THE NATIONAL FLAG OF SOUTH AFRICA : EVOLUTION OF THE FINAL DESIGN

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The present national flag of the Republic of South Africa was taken into use at one minute past midnight on the morning of 27 April 1994.

It replaced the previous national flag which had flown over South Africa from 31 May 1928 until just before midnight on 26 April 1994. That previous national flag, which had been born in controversy, was later perceived as a symbol of apartheid and thus became politically unacceptable to many South Africans. Particularly after the then State President, F.W. de Klerk, announced in Parliament on 2 February 1990 that Nelson Mandela and other political figures would be released from custody, many of us realised that the days of the former national flag with its strong colonial connotations, were numbered.

My involvement during February and March 1990 in the creation of Namibia's national symbols, set me thinking about a new national flag for South Africa and for more than three years I wrestled with one design after another, but none of these ideas seemed to offer the answer I was looking for. While working on Namibia's symbols, I had investigated the configuration of all national flags. Although there had since been some changes, the broad parameters were still relevant.

There are over 160 national flags in existence world-wide, and of these more than 50 % are composed of colours arranged in a horizontal configuration. Of these a quarter also have either a panel, a triangle or a trapezium at the hoist. A further almost 20 % of national flags have their colours in a vertical configuration, while some 10 % are composed of crosses and/or saltires. A further 10 % are single-colour flags bearing some device, usually in the centre. Of the remaining 10 %, less than half have diagonal stripes, while the remainder are composed of triangles, have borders, or are plain flags with some device on a canton.

Obviously, these salient facts had to be borne in mind, since it is essential that any new national flag should be unique and unlikely to be confused with the flag of another nation.

As far as the relative popularity of flag colours used in South Africa over the past three and a half centuries is concerned, this information had also been researched and tabulated. In descending order of popularity, the principal colours found are: white (25), green (22), red (20), blue (20), black (16), gold/yellow (15) and orange (6). If the red and orange are combined and represented by chilli red, they in fact take first place, but we will come to that later.

In contrast to the generally conservative European approach to national flag designs and colours, African indigenous art and design tends to be much bolder and more colourful. This is a factor which also could not be overlooked.

No easy answer presented itself and, as you can imagine, by mid-1993 I was becoming somewhat despondent.

In August 1993, like many of you, I attended the 15th International Congress of Vexillology in Zürich. During the meeting of FIAV on the evening of 25 August 1993, while Bruce Berry was doing the talking on behalf of the Southern African Vexillological Association, my mind again began to wander.

With the Congress undoubtedly providing a conducive atmosphere, yet another idea came to me and I quickly sketched it on the back of my lecture list. Unlike my previous bright ideas, which had all been consigned to the wastepaper basket, the more I looked at this design, the more I felt that it might offer a possible solution. What I had been looking for was something which conveyed the idea of convergence and unification.

At that stage, negotiations aimed at preparing a new constitution for South Africa were well under way at the World Trade Centre at Kempton Park, not far from Johannesburg. In the process of drawing up this new constitution, the multi-party Negotiating Council also considered the question of South Africa's national symbols.

As far as the public at large is concerned, the most emotive of these symbols was undoubtedly the national flag. On 7 September 1993, only days after my return from Zürich, the Negotiating Council appointed a National Symbols Commission which was mandated to consult the public and put forward recommendations as soon as possible. At our first meeting, which was held on 15 September 1993, we established three subcommittees. One, to consider proposals for a national flag, another to consider the national coat of arms, and the third to look into the question of national anthems. The only two members of the Commission with any real heraldic and vexillological experience were the late Dr. Cor Pama and myself. Both of us were thus nominated to serve on the national flag and coat of arms sub-committees, while I was also appointed as convenor of the latter subcommittee.

You may be interested in the following photograph, taken recently, of one of the batches of designs which were received. By the time this Commission started drawing up its report on 14 October 1993, some 7000 proposals for a new national flag had been received from the public. The time available for evaluation and the preparation of recommendations was far too short.

