



Your Flag's Got My Flag On It

The Union Jack and the Australian Flag

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Like many Brits before me, and surely many more to come, I am living, 10,000 miles from home, in Australia. For 250 years, British people have been coming to Australia, and for 250 years the flag of the United Kingdom has, in some way, flown over this land. Today, walking to work or driving along the highway, an Australian flag, with the Union Jack prominently in the canton,¹ is never too far away.²

While the Union Jack reminds me of home, I am aware of its contested presence on the Australian flag, a presence that elicits varied responses from the people of Australia. What does it mean to have the Union Jack, the flag of another nation, included as such a prominent feature on the Australian flag?

It is not my intention, nor is it possible in such a short piece, to revisit every aspect of the long running flag debate: the focus of this piece will be on the Union Jack. This paper aims to provide a critical discussion of the Union Jack's place on the Australian flag, and I will attempt to unravel the symbolism and meaning of the Union Jack in this context.

I will start by briefly recounting the histories of the Union Jack and Australian flags and the history of the flag debate in Australia. I will then reflect on Australia's British heritage, other immigrant heritage, and, finally, Aboriginal heritage. Lastly, I will discuss the continued relevance or irrelevance of the Union Jack in Australia today and its appropriateness as a symbol of this nation.

The Flags of the United Kingdom and Australia

The Union Jack,³ in its present form, was created upon the unification of England, Scotland and Wales with Ireland in 1801.⁴ England and Scotland are represented on the flag by the St. George's and St. Andrew's crosses respectively, while the cross of St. Patrick represents Ireland. Curiously, there is no symbolic representation of Wales on the Union Jack.⁵

The Union Jack was flown over Australia from its first outing in 1770, though it was by no means the only flag used.⁶ On September 3rd 1901, the current flag was flown for the first

¹ 'Canton' means any quarter of a flag, but is commonly used to denote means the upper-hoist quarter.

² This is a treat for an English vexillophile; we English are far too reserved and flags only seem to come out around the time of the Football World Cup, or, more worryingly, at the rallies of far-right groups.

³ There is no consensus on whether it should be called the Union Flag or the Union Jack. King Charles, in his 1634 'Proclamation appointing the Flag, as well for Our Navy Royal as for the Ships of Our Subjects of South and North Britain' referred to the Union Flag. It is unclear exactly how the term Union Jack arose, possibly from the term 'Jack Staff', meaning a flagpole on the bow of a ship. In addition, the Union Jack, as I shall refer to it, is not actually laid down as the national flag by statute; it is the de facto flag of the United Kingdom.

⁴ The Acts of Union1800.

⁵ Robin Ashburner, former President of the Flag Institute jokingly commented, "How is it, I hear you ask, that Wales, the most important country within the kingdom, is absent from the Union Flag?", before explaining that as a principality, Wales need not be represented heraldically (Ashburner, 'Flags in Wales' (2001) International Conference of Vexillology XIX. See also Scruby, 'Dragon With No Puff' (2009) 89 *Crux Australis*). Perhaps even more curious is that it was not until 2007 that a Welsh parliamentarian questioned this absence and called for representation of Wales on the flag (see BBC News, 'Welsh dragon call for Union flag', 27 November 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7114248.stm> accessed 6th January 2011).

⁶ For a detailed exposition of Australia's flag history since federation, see Kwan, *Flag and Nation: Australians and Their National Flags since 1901* (UNSW Press, Sydney 2006)

time, in a south-westerly wind, atop the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne,⁷ following a competition to design a new flag. The design for the flag was concurrently arrived at by 5 of the 30,000 entrants. While the Review of Reviews stated at the time that the Commonwealth Government had adopted the new design as the 'Federal Flag',⁸ it was not until the passing of the *Flags Act* 1953 that the current flag was designated as the national flag.

