

## Jonathan Dixon: Flags of Australian Territories

**Abstract:** *Several different patterns have been proposed and/or used in flags for Australia's internal and external territories. This will be a historical overview of these flags, from Papua to the Cocos Islands.*

Since Federation in 1901, the flags of the territories of the Commonwealth of Australia have been quite varied. Unlike the state flags, which have followed the same basic pattern since they were established before Federation, the territories have adopted (or radically changed) their flags at many different times. The flags chosen reflect not only on the nature of the territories, but on the attitudes towards Australian flags of those making the decisions.

Australia's territories can be classified as populated external territories, self-governing internal territories, and others which have very limited populations and/or self-government. This last group, including the Jervis Bay Territory and offshore regions such as the Coral Sea Islands, do not have flags of their own, and it is often wrongly claimed that their flag is the Australian national flag. Of course, as territories of the Commonwealth, the national flag is used, but that is not at all the same thing.

The differences between the flags of the other territories display the differences between the statuses of the territories, but a broader and more interesting picture is revealed when we also include the historical Australian territories in New Guinea. These flags from the start of the nineteenth century will be our focus as we discover that territorial flags have always not only been influenced by state and Commonwealth flags, but have also influenced moves to change them.



The background to all Australian flags is the system of colonial flags in the British Empire. The flags of the states all originated as the standard colonial Blue Ensign defaced in the fly. The most commonly used element was a depiction of the Southern Cross, Crux Australis, used at one time or another in Victoria, New South Wales,



and South Australia, as well as New Zealand, not always staying within the usual confines of a disc [1]. The designs adopted for the Commonwealth



Ensign and Merchant Flag in September 1901 were simply British ensigns with a southern cross badge and an extra six-pointed star beneath the Union Jack. This third distinct element after the

Union

Jack and southern cross, representing the federation of six states, was not only a symbol in its own right, but an addition that made the flag both an obviously colonial flag and something subtly more.



### Papua's British Ensign

The territory of Papua, occupying the south east quarter of New Guinea, was first annexed by the colony of Queensland, but was at the time of Federation a British colonial possession known as British New Guinea [2]. Shortly after Federation, the administration of the territory was handed over to the Commonwealth Government. In line with the Admiralty instruction of 1865 and the Order in Council of 1869, the territory should have had two flags in use - the Administrator's Union Flag defaced with a badge surrounded by a green garland, and a Blue Ensign bearing the same badge, for use by government vessels. The badge in this case consisted of a crown above the letters "BNG", although in 1906





correspondence from the Admiralty still referred to a badge where the letters were simply "NG", which had been used before 1888 <sup>13</sup>l.

However, following the accession of Edward VII to the British throne in 1901, he asked that vexillological crowns all over the British Empire change shape to that of the Tudor Crown. In Jan 1904, the Colonial Office in London wrote to the Australian Governor-General, Lord Northcote, in Melbourne to confirm this change with respect to the BNG badge, but also suggested that a badge based on the Public Seal of the possession might be more appropriate. Around that time, the Australian Parliament was debating the Papua Act, which would formally accept administration of the territory under the name Papua. When the suggestions concerning the badge were referred to Port Moresby, it was decided to delay the decision until after the bill had been passed.

The design on the Public Seal, an elaborate depiction of a bird of paradise, was considered too badly drawn to be appropriate for the badge, and on 23th January 1906, the Papuan Executive Council decided to suggest the badge be "the Tudor Crown above the word 'Papua' in plain capitals and the whole surrounded by a laurel wreath." This suggestion was approved by Melbourne and sent by Northcote to the Colonial Office on 23 February. When new flags were required in November, London confirmed that the design had been approved.

Copies of the badge as it appeared in the new 1907 Admiralty Flag Book were forwarded and were received in Port Moresby in November 1907. By this time, there was a new Acting Administrator of Papua, who was in fact at least the fourth Administrator or Acting Administrator to enter into correspondence concerning the badge. His office replied on 7th November to the Department of External Affairs in Melbourne, saying that it was regretted that the new badge was not more significant and emblematic of Papua, like the design of the Public Seal. The response also said, presumably displaying a misunderstanding of how the badge was meant to be used, that the badge seemed bald and unfinished without the laurel wreath that had been used for the previous quarter of a century <sup>14</sup>l.

