that the time had come for a truly unique and unifying symbol that all New Zealanders could be proud of, stating that “…arguably the most important reason for change in my view is to build over signs of patriotism; to get out there and celebrate modern New Zealand, this incredibly multi-cultural society.”\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{67}ibid.
\textsuperscript{69}“Calls for a new flag.”
\textsuperscript{70}Key, “It’s no secret...” 3:14.
2.2 Public engagement in national flag discussions

While unique in the extent that the general public was able to participate, the New Zealand Flag Consideration Project is far from being the first time that citizens have been able to participate in a discussion about their national flag. There are a number of examples where the general public has had a chance to weigh in on the process of designing a new national flag, either through unsolicited suggestions or when the governing body has explicitly invited their citizens to participate. The Icelandic flag committee of 1914, for example,
advertised in numerous newspapers for the submissions of potential flag designs and received 46 proposals from 35 individuals.71

Soliciting flag design from the general public in this manner is a prototypical form of crowdsourcing, defined as “the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and specifically from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers”72 in which the content is the flag design and the traditional supplier would be a vexillologist or a designer. Crowdsourcing, however, does not always produce the desired result, as was the case in South Africa in 1994, when after over 7,000 proposals from the public were deemed unsuitable for the country’s post-apartheid flag, state herald Fred Brownell was asked to design the new flag.73 Citizens have also been able to voice their opinion about their national flag when, in some countries, the decision to change the flag has been put to the people in a referendum. In these cases, such as in Belarus in 199574 and Mauritania in 2017,75 the public has no say in the design of the flag, but simply whether they want it to replace the existing flag.

2.3 The New Zealand Flag Consideration Project

2.3.1 The implementation

An important aspect of the Flag Consideration Project from the beginning was that it would be as democratic a process as possible. Early on, Prime Minister Key expressed that it could possibly have been easier to gather 61 votes and push a new flag through Parliament, but that it was important to him that all New Zealanders have a voice in the discussion.76 To increase public engagement with the process, the two-part postal referendum the determine the fate of the national flag was situated in a wider context of a) asking New Zealanders to express what they wanted their flag to represent through the

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Stand for NZ campaign, and b) calling for proposals of the design of the potential new flag.\textsuperscript{77}

2.3.2 The finalists

A panel of 12 judges – none of whom had a background in design, the arts or vexilology – were tasked with the job of choosing the final four flag designs for the first referendum from the list of 10,292 submissions received during the crowdsourcing portion of the project. A list of forty designs still in contention was published in August of 2015 (see image 11). Some were immediately underwhelmed by the lack of variation in the flags presented: half of the flags featured a Southern Cross; just under half featured a Koru; a fourth of the designs featured a silver fern, which Prime Minister Key had said from the get go would be a feature on his preferred alternative flag design; and only two featured none of those three elements.\textsuperscript{78}

Image 11: The official long-list of possible contenders for the new flag of New Zealand.

\textsuperscript{77}“Flag referenda.”
On September 1, a month and a half before the first stage of the referendum would start, the final four flags, as chosen by the panel, were announced: one design featured a Koru (a traditional Māori stylization of a silver fern) and the other three featured a silver fern, two of which were exactly the same except for the color of the field. The similarity between the proposed designs sparked a flurry of negative reactions online, one writer even going as far as to call the four designs a “national disgrace.” People in favor of changing the flag but opposed to the final four designs began to unite behind a different option – Red Peak – and within two weeks a social media campaign had collected over 50,000 signatures on a petition to have Red Peak replace one of the identical Silver Fern flags or add it as a fifth option to the ballot. Prime Minister Key was originally against the idea, citing the change as being overly complicated, but following legislation put forward by the Green Party on September 21, the design was added to the ballot with Key saying that he did not want “… to be the one that stands in the way of people having some choice.” Images 12 through 16 show the five finalists up for the first referendum.

Image 12: Black and White Fern, designed by Alofi Kanter from Auckland. This design uses the Silver Fern, one of the national symbols of New Zealand, in conjunction with the national colors black and white. It is meant to boldly announce the identity of New Zealand to the rest of the world.