The Australian Flag Debate: a brief history

The flag debate has been described as "a high-octane issue that's been dividing us since 1901",⁹ and it is true that criticisms started flowing as soon as the new flag had been chosen. *The Bulletin* commented, shortly after the announcement of the new flag, that it is:

*a staled réchauffé of the British flag, with no artistic virtue, no national significance... That bastard flag is a true symbol of the bastard state of Australian opinion.*¹⁰

From 1967 onwards, Ray Morgan Research has conducted a poll, approximately every five years, gauging Australian opinion in the flag debate. These polls showed an intensification of interest in a new flag in the 1990s: 52% of Australians wanted a new flag in 1998.

The *Flags Act* 1953 did not provide any process for changing the national flag, though it was the norm for flag amendments to be effected by administrative decision, without a referendum.¹¹ In response to the heightened intensity of the flag debate, an amendment to the *Flags Act* was passed to provide for a process for changing the national flag.¹² The amendment provides that any proposed change to the national flag must be approved in a referendum.¹³

Since the peak of interest in a new flag in 1998, the calls for a new flag have, according to the Morgan polls, subsided somewhat, and the figure is now at 29%, with two-thirds of respondents preferring to retain the existing flag. Nevertheless, the debate will almost certainly come to the fore once again in the future, particularly in light of Prime Minister Julia Gillard's suggestion that a change in the monarchy would be an appropriate time for Australia to become a Republic.¹⁴ A move toward becoming a republic would surely reinvigorate calls for a new flag.

Australia's British Heritage

In 2006, Australia conducted a census. Citizens were asked about their heritage; 37% of people stated their heritage to be Australian while 32% identified as English, 9% as Irish, and

⁷ Ritchie, 'Evans, Ivor William (1887 - 1960)', Australian Dictionary of Biography Online Edition <<http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A140123b.htm>> accessed 7 January 2011.

⁸ Review of Reviews (1901) available at <<http://www.australianflag.org.au/review-of-reviews/>> accessed 1 February 2011.

⁹ 60 Minutes, 'The Great Flag Debate' (April 22 2010), transcript at <<http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=1043624>> accessed 7 January 2011.

¹⁰ Bulletin, Sydney, 28 September 1901.

¹¹ E.g. the Civil Aviation ensign (1934), the changing of the roundel on the RAAF flag (1949), changing from the Union Jack as the national flag (1953), and the endorsement of the two Indigenous flags (1995). The current flag was also not adopted by referendum.

¹² Flags Amendment Act 1998.

¹³ From a lawyer's perspective this is an interesting provision as the effect is to bind future parliaments by acting as a fetter on their power. Referenda are ordinarily used only for constitutional changes, as per Section 128 of the Constitution of Australia. Constitutional referenda require both a majority of electors to vote in favour and the majority of states, though the wording of the Flags Amendment Act does not appear to require such a double majority.

¹⁴ Lane, 'PM wants change of monarchy before republic', ABC News (August 17 2010)

<<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2010/s2985076.htm>> accessed 7 January 2011.

8% as Scottish.¹⁵ Given that the first non-aboriginal settlers of Australia were British, and that Britain has always been the dominant source of migrants to Australia, it is unsurprising that more Australians claim British or Irish heritage than claim Australian heritage. In addition to a strong British heritage in terms of the people of Australia, Australia's systems of governance and social institutions are also largely drawn from British models. The main purpose of a flag is to represent a nation and its people, so it is perhaps understandable that the Union Jack plays a starring role on the Australian flag.

Yet the Union Jack, placed in the heraldic position of honour,¹⁶ implies more than just heritage. It implies that Australia is a British colony or dependency. Only three other independent nation-states in the world continue to feature the Union Jack on their national flags.¹⁷ Indeed, the Review of Reviews, publicising the competition held to design Australia's flag, stated that designs "should contain the Union Jack, to stand for Great Britain",¹⁸ not as a representation of Australia's British heritage. Other Commonwealth countries have since changed their flags and rid of the Union Jack, and did not become republics in doing so.¹⁹

The Commonwealth star and the Southern Cross do, to some extent, symbolise independence, but they still appear subordinate to the Union Jack. As Paul Keating concisely put it, "the expression of the full sovereignty of Australian nationhood can [n]ever be complete while we have a flag with the flag of another country on the corner of it".²⁰ Keating's point was humorously illustrated by Ausflag's poster advocating a new flag for the 2000 Olympics, which, referring to 28 different flags all containing the Union Jack, read, "Australia's Identity Crisis: Colony, State, Nation, Fire Brigade or Yacht Club?"²¹ When I see the Australian flag, I have to remind myself that the ties to Britain are historical and that they no longer hold legal or constitutional significance, while the flag itself suggests otherwise.²²