### A more Australian alternative

More relevant, however, was another message sent the same day. It included a flag, presumably a Blue Ensign with the previous badge, and asked for confirmation that this was the correct template



for use at government stations. The flag was at that point also used by local ships, but the secretary also asked whether the Australian government would prefer them to use some for of the Commonwealth Flag [5].

This prompted the Department of External Affairs to make a new recommendation to the Prime Minister, who decided that the flag used



by territories should be the Commonwealth Blue Ensign with a badge in the centre of the lower half of the flag. In the case of Papua, this badge was to be simply the word "PAPUA" in block

capitals on a white circle. Red letters were considered, as was a badge diameter of  $1/3$  the hoist length, but the final drawings used black letters and a badge occupying  $2/5$  of the flag's breadth. The drawings were sent to Port Moresby on 14 July 1908, with the proviso that it was planned to add an extra point to the six-pointed Commonwealth Star, once the Imperial authorities had given permission [6].

Despite this, it is not known that the new flag was ever used. It appears that nothing about the flag was sent to London. In fact, the request for permission to modify the Commonwealth Flag was phrased in such a way that the Colonial Office interpreted it as only referring to the red Merchant Flag. The Blue Ensign and Governor-General's Union Flag were originally approved without any formal process, and so were assumed to simply follow the Red Ensign, which required a warrant from the Admiralty [7]. The Colonial Office, who insisted later that year that the Union Jack was the national flag throughout the empire [8], may or may not have been willing to approve the new template, but they do not seem to have even been notified [9].



However, this does not mean that this proposal did not have any impact. The original suggestion of a flag based on the Commonwealth Ensign was directed to Atlee Hunt of the Department of External Affairs, who was at that time also dealing with the design of the new Commonwealth Arms. The timing makes it quite possible, even likely, that this reminder of the status of Papua as part of Australia gave someone the idea of adding a extra point representing the territories to

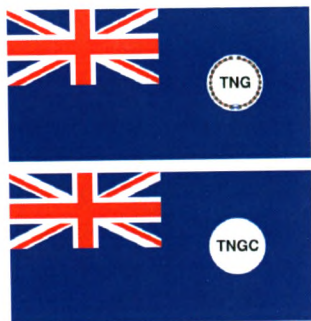


the six pointed star of the crest, as part of an attempt to make it distinctive enough to satisfy the College of Arms. The choice of the crest led to the suggestion to change the star on the Governor-General's flag,

and ultimately, the Commonwealth Ensigns, so the Papuan administration's idea may indeed have had quite an effect <sup>[10]</sup>.

### Papua and New Guinea

The move to put more emphasis on Australia and the Australian flag above the plain ensigns of the Empire may have been preceded by the use of a similarly defaced ensign by the Australian Customs Service <sup>[11]</sup>. This pattern was continued by the Lighthouse Service and eventually by customs authorities in New Guinea. Before then, Jilek states that the British ensign with the badge including the Tudor crown was used until Japanese occupation in 1942, being approved by the Australian Parliament in 1926. It is not clear what this refers to. It is not obvious from the Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives 1926-27-28, and the formal involvement of parliament in approving flags would have been unprecedented at that time <sup>[12]</sup>.



A corresponding British Ensign was also used in the League of Nations mandate in the north east of the island, the Territory of New Guinea, from 1921, according to Jilek. The badge was simply the letters "TNG" on a white disc, surrounded by a garland. The local customs service at that time used an ensign with a badge without



the wreath, and containing the letters “TGNC”. Jilek also reports, however, that after the formation of the unified territory of Papua and New Guinea under United Nations trusteeship in 1949, no official flag was used for the territory. The Australian Flag (soon to be legislated as the National Flag) was used by the government, and the customs service added their “TP&NGC” on a white badge to the Australian Ensign [13].