In Namibia we had set aside a full day to evaluate 835 designs, but the national flag subcommittee and its assessors were expected to evaluate, report on and come up with recommendations on 7000 designs between 11 am and 4 pm, which included a break for lunch!

My duties as convenor of the national coat of arms subcommittee prevented me from being directly involved in the activities of the national flag subcommittee, so I was unable to make any meaningful contribution at that stage.

Because of the politically charged atmosphere of the negotiating process, which also permeated into the various technical committees, I decided early in the proceedings not to submit any proposals of my own to the Commission, lest there be allegations of a conflict of interests.

As a mental exercise, if nothing else, I continued working on the idea which had come to me in Zürich, adjusting the design, and trying various colour combinations. The following illustrations will give you an idea of how my thoughts on the matter progressed.

The first is of the original "Zürich design", in colour, but with green at the top and blue below . But since I felt that an adverse symbolism could be attached to the idea of red paths converging, I then swopped the red and green. The next step was to try yellow triangles at the hoist, because of the popularity of this colour in a sporting context and in the flags of certain political groupings and then to superimpose black triangles on the yellow. Red and orange were tried as alternative colours for the top band.

On the advice of my youngest daughter, I then deleted the continuation of the central green stripe to the hoist . Her argument was that certain people would "stand the flag on its head" and see the "ban the bomb peace sign". This variation, with a chilli red upper band, seemed to me to offer the best solution, from both an historical and aesthetic point of view. I am not particularly fond of black as a flag colour, but by means of a triangular black overlay, I was also satisfied that if black had to be added, it could be superimposed on the yellow without adversely affecting the integrity of the design as a whole. Little did I then believe that any of these designs might ultimately be considered.

In the limited time available, the National Symbols Commission put forward six flag designs submitted by the public (one with minor adjustments), for consideration by the Negotiating

Council. These designs were widely publicised in the media, but failed to elicit any enthusiastic support, either from within the Negotiating Council or from the public at large.

An important viewpoint of the National Symbols Commission, which was largely over-looked, was that the activities of the Commission be considered as the beginning of a process, not necessarily as the end.

As a result of the lukewarm public response to the Commission's six proposals, a number of graphic design studios were requested by the Negotiating Council to put forward further proposals. There is a vast difference between decorating a shopping centre and designing a national flag, with the result that most of their proposals were impractical. The following photograph will give you an idea of some of their designs. These proposals were also not met with any enthusiasm and the matter was left in abeyance while other aspects of the Constitution which would guide South Africa for a transitional period of some five years, were resolved. As far as the national flag is concerned, section 2(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993 (Act No. 200 of 1993), merely provided that "The national flag of the Republic shall be the flag the design of which is determined by the President by proclamation in the Gazette".

The question of a new national flag for South Africa was thus, as yet, unresolved when Parliament went into recess at the end of 1993.

From then, until the first fully representative elections commenced on 27 April 1994 (the date on which the new constitution came into force), South Africa was, in effect, governed by the State President, on the advice of a multi-party Transitional Executive Council (TEC).

Among the constitutional matters which had still to be settled, was that of the national flag. The TEC only seems to have woken up to the fact in mid February 1994, when Roelf Meyer and Cyril Ramaphosa, who were the chief negotiators of the Government and the African National Congress (ANC), respectively, were given the task of resolving the problem. They entrusted the solution of the flag question to a technical working committee of Government and ANC nominees, of which I was the convenor. We were instructed to come up with an acceptable solution by the end of the week!

At our first meeting in Cape Town on 28 February 1994, members of the technical working committee were unanimous in the view that the idea of interlinking or convergence should, in the interests of national unity, be a central theme to any draft design put forward to the TEC's subcommittee on national symbols.

At last, the basic concept which had come to me in Switzerland, and which had later been refined, seemed to offer a possible solution. It in fact formed the basis of two of the four designs put forward by the technical working committee after its second meeting on 2 March 1994.