Vexillologically speaking, the presence of the Union Jack results in a confused message. The Union Jack takes precedence over Australia's symbols, despite Australia's independence, and there is an uncertain relationship between interpretations of the Union Jack as a symbol of colonial power and a symbol of British heritage.²³ Clarity is a cardinal principle of flag design, and this may be reason enough to change it. However, it must also be remembered that flags are symbols of the people, and take on the meanings given to them by those people. Hard and fast rules may not be suitable for flags, where interpretation can change over time. While the Union Jack may have originally stood for the motherland itself, it seems to have come to symbolise Australia's British heritage in the minds of most Australians. In

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, '2006 Census of Population and Housing: Media Releases and Fact Sheets' (2007).

¹⁶ The canton is significant as it is the last part of a flag to wear out. Burton, 'A Clash of Symbols: Does the Flag Matter?' in Gould, Boland and Haverson (eds), *Caught in the Breeze: 10 Essays* (Blemish Books, Canberra 2010) 71-97.

¹⁷ New Zealand, Fiji and Tuvalu. Niue and the Cook Islands, nations with special status in association with New Zealand, also continue to use the Union Jack on their flags, as do some sub-state entities, such as the Canadian Province of British Columbia.

¹⁸ The Review of Reviews for Australasia (20 September 1901) 241 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ Perhaps the most obvious example is Canada's Maple Leaf flag. That flag is an instantly recognisable symbol of Canada that is internationally known. In removing the Union Jack from its flag, Canada did not lose its British heritage or historical ties, but it did signify that it was an independent nation worthy of a national symbol that all of its people could identify with.

²⁰ Questions Without Notice: Australian Flag (Mr. Downer, Mr. Keating), Hansard, 2 June 1994, 1318.

²¹ Ausflag, 'Australia's Identity Crisis: Colony, State, Nation, Fire Brigade or Yacht Club?', republished in Foley, *The Australian flag: colonial relic or contemporary icon?* (Federation Press, Leichardt 1996).

²² That said it will be recalled that during the 1975 constitutional crisis, the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, dissolved Gough Whitlam's Government, an interference with government that would be unlikely to happen in Britain.

²³ See Foley, *The Australian flag: colonial relic or contemporary icon?* (Federation Press, Leichardt 1996).

the most recent Morgan poll, 69% of Australians said that they favour keeping the Union Jack.²⁴

Australia's Other Immigrants

While predominantly of British heritage, Australia has a significant non-British, and even non-European, heritage. It is worth exploring this heritage; particularly bearing in mind that the Union Jack does not represent this part of Australia's past and present. One fifth of Australians say their heritage lies with some other ethnic group. This ranges from the strong non-British European heritage, such as Italian and German, each of which is claimed by 4% of Australians, to the heritage of more recent migrants, such as Lebanese and Vietnamese, each claimed by 0.9% of Australians.²⁵

These levels of non-British heritage would of course been unthinkable at the time the flag was designed, and would have remained unthinkable until the 'White Australia' policy started to die out in the mid-1900s. Thus when the Australian flag was designed, fidelity to the motherland was a key criterion for acceptance.²⁶ Since then, the make-up of Australia has shifted markedly, and Australia is now one of the most cosmopolitan nations on Earth.

Even if it is conceded that Australia's predominantly British heritage justifies representation on the Australian flag, the Union Jack is a symbol that holds no meaning for a large number of Australians. A recent IPSOS survey suggested that only 11% of Australians not born either here or in the UK support retention of the current flag while the majority (67%) believe that the flag should be changed.²⁷

On the one hand, it may be that the Union Jack is a positive symbol of what immigrants can aspire to achieve in Australia, representing the adversity and hardship overcome by the early settlers in order to form a nation. Those seeking a better life in Australia may not consider the symbolical nuances of the flag, instead imbuing it with their own aspirations for a life in Australia.²⁸ On the other hand, second- and third-generation immigrants may feel unrepresented by a flag that does not show Australia's diversity and instead advertises Australia's 'Anglo-Saxon' credentials.