Several sources report an unofficial flag used by Papua and New Guinea at sporting events in the 1960s. Barraclough and Crampton (1981) describe it as green with a gold bird of paradise, while Jilek reports the bird displayed proper [14]. The bird was widely used as a local emblem, first appearing on flags of the German territory of Neu-Guinea as well as on the Public Seal of Papua [15]. The online image by Gross shows the tail feathers as red, while Bartlett's *Flags of Paradise* has them brown, and implies that the flag was indeed that of the Trust Territory [16].



The flag chosen for the territory in 1970 by the Australian administration continued the use of the bird of paradise, featuring the southern cross and the bird in the first and third parts (respectively) of a vertical tricolour. White stars and gold bird on a blue-yellow-green field seem the most commonly given colours, but some sources make the bird of the green stripe white [17]. At any rate, this unusually edge-heavy flag was not popular, and in 1971 the House of Assembly chose a new flag.



The flag, based on a design by high school student Susan Karike, was chosen on 12 March and adopted by the National Identity Ordinance on 24th June 1971. The flag used traditional colours of red, black and yellow, and introduced a fairly radical design, with the 2:3 field divided diagonally from the top hoist red over black. The charges,



as in the previous design, were a yellow bird of paradise (top fly) and a white southern cross (bottom hoist). The southern cross is simultaneously a connection with the Australian flag and a more general symbol for any nation in the Southern Hemisphere. The choice of five-pointed stars is a departure from the Australian tradition, appropriate for a territory considering itself a nation and looking forward to independence. The flag did indeed stay when independence came four years later, at which point there were no longer any Australian territories with flags of their own.

### Mainland territories

This changed when the Northern Territory achieved self-government on 1st July 1978, after many years of governance first by South Australian and then the federal government. The flag raised on that day was designed by Melbourne artist Russell Ingpen using proposals from the public. The hoist features the southern cross in white on black, more closely following Australian use of the device by allocating points to stars as in the Victorian state flag.

The territory's place as an internal territory is further emphasised by the use of seven petals on the black and white Sturt's desert rose on an ochre background, with the same meaning as the points on the Commonwealth Star [18].



This pattern has been criticised for splitting the field in two pieces and not providing a single focus [19]. However, it was copied by Ivo Ostyn in his design that won a poll for an Australian Capital Territory flag in 1992. The flag was adopted on 25th March 1993, several years after self-government was obtained in 1988.

The white southern cross on blue at the hoist this time represents membership of the Commonwealth through the pattern of the national flag - perhaps more appropriate for



the nation's capital than the Victorian version. The gold fly contains the arms of Canberra in blue, perhaps a reminiscence of the earlier Canberra flag comprising the arms on a red field [20].

Both flags share the ratio 1:2 with the federal and state flags, and divide the field in the ratio 1:2. In the author's opinion, the contrasting combination of the ACT's livery and sporting colours cope better with this distinctive layout than the traditional hues of the NT, but the capital may have benefited from a simpler flag if the authorities had considered Ostyn's alternative design substituting a royal bluebell for the arms [21].

The Jervis Bay Territory, a small area on the New South Wales coast sold to the federal government in 1915 to provide sea access, became a separate territory when the ACT was given self-government. It is therefore wrong to suggest that the ACT flag ever represented Jervis Bay in any way.

### Other territories

The Pacific's Norfolk Island, settled by descendents of the Bounty mutineers, and closer to New Zealand than Australia, was always after Papua New Guinea the territory with the most aspirations for greater independence. It therefore makes sense that its flag, approved 6th June 1979 and adopted 12th January 1980, is the most devoid of Australian symbolism. The native Norfolk Island Pine in green on the central stripe of a 7:9:7 green-white-green vertical triband with overall ratio 1:2 seem more



reminiscent of Canada than Australia [22]. Indeed, the Norfolk Island flag seems to support the "Canadian Pale" proposal for the state of New South Wales by Ausflag's Harold Scruby, just as the NT/ACT pattern recommends similar designs for state flags such as proposed by Brendan Jones, and seen in the wind in New South Wales (Ausflag) and Western Australia (as the Parliament House Centenary Flag) [23].