As convenor of the technical working committee, it fell on my shoulders to try to interpret the committee's views and convert them into final designs.

The first of these designs, which was in green and gold (South Africa's traditional sporting colours and also two of the most popular colours in the flags of the South African "liberation movements"), had a vertical dovetailed partition line. This design was suggested by Dr. J.C. Pauw, one of the members of the technical working committee.

The second, to which red and blue were added, had a zig-zag configuration and was based in part on an idea which the ANC members had tabled.

The third, which was my personal preference, was one of the refinements of my "Zürich design". It included white as a further colour. The choice of chilli red (red/orange), for the upper band circumvented certain political objections to the use of orange. This design has a clear link with the past, but at the same time has much which is new.

When the possible incorporation of white had been discussed in the technical working committee, I had gained the impression that if white was to be included, there would also

have to be black, because of a perception held by many of my compatriots that these two colours are representative of white and black South Africans respectively.

The only place in which black could, to my mind, be successfully added to the third design, was in the form of a triangle superimposed on the gold in the hoist. I had already investigated this possibility, and found that it would work. My artists were thus instructed to prepare this variation as well. It is this version of the "Zürich design", which was ultimately adopted by the TEC as South Africa's new national flag on 15 March 1994.

On the same day the South Africa Bureau of Standards was requested to prepare the appropriate specification with all speed. This specification was available three days later.

For some inexplicable reason the TEC, on the other hand, took its time in submitting its recommendation to the State President, with the result that a proclamation adopting the new national flag was only published in the Government Gazette on 20 April 1994.

This was only seven days before the flag was to be taken into use, so you can well imagine the magnitude of the problem which this created for flag manufacturers.

For weeks after the adoption of the new national flag, I seemed to do nothing but answer questions. It felt as if the whole world wanted details about the design, colour codes and symbolism. Considering the diversity of the South African population, the question of symbolism, especially with regard to the colours, was a potential minefield.

The only aspect of the flag to which I have been prepared to attach any measure of symbolic meaning, has been the central design, which begins as a V at the hoist, comes together in the centre of the flag and extends as a single horizontal band to the outer edge of the fly. This can be seen as representing the convergence of diverse elements in South African society which then take the road ahead in unison.

This idea of convergence and unification links up with the motto of the national coat of arms, *Ex Unitate Vires*, which means "Unity is Strength".

As far as the choice of colours is concerned, the chilli red, white and blue are derived from the earlier stages of our flag history, while green, black and gold, first came into use in South African national flags during the 19th century. Since chilli falls between red and orange it can, together with white and blue, be seen as representing both the Dutch and British colonial flag traditions in South Africa. Green was taken into use for the first time in the Transvaal *Vierkleur* in 1857; the national flag of the Boer Republic of The Land of Goshen had a black stripe and one of Stellaland's flags had a gold star. These two flags date from the 1880's. The widespread association of, for example, black, green and gold with the flags of "liberation movements", is thus predated by many years by their use in other South African flags. One should bear in mind that individual colours, or combinations of colours, can have widely differing meanings to various people. For this reason, no universal symbolism can be attached to any of these colours, and they are open to free interpretation. Those who wish to see the colours of their political party, or colours which they might in some other way hold dear in the national flag, are thus welcome to do so.

Indeed, it is the very avoidance of any symbolic meaning for any of the colours which, I believe, has contributed to the widespread acceptance of the new national flag of South Africa across the political and cultural spectrum.

Change is often accompanied by a measure of resistance and there are those who still cling to the previous national flag, although their numbers seem to be dwindling. But all in all, the new national flag seems to have found its way into the hearts and minds of the population at large, and to have become the unifying symbol which South Africa needs.

Technically, it is still an "interim" national flag, but the level of support is such that I believe it has a very strong chance of being confirmed.

To those present who, two years ago in Zürich unwittingly provided inspiration and moral support for the design of the new South African national flag, may sincere thanks. You were

an integral part of what has been referred to as one of the success stories of the "New South Africa".