Just as Australia has evolved from being a British dominion to an independent state with a British heritage, so too has 'White Australia' turned into an ethnic and cultural melting pot. Just as the flag should arguably send a clear message about Australia's status as an independent nation, it should also be a clear representation of the cosmopolitanism of Australia today.

Australia's Indigenous Heritage

Whatever one's opinion on whether the Union Jack rightfully represents Australia's British heritage, or under-represents Australia's non-British heritage and present diversity, the presence of the Union Jack in no way represents the first Australians, who have lived here for some 40,000-60,000 years.

²⁴ Roy Morgan Research, 'Clear Majority Want to Keep the Australian Flag' (2010) <<http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2010/4495/>> accessed 8 February 2011.

²⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, '2006 Census of Population and Housing: Media Releases and Fact Sheets' (2007).

²⁶ Evans, 'The history of the Australian flag' (Evans, Melbourne 1918).

²⁷ AusFlag, Media Release: Survey Reveals a Majority of Australians want a New Flag, 26 April 2010.

²⁸ See Sprawson in Gould, Boland and Haverson (eds), *Caught in the Breeze: 10 Essays* (Blemish Books, Canberra 2010) 25-29.

Many have pondered whether the Union Jack is a “symbol of constitutional liberties in the radical English tradition or the symbol of oppression”.²⁹ I feel a sense of sorrow when I look up at the Australian flag, for the presence of the Union Jack is a stark and persistent reminder of oppression: a reminder that my ancestors, and those that came after them, perpetrated what some have called genocide against the Aboriginal people.³⁰

I cannot speak on behalf of aboriginal people, and I acknowledge that there are those that wish to focus on more substantive issues of reconciliation, as well as those that feel that representation on the flag is a vital symbolic step.³¹ I can only imagine that the Union Jack not only fails to represent Aboriginal people in any meaningful way,³² but is a reminder of the terrible destruction wrought in the course of colonisation. As Wellings says, the Union Jack can be a symbol of oppression too. As respected Aboriginal activist Dr Lois O'Donoghue states, the flag symbolises a “narrow slice” of Australia’s history, “including a significant period where the rights of Australia’s indigenous peoples were overlooked... most of Australia’s indigenous people cannot relate to the existing flag”.³³

Recognising the lack of Aboriginal representation, an Aboriginal flag was created in 1971, followed by a Torres Strait Islander flag in 1992; both were recognised as national flags under the *Flags Act 1953* in 1995. While it may be thought that this recognition was a positive step, Harold Thomas, creator of the Aboriginal flag, commented that “the people who are making and support this move [to recognise the flag] have no idea about symbols”.³⁴ Thomas was noting the fact that the flag that he had designed truly symbolised his people, while those that sought to give his flag further credence by officialising it stood by a national flag that is not truly representative of its people.

The process of reconciliation has proved to be a long, complex and painful one, and the nature of the Australian flag is but one small, albeit important, piece of the puzzle. I am not qualified to comment on what form a truly reconciliatory flag may take, or how it may adequately symbolise Australia’s aboriginal heritage and its heritage from colonisers and other immigrants. It merely suffices to say that the Union Jacks presence on the Australian flag surely symbolises oppression as much as it symbolises the positive aspects of the British colonial empire.

Conclusion

Ben Wellings comments that flags have a “limited but malleable range of meanings”.³⁵ Within that limited range of meaning, flags are endowed with the personal opinions of those that are represented by them. The Australian flag means something different to the teenager

²⁹ Wellings, ‘My Flags: Power, Politics and National Identity in Red, White and Blue’ in Gould, Boland and Haverson (eds), Caught in the Breeze: 10 Essays (Blemish Books, Canberra 2010) 11-24, 23.