Christmas Island is an island in the Indian Ocean



with an economy built on phosphate mining. Transferred from the control of Singapore to Australia in 1957, the local population is largely ethnically Chinese. The flag of the island does not give primacy to the



Commonwealth's southern cross like the mainland territories, but nor does it leave it out altogether as in Norfolk Island, rather being inspired by the flag of PNG, albeit with the traditional British 1:2 ratio. Divided diagonally blue and green, it features a yellow Golden Bosun Bird in the upper fly and a white southern cross in the lower hoist. The stars here, however, are the seven-pointed stars of the Australian flag, indicating a greater commitment to Australia, if for no other reason that the fact that Christmas Island is less able to function independently. This is perhaps reflected in the fact that the winner of the competition announced on 14th April 1986 was not a local, but Tony Couch, a Sydneysider who had spent 4 years on the island. His design includes in the centre of the flag a green map of the island on a gold disc, purportedly representing phosphate mining. The addition of a third key element possibly goes some way to unite the two halves of the field, but does leave the flag looking slightly cluttered. The flag was widely accepted and used unofficially until the Administrator adopted it as flag of the territory on Australia Day, 26th January 2002 [24].

Australia's other Indian Ocean Territory is the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, as small, even more remote island group populated by Muslim Malays. At the time of the official adoption of the Christmas Island flag, the Indian Ocean Territories Administrator said he hoped to do the same



in the Cocos Islands in April of that year [25]. A flag for the territory was actually chosen in July 2003. It was designed by local youth group member Mohammed Minkom and is clearly modelled on the national flag,

although there is some resemblance to the Christmas Island flag. The southern cross appears in Australian colours, gold on green, in the fly. The canton boasts a coconut tree on a gold disc, representing the islands, and in the centre of the 1:2 flag an Islamic crescent replaces the crosses of the Union Jack to indicate "the multiculturalism of the

islands". The design was the winner of a competition to choose a flag in time for the 20th anniversary of Self Determination (when the Islanders voted for integration with Australia) on 6th April 2004. The flag was officially adopted on 9 April 2004 [26].

This design would seem to be influenced by the debates over changing the national flag since the 1980s. It is reminiscent of the many proposals which imitate the current flag in structure and/or the use of three distinct symbols. The busy designs seem to be a result of vexillographers trying to make a flag do everything, a tradition which had started by 1901 when the winning design was that little bit more than a British Ensign. If the national flag gets away with its three emblems, it is because the Union Jack forms an obvious primary focus that is not easily simply replaced. However, the Cocos flag is not a replacement for the Commonwealth Ensign, but the first territorial flag to be so closely based on it since 1908, which may be a symptom of the more recent trend towards greater use of the national flag.

### Conclusion

From 1901 to 2004, the choices of territorial flags and the associated debates have held a light up to the vexo-political attitudes of the times. The Australian Ensigns are conspicuous in their presence and absence throughout, particular in 1908, the 1950s and 2004. At the same time, their 1:2 ratio and southern cross emblem are recurring themes.

The British Blue Ensign was the colonial default for the first 50 years, but whenever it was abandoned, the door was opened to vexillographical innovation [27]. The realm of territorial flags is a testing ground for new patterns, and it remains to be seen whether any will prove prosperous. The Jervis Bay Territory does not appear to need a flag at this point in time, but its separate identity is slowly being promoted by the federal government. If and when a flag is chosen, will it follow the NT/ACT model, or be something new? Will any of the territorial patterns cross over into state flags? Does the Cocos Islands' choice show promise for a minimalistic change to the national flag, or simply indicate that the flag is too entrenched to be changed?





