

THE TEN MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NEW ZEALAND FLAG REFERENDUM PROCESS

Palmerston North Rotary Club

November 2nd 2015

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Tēnā koutou katoa.

Many thanks for inviting me here today to address you regarding the New Zealand Flag Referendum Process. As a member of the panel it is our job to be neutral, not to promote any particular design, and to provide information where and when required and as such I welcome this opportunity to address you here today. As we embark upon the first referendum to rank the five alternative designs, I think it is important to address the ten most commonly asked questions in the hope of dispelling some of the myths so that people can make an informed and educated decision for the two referendums.

1. Are you worried about the level of feeling in the debate?

No. In fact I've been encouraged by the amount of passionate responses. Why? Because it shows me that we care deeply about what is arguably our most prominent symbol of nationhood. Whether we stay with what we have or we decide upon a new ensign, it is vitally important that we get it right and that above all else that we have an emotional connection to our flag. We need to remember that the purpose of a flag is to incite a strong sense of patriotism. A flag that fulfils its purpose needs to summon every ounce of pride your being can feel. Call it making the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end, your heart beating twelve to the dozen, or not being able to swallow without detecting your Adam's apple, this is the very purpose of a flag. Nationalistic fervour has its place and it should be demonstrated when witnessing your flag.

2. Is this a world first?

Yes. No other country has ever embarked upon such a transparent and democratic process to select their flag. Some vexillologists have expressed an opinion that they would not be surprised if other countries in the future follow suit. Second is that Australians I have spoken to are somewhat envious of our process and did express a hope that a similar process would be repeated across the Tasman. Should we decide to change our flag then that will leave only two independent countries within the Commonwealth, Tuvalu and Australia, out of 53 nations that will still be using the Union Jack on their official ensign.

3. Why did the panel select the four designs they did?

There has been much debate surrounding the four alternatives that were selected by the panel. Every panel member saw every design which numbered more than 10,000. As you'll appreciate, we are all different and bring different perspectives, and that made for robust decision making. We also invited a number of cultural (including tikanga), Vexillology (the study of flags), and art and design advisors, to provide confidential technical feedback on the designs under consideration. These advisors focused on ensuring that any proposed designs were workable and that there were no impediments in the choice of proposed designs.

We believe a potential new flag should unmistakably be from New Zealand and celebrate us as a progressive, inclusive nation that is connected to its environment and has a sense of its past and a vision for its future. It was of course an enormous task to make our selection and the panel was unanimous in this. In making our decision we didn't follow a category-based process which would have led to a different symbol on each flag. Rather we took a more difficult path, asking "What flag is right for NZ?" It has to be a flag which New Zealanders from all walks of life can identify with and which clearly identifies us.

I would like to take this opportunity to just briefly go through each flag chosen and explain the rationale behind the selection of each design.

a. *Red, White and Blue Silver Fern and the Black, White and Blue Silver Fern*

Two of the flags were created by the same designer, Kyle Lockwood. Both designs incorporate the Southern Cross and the silver fern, with one design using the colours red, white and blue, whereas the other uses the colours black, white and blue. The reasoning behind selecting the two is clearly to offer a choice regarding what colours New Zealanders feel represent our country.

Red, white and blue is a stronger nod to our current flag given its colours and as one vexillologist remarked "*the most commonly used colours in flags*" because they fly well and can be seen from a distance. The black, white and blue silver fern design was selected for people who feel that our national colour is black; our association with the colour undoubtedly has a long and strong history.

During the engagement process the most common comment made to panel members was that if the flag was to change then people would like to see the Union Jack replaced with the silver fern. There is another aspect to these flag designs that are worth noting. It replicates the Southern Cross as it is depicted in the current New Zealand flag. The reason why the colours are red and white is because in 1869, when the original New Zealand Flag design was created and proclaimed, the colours of the Southern Cross were to be the same as the Union Jack.