³⁰ Ben Kiernan, ‘Genocidal Violence in Nineteenth-Century Australia,’ in his *Blood and soil: a world history of genocide and extermination from Sparta to Darfur*, Yale University Press, 2007 pp.249-309

³¹ Dr Lois O'Donoghue CBE, for example, (‘A Flag for all Australians’, Speech at the launch of The Australian Flag - Professional Design Competition and Exhibition (Museum of Sydney, 25 January 1998)) sees these symbolic gestures as vital, stating, “even small symbolic gestures can be powerful”.

³² There is an argument that the Southern Cross features in aboriginal culture, though this seems somewhat contrived. During a debate held for an episode of 60 minutes (60 Minutes, ‘The Great Flag Debate’ (April 22 2010), transcript at <<http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=1043624>> accessed 7 January 2011), one participant suggested that the Southern Cross is part of many aboriginal stories. This was rebuffed by another participant, who shouted down the suggestion that this is sufficient representation of aboriginal people as “rubbish!”

³³ Dr Lois O'Donoghue CBE, ‘A Flag for all Australians’, Speech at the launch of The Australian Flag - Professional Design Competition and Exhibition (Museum of Sydney, 25 January 1998).

³⁴ Thomas, Land Rights News, July 1995, 3, cited by Dow, ‘Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Icon or Eyesore?’ (2000) <<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1970s/emb72/dowembassy.htm>> accessed 7th January 2011.

³⁵ Wellings, ‘My Flags: Power, Politics and National Identity in Red, White and Blue’ in Gould, Boland and Haverson (eds), Caught in the Breeze: 10 Essays (Blemish Books, Canberra 2010) 11-24, 24.

wearing it at the Cronulla riots than it does to the Sudanese refugee who walked 800 kilometres to flee civil war and get on a plane to Australia,³⁶ or a Brit who struggles to reconcile the feeling of home that the Union Jack inspires with the feeling of sorrow for past wrongs committed during colonisation.

The Union Jack at once represents the overwhelmingly British heritage of Australia, but gravely under-represents the cosmopolitanism of modern Australia; it serves as a welcome reminder of home for some, and an unsettling reminder of the devastation caused by the process of nation building for others.

Australia's process of 'finding its feet' and 'growing up' as an independent nation is well documented³⁷ and it seems that the debates over becoming a republic and changing the flag are the two major hurdles remaining in Australia's road to casting off its image as 'Britain's little boy', as *The Bulletin* so delicately put it in 1901.³⁸

To borrow comments made by one submission to the 2004 Inquiry into an Australian Republic,³⁹ the question of the Union Jack's presence on the Australian flag is:

...about nationhood. It is about accepting us all as full citizens in an independent nation and not migrants to the remnant of a defunct British Empire. It is about equality of its citizens regardless of their roots. It is about going beyond the deeds of one ethnic group over the aborigines.

A flag is a symbol of a nation and its people. The Union Jack is a symbol of the United Kingdom and the English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh people that make up that nation. While many, if not most, have come to accept the current flag, Australia's "foremost national symbol"⁴⁰ should too be truly its own. As Dr Lois O'Donoghue puts it: "We regard ourselves as independent, individual and inclusive - but our existing flag, our national symbol, says none of this".⁴¹ Australia's national flag should represent Australia's independence, and the Aborigines, British descendants, Europeans and recent immigrants that are its people.

³⁶ See Warwick Sprawson's harrowing but moving account of this journey in Gould, Boland and Haverson (eds), *Caught in the Breeze: 10 Essays* (Blemish Books, Canberra 2010) 25-29.

³⁷ See, for example, Mason, *Experience of nationhood: modern Australia since 1901* (4th edn McGraw-hill, Sydney 2002).

³⁸ *Bulletin*, Sydney, 28 September 1901.

³⁹ The Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, *The road to a republic* (Canberra 2004) 5.

⁴⁰ Australian Government, *Australian National Flag*

<http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/publications/symbols/factsheets/australian_national_flag.pdf> accessed 7 January 2011.

⁴¹ Dr Lois O'Donoghue CBE, 'A Flag for all Australians', Speech at the launch of The Australian Flag - Professional Design Competition and Exhibition (Museum of Sydney, 25 January 1998).