Image 13: Silver Fern (Black, Blue & White), designed by Kyle Lockwood from Wellington. The design combines the Silver Fern, “an element of indigenous flora representing the growth of [the] nation”84 with the Southern Cross from the current national flag, a representation of New Zealand’s location on earth. The blue color of the field symbolizes the Pacific Ocean which must be crossed to arrive on the islands and the black symbolizes Kiwi pride and achievement.85

Image 14: Silver Fern (Red, White & Blue), designed by Kyle Lockwood from Wellington. This design is identical to Lockwood’s other design but in a different color. The symbolism is the same, with red replacing black and representing the heritage and sacrifices made by New Zealanders.86

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84 ibid., 12.
85 ibid., 10.
86 ibid., 13.
Image 15: Koru (Black), designed by Andrew Fyfe from Wellington. The Koru is a Māori stylization of the Silver Fern and in this design, it is utilized to represent “new life, growth, strength and peace.”

Image 16: Red Peak, designed by Aaron Dustin from Wellington. This design is a simplified geometric representation of the land and sky based on a Taniko pattern. The color choices are meant to represent both dominant cultures in New Zealand, with the black, white and red on the hoist echoing the national Māori flag and the blue, white and red on the fly drawing from the Union Jack and the current national flag.

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87 ibid., 24.
88 ibid., 2.
2.3.3 The result
Between November 20 and December 11, 2015, the first flag referendum took place as New Zealanders were able to rank these five finalists in order of preference. Lockwood’s blue, black and white Silver Fern flag came out on top and in March 2016 it went head-to-head with the current national flag in a second referendum (see image 17). Voter turnout was just shy of 68%, and the New Zealand Blue Ensign received 57% of the vote. While Prime Minister Key expressed his disappointment that the flag did not change, he urged New Zealanders to embrace and rally behind their national symbol and promised that his political party, at least, would not raise the idea of a new flag again in the foreseeable future.\[90\]

![Image 17: The current national flag of New Zealand the the proposed new design flown side-by-side.](image)

2.3.4 Criticism and aftermath
Both during the process and after the results had been publicized, the Flag Consideration Project attracted a lot of criticism from various directions, some of which has already been touched upon such as: the argument that changing the flag would be disrespectful to veterans; the panel of experts contained no design experts; and that the choices presented to the people were underwhelming or too similar. Others criticized the cost of the referendum and questioned whether the money would be better spent on more pressing

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\[90\] “Flag referenda.”
matters, or chalked the whole thing down to John Key using the issue for personal gain and to secure his legacy.

Image 18: Many of the designs submitted during the crowdsourcing portion of the Flag Consideration Project were jokes. However, they were widely reported on in both New Zealand and international media, undermining the process. 
Left: Fire the Lazer by James Gray. Right: Te Pepe by David Astil.

Then there are those who believe that process was simply inherently flawed. Chris Keall argues that the Achilles heel of the operation was the focus on being as democratic as possible by not allowing for a degree of control over the designs submitted in the crowdsourcing portion of the project. The promulgation of designs such as Laser Kiwi or New Zealand Pepe (image 18), especially by the international media, made a joke out of entire process. Others simply believed that the process lacked direction, with one New Zealander, illustrator Toby Morris, comparing the design contest and referendums to a case of premature interior decorating:

Without a reason for change, the process was aimless and directionless from the start. There was no movement, no impetus. We weren’t reacting to any identity-shattering or identity-defining event. We were choosing the curtains for a house we hadn’t built yet.

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92 Jenna Hatch, “The New Zealand flag vote was a wasteful vanity project by John Key,” Independent, March 24, 2015, accessed December 11, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-new-zealand-flag-vote-was-a-wasteful-vanity-project-by-john-key-a6950571.html
National flags are a reflection of the political realities of a nation and are most often “…introduced and promulgated during, or after, significant national events,” and while the colonial symbolism of the Union Jack or the flag’s similarity to its Australian neighbor are valid enough reasons to want to change the flag, there is simply not enough sense of urgency to be able to fuel a two-year process. There are many that believe the possibility of changing the flag should be revisited during defining national events, such as at the end of Queen Elizabeth II’s reign as monarch, or if the time comes that New Zealand reconsiders its place in the Commonwealth and considers becoming a republic.