There was a particularly strong affinity with the Southern Cross which was the most common symbol presented within the over 10,000 flag designs submitted and a trend that is no doubt due to the current New Zealand flag design. Again the public who engaged with the process articulated that they wanted "*something old, something new*". The inclusion of two symbols within the one design can again be related to the current New Zealand flag, as it has both the Union Jack and the Southern Cross.

b. Black and White Silver Fern

Much comment was made about following the formula of successful flag designs with many highlighting the Canadian Maple Leaf, the Israeli Star of David, the Switzerland White Cross and Japan's Red Sun. They all follow the same rule - one unique symbol, two colours. As such there are really only two images that could be considered our national symbols; the kiwi and the silver fern. The panel considered that the kiwi flies less well on a flag and can be difficult for an international community to recognise. Canada had a similar dilemma when they looked at a new flag during the 1960's, the animal of debate being the beaver. They too came to the conclusion that, especially for an overseas audience, the beaver would become confused with a variety of other species.

The indigenous silver fern enjoys a long history in terms of representing our country. The earliest example of the silver fern being used as a symbol is during the 1850's when a rifle match was organised in Taranaki. Following that it was promoted by national rugby teams in the 1880's, in the military since the Boer War, and in trade from the 1920's. Look at its use today – we use the silver fern on our currency, the Coat of Arms, and on our passports. To some extent, should the flag change to incorporate the silver fern, it would be consistent with national symbolism we use on a daily basis. The black and white silver fern design follows the formula of one unique symbol and two colours. The design provides clarity from a distance as well as incorporating what some would argue are our national colours, black and white.

c. Black and White Koru

The black and white koru design was included as yet again it follows the one unique symbol, two colours concept. The koru was a popular option amongst flag designs submitted as a unique Māori symbol and it has a strong connection to the silver fern, as all silver ferns begin life as a koru. This provides the public another design that is uniquely from New Zealand. It is very distinctive and has a long history. It symbolises new growth and rejuvenation and most recognise it and relate to it.

The panel listened intently to the public feedback from the *'What do we stand for'* exercise, the two most popular values being 'freedom' and 'history'. These values are reflected in the four choices made by the panel. Both the koru and the fern grow freely and strongly given the right environment, can symbolise freedom, and both have a long and proud history when it comes to symbolising New Zealand in multiple arenas. They also represent the past and the future as the Māori whakataukī (proverb) associated with the plant articulates *"Mate atu he tetekura, ara mai he tetekura"* (As one plant frond dies, another unfurls to take its place). It speaks to the concept of regeneration. The traditional usage of the silver fern is also a great fit with the narrative of a flag as when Māori traversed the forest, they would leave the silver side of the fern facing the moonlight to provide a pathway home. It was used as a homing beacon, a way to find your way back to where you had come from.

4. Do you agree with the Red Peak Design being included in the first referendum?

My view is that the inclusion of the design is a positive development as it offers another option for the voting public. In particular it provides those with an appreciation of an abstract design, an option in the referendum. The symbolism of Ranginui and Papatūānuku is again a uniquely Māori concept and one that people from New Zealand can resonate with. This design also adheres more strictly to the majority of other flag designs that represent countries which may explain why many people have commented why it looks 'more like a flag'. Of the just over 200 countries, the vast majority employ straight line designs. The Red Peak design would not look out of place on a 'Flags of the World' poster.

5. What do Vexillologists think?

In September I attended the International Congress of Vexillology in Sydney. The Congress, consisting of the world's experts in flags, assemble every two years and discuss all matters relating to flags. Much of the focus was on what we are doing and comparisons were made between the New Zealand experience and that of Fiji's. During my time at the Congress I was fortunate enough to spend some time with Vexillologist Ted Kaye. Ted is the author of *"Good Flag, Bad Flag"*, a bible if you like on what's good and what's not when selecting a flag.

Ted was particularly intrigued with the process we embarked upon when it came to asking the public “*What do you stand for?*” By posing such a question, it provided the opportunity for the public to articulate what principles are important to our country and that those values might be reflected in our national flag. This is a process that, at times for many other countries, has been lacking when deciding upon their flags as they tend to be selected by legislation, royal or presidential decree, or by revolution. Another Vexillologist I met was Graham Bartram, Chief Vexillologist of the Flag Institute. Graham has also been supportive of the process and has expressed an opinion that above all else, people must like a flag to be endeared to it. The final message vexillologists conveyed to me was that it is vitally important that people view a flag in situ. Judging a flag on paper and in the wind can lead to two different conclusions about the appropriateness of a design. If you have an opportunity to view the five alternative flags on a flagpole, then I would encourage you to make the time and see what they look like in reality.