## Notes and references

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3. Correspondence from Colonial Office to GG Lord Northcote, 1901 and 1906, National Archives of Australia file A1 1908/9191; Jilek, p198.
4. Correspondence between Colonial Office, Governor-General, Dept of External Affairs and Administrator's Office, 1904-1907, NAA file A1 1908/9191.
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6. Correspondence from Dept of External Affairs to Prime Minister, Administrator's Office and local artists/flag makers, Dec 1907-Jul 1908, NAA file A1 1908/9191.
7. Correspondence within Colonial Office, Sep 1908, (British) National Archives file CO 523/19
8. Apart from New Zealand, which had legislated for its blue ensign. The context was that of flags used by the public on land, but the feelings expressed may have been more generally relevant. Response from Colonial Office to Canadian enquiry, Dec 1908, NA file CO 523/19.
9. The NAA file on the matter (A1 1908/9191) does not include any such notification, and CO and Admiralty registers of correspondence from that time do not mention the design.
10. Correspondence between Atlee Hunt, Captain Collins and E. Wilson Dobbs, NAA file A462 828/3/8 PART 1.
11. K. Hannan, P. Chinn; /Flying the Customs flag/ in *Manifest*, winter 2005, Australian Customs Service, ISSN 1329-7961 online at [http://www.customs.gov.au/webdata/resources/files/manifest\\_winter\\_2005.pdf](http://www.customs.gov.au/webdata/resources/files/manifest_winter_2005.pdf). Comments on article (particularly the ambiguity of the sources) at FOTW: [http://flagspot.net/flags/au\\_cust.html](http://flagspot.net/flags/au_cust.html)
12. Jilek, p198.
13. Jilek, pp200-202.
14. Barraclough & Crampton, *Flags of the World*, 1981 pp212-213; Jilek, p202.
15. Jilek, p200.
16. Papua and New Guinea 1965-1970 (Australia), *Flags of the World* (as updated 14 Feb 2007) <http://flagspot.net/flags/pg1965.html>; R. G. C. Bartlett, D. Porter, *Flags of Paradise* poster, Flag Society of Australia, 1996.
17. See summary of different sources at Papua and New Guinea 1970-1971 (Australia), *Flags of the World* (as updated 14 Feb 2007) <http://flagspot.net/flags/pg1970.html>.
18. Official Symbols - NT Flag online at <http://www.nt.gov.au/ntg/symbols/ntflag.html>, Northern Territory Government; Protocols section of the Chief Minister's site <http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/protocol/flag.shtml>; both accessed 31 Aug 2005.
19. Burton, *Crux Australis* 17/2, p100.
20. Australian Capital Territory, *Flags of the World* (as updated 6 Jan 2007) <http://flagspot.net/flags/au-act.html>.
21. Ostin's comments to *Flags of the World*, online at <http://flagspot.net/flags/au!act.html> (as updated 2 Sep 2005).
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23. Ausflag's proposals are online at <http://www.ausflag.com.au/new/nswphotos.html>; Brendan Jones' proposals at <http://members.optusnet.com.au/~brendan.jones/flags/>; Western Australia

- Parliament House Centenary Flag (Australia), Flags of the World (as updated 29 Jan 2005).
24. The Islander (newsletter of the Shire of Christmas Island), issue no. 245, article available online at <http://hoshic.mozfaq.org/Xmas-island-flag.pdf>.
  25. as above.
  26. Burton, Crux Australis 17/1 p36; Personal communication from M. I. Minkom, Communications Officer for Shire of Cocos (Keeling) Islands, June 2007.
  27. A fact generally disliked by the more vocal supporters of the current national flag. See <http://flagspot.net/flags/au/act.html> for the Australian Flag Society's attempt to return the territories to the Blue Ensign model.

### Acknowledgements:

Some images are taken from FOTW Flags Of The World website at <http://flagspot.net/flags/> :

Figure 2 is based on an image by Clay Moss

Figure 3 is by Clay Moss

Figure 9 is by Pascal Gross

Figure 10 is based on an image by Mark Sensen

Figure 11 is by Željko Heimer

Figure 12 is by Martin Grieve

Figure 13 was originally hosted on a Christian Brothers website

Figure 14 is by Johann Eisenreich Jr. and António Martins

Figure 17 is by Željko Heimer

### Other images:

Figure 15 is taken from the Ausflag website <http://www.ausflag.com.au/new/nswflags.html>

Figure 16 is taken from Brendan Jones' website

<http://members.optusnet.com.au/~brendan.jones/flags/wa.html>

Figure 18 was supplied by the Shire of Cocos (Keeling) Islands (figures attached with names fig01.gif, etc.)

### About the author



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