At the end of the day, however, the perceived success or a failure of the Flag Consideration Project is relative to what one believes the end goal should have been. While the process did not result in a new national flag for New Zealand, it did succeed in creating a dialogue about the collective national identity and how the country wants to be represented on the international stage while also inspiring patriotism in the country’s citizens as they took a stance with their preferred flag. Some believe that the pinnacle of the flag debate has not yet been reached, and that now that an alternative design has entered into the repertoire of national symbols in an unofficial capacity, it will likely continue to amass support from those in favor of changing the flag.

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95 Elgenius, “The origin of European national flags,” 27.
97 “Flag referenda.”
Conclusion

Flags carry a great deal of meaning, and it is abundantly clear that the symbolism of these pieces of cloth fluttering in the wind is not only limited to what the colors or devices of the design are meant to represent. The question, however, is whether the meaning of the flag is inherently tied to a specific design, or whether it can be transferred to a new design.

The debate that occurred in and around the flag referendum in New Zealand loudly echoes a similar process that happened half a century earlier and was regularly cited by Prime Minister Key. When the Prime Minister of Canada, James Pearson, proposed to adopt a new national flag in 1964, it divided the country and most of the year was spent arguing the case. Those that were in opposition of the change argued that Canada had always been represented by their flag (a defaced Red Ensign, see image 19) and that it would be disrespectful to those that fought under it in the two world wars. Pearson persisted and pushed the new flag through Parliament, refusing to put the matter to a public vote, and on February 15, 1965 the iconic Maple Leaf Flag was officially flown for the first time. Today it is unlikely that you would find a person that would want to go back to the old flag – some would not even be able to pick the Canadian Red Ensign out of a lineup – but if there had been a referendum in 1964, it is not guaranteed that the flag would have been replaced.98

Image 19: The Canadian Red Ensign on the left and the Maple leaf flag on the right

Perhaps the underlying challenge for the New Zealand flag debate lay in the democratic nature of the process. Speaking about Milwaukee’s inability to replace its

poorly designed city flag despite three attempts at doing so through crowdsourcing and a vote, radio host Roman Mars exclaimed that it was “… discouraging enough to make you think that good design and democracy simply do not go together.”\(^9^9\) I think that it is not so much about the design of the flag – although certainly important – but rather the associations people have with the object itself. The New Zealand flag referendum did not happen in a vacuum: people brought with them the history of the current flag, and it compelled them to vote one way or the other. Of course, there are also those who want a new flag, *but just not that one* and therefore ultimately decided to vote for the incumbent.

Had New Zealand voted to replace their flag, it would have been interesting to try and classify the new national flag according to the categories presented in chapter 1.3; and for that matter, where does the Canadian flag – which did change – fit? Both examples saw the removal of colonial symbolism from the flag, and as such they could be classified as symbols of independence, albeit extremely delayed ones. However, I would argue that perhaps we are seeing the evolution of a fifth category, one which sees flags as symbols of redefinition as “associations attaching to nation and nationhood are renegotiated,”\(^1^0^0\) rather than change simply occurring in response to a single definitive event. And while it is impossible to predict what will happen in the future, what remains true is that change is inevitable and we will continue to see nations redesign their flags to convey an evolving sense of identity. I for one, am excited to see the inevitable official flag debate in Australia – which faces many of the same issues with their current flag as New Zealand – and only time will tell in what capacity that debate will occur. As for New Zealand, Prime Minister Key literally ran an idea up the flagpole and close to one million people saluted\(^1^0^1\) and while it may not happen in his lifetime or even mine, I believe that New Zealanders will eventually have a new national flag.

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\(^1^0^0\) Elgenius, “The origin of European national flags,” 28.
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List of images


Image 2: Composite image.


Image 3: Composite image.


Image 4: Composite image.


Image 5: Composite image.


https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/fire-lazar


Image 19: Composite image.


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