6. Are the eyes of the world upon us?

Yes. The level of media exposure our country has had from the exercise has been colossal, with articles appearing in the vast majority of major international television networks, newsprint and radio. Having recently travelled to Europe, the first question asked by foreigners upon realising where I was from is what I thought about changing our flag. It didn't matter if they were from the Americas, Asia, Africa or Europe, people from all parts of the globe are particularly interested in our flag debate. I struck several conversations with Brits from London on the subject. Their opinions fell into two camps; one camp couldn't understand why we would want to get rid of the Union Jack after all England had done for New Zealand and the other group couldn't understand why a country at the bottom of the South Pacific Ocean still used the Union Jack when we live thousands of miles away and hadn't had much to do with Mother Britain since the conclusion of World War II.

7. Is a flag a logo?

One observation I made during my travels of Europe is the love certain countries exhibit for their flag. In particular the countries of England, Switzerland, Italy and Germany, all took great care in flying their flags from their houses. They also tended to use their flag as a marker of identity and on products sold that originated from their country. In every souvenir shop in London were a range of products that had the Union Jack stamped all over them, be they an umbrella, a teddy bear or a replica of Big Ben. Similarly Switzerland plastered their red cross on every box of chocolates, army knife and watch. This leads me to believe that the more a people connect with their national flag, the more inclined they are to use them in everyday life; from using the flag as a logo on products to displaying national pride in their own homes.

8. Should people 'rig' the vote if they don't want the flag to change?

No, I don't think so. People should not dismiss their democratic right and have their vote disallowed by not completing their voting papers correctly in the first referendum. Some have also proposed to vote for their least favoured option in the first referendum in the hope that it wins and that therefore people will be more encouraged to support the current flag in the second referendum.

People who want to support the current New Zealand flag have the opportunity to do so in the second referendum. I would urge people to vote properly in both referendums. The risk people run by voting for their least preferred option in the first referendum is that should that flag win, then it could very well win the second referendum and people who have employed that strategy could see their least preferred option become the new flag for New Zealand.

Some have suggested that the first referendum question that should be asked is whether or not people want to change the flag. The issue with this approach is that if you do so, you are asking people to vote blindly. People may not be prepared to say that they want the flag to change if they don't know what it is being changed to.

9. Are we going to reach a consensus?

No. There will be five alternative flags and only one can be the winner. However given that the first referendum is preferential voting (it will ask you to rank the flags in order) that could mean that your second or third option might become the most popular alternative, rather than your first preference. The fact of the matter is that regardless of what referenda process is selected, there are going to be those who may not be happy with the outcome.

For those who find themselves in this category I would encourage you to remember that this is the most transparent and democratic process for selecting a flag that has ever taken place and to ask yourself the question before the second referendum *"Would you rather stick with what we have or would you rather see the alternative option become our new flag?"* It's an important decision and one that requires some thinking before placing your vote accordingly.

10. Do you think we will repeat this process if the flag doesn't change?

This is a question that requires a crystal ball and no one knows the answer. However, consider this. What will happen if Scotland decides to vote for independence in another ten years? Much debate ensued during the Scotland Referendum last year about what would happen to the Union Jack if Scotland decided to part ways from the United Kingdom. Does that mean that all Union Jacks are to remove St Andrew's Cross? Would that mean that we would have to change our flag? What might happen if Australia and Tuvalu change their flags in the near future? If that was to occur, then we may feel the need to take another look at our flag.

The other reason why we might change our flag is if we become a republic. If that was to occur, then a whole raft of changes would have to be implemented including our constitutional arrangements. Changing the flag could be one of many changes to occur.

I hope that I have answered some questions you may have had about the New Zealand flag referendum process. If not, then I am happy to take questions and attempt to answer them. The last point however that I would like to make is this – I would encourage each and every one of you to talk with your family, friends and neighbours about the referenda and to urge them to place their vote. Whether we stay with our current flag or change it to the most popular alternative, it is important that everybody has their say. After all, this process is not only a national first but a world first. This is quite literally, history in the making.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tenā tātou katoa.