

Brief history of the Australian national flag



Front cover of the *Review of Reviews*, 20 September 1901 edition.

National flag quests held around the time of federation by the *Melbourne Herald* and the *Review of Reviews for Australasia* were well supported. On 29 April 1901 a notice was placed in the *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette* inviting the public to enter an official Federal Flag Design Competition. It attracted 32,823 entries from Australia and overseas, including the majority which were originally sent to the *Review of Reviews* before amalgamation with the government contest. One of these had been submitted from the unnamed governor of a colony. The combined prize pool of 75 pounds was augmented by a further 50 pounds donated on the initiative of the Havelock Tobacco Company.

A photograph of the winning design a composite “embodying the general ideas of the five successful competitors, but different in detail” was published in the *Review of Reviews* on 20 September 1901. The names of the five designers of the Australian national flag were: Ivor Evans, a fourteen-year-old schoolboy from Melbourne; Leslie John Hawkins, a teenager apprenticed to an optician in Sydney; Egbert John Nuttall, an architect from Melbourne; Annie Dorrington, an artist from Perth, and William Stevens, a ship’s officer from Auckland, New Zealand. They all received 40 pounds each. The entries were judged on seven criteria: loyalty to the Empire; Federation; history; heraldry; distinctiveness, utility and cost of manufacture. The majority of the designs incorporated the Union Jack and Southern Cross however native animals were also popular. Among the more amusing proposals was one featuring a variety of them playing cricket with a winged ball and another with a six-tailed kangaroo aiming a gun at the Southern Cross. The entries were all put on display in the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne and the judges took six days to deliberate before reaching their decision. The Australian or Commonwealth blue ensign as it was originally known was flown for the first time 3 September 1901 the day the winners were announced.

It was reported in *The Age* newspaper that:

At the exhibition Building yesterday afternoon the Countess of Hopetoun formally opened the Commonwealth Flag and Seal Exhibition and announced the names of the successful competitors.

The event was timed for 2:30pm and at that hour a large number of people had assembled about the entrances, attracted by the absolutely unique occasion. Among those present were a goodly sprinkling of legislators, both Federal and State, and a number of clergymen of various denominations.

As Lady Hopetoun entered, a huge Blue Ensign with the prize design of the Southern Cross and a six pointed star thereon was run up to the top of the flagstaff on the dome and breaking, streamed out on the heavy south-westerly breeze, a brave and inspiring picture.

On entering the rooms reserved for the thousands of designs which go to make up the exhibition, the beholders were almost dazzled by the polychromatic spectacle which greeted their eyes. Every conceivable and inconceivable combination of colours flared from the walls which were spread from top to bottom with the artistic, in-artistic and, in many instances, weird designs sent in, and for a few minutes the feeling was truly overpowering. After making a brief inspection of the principle designs which had been awarded prizes or honourable mention, Lady Hopetoun seated herself at the prize table.

The Prime Minister rose and said the Countess of Hopetoun had kindly consented to open the Exhibitions, but before doing so wanted him to explain how the competition had come about and how it had resulted. With regard to the flags, he read the following letter from the judges.

Melbourne 2nd September

Sir,

Attracted by the loyalty and sentiment of the Australian people as represented by the 30,000 designs for a national flag, the great majority of which contain the Union Jack and Southern Cross. It was felt that the only additional emblem was one representing the Federation of the 6 States. This was supplied by various forms such as coloured bars, shields, devices, stars, figures, letters, animals etc. introduced in various forms, colours and positions on the various designs.

Having carefully examined every exhibit with due regard to history, heraldry, blazonry, distinctiveness, utility and cost of making it up in bunting, it was apparent that a Commonwealth Flag, to be representative, should contain –

The Union Jack on a blue or red ground.

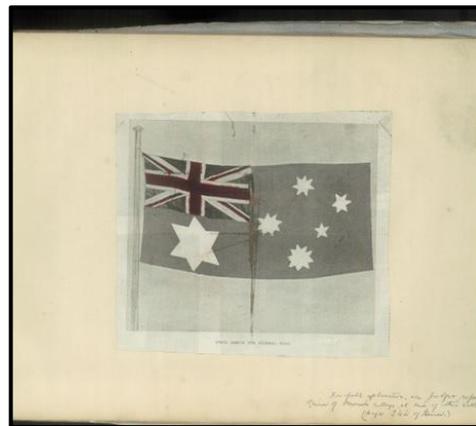
A six pointed star, representing the federated States of Australia, immediately underneath the Union Jack and pointing directly to the centre of the St George's Cross, in a size to occupy the major portion of one quarter of the Flag.

The Southern Cross; in the fly, as indicative of the sentiment of the Australian nation. Many designs were rejected as not being in accord with heraldry-borders around the Union Jack, contrary to the heraldry and blazonry of flags... crosses, coloured stars, stars too small to be seen at a distance, and otherwise faulty in design.

In conclusion we may state that our task was not an easy one, but our desire was to give the people of our new born nation a symbol that would be endearing and lasting in its effect, and with that end in view we hope that we have been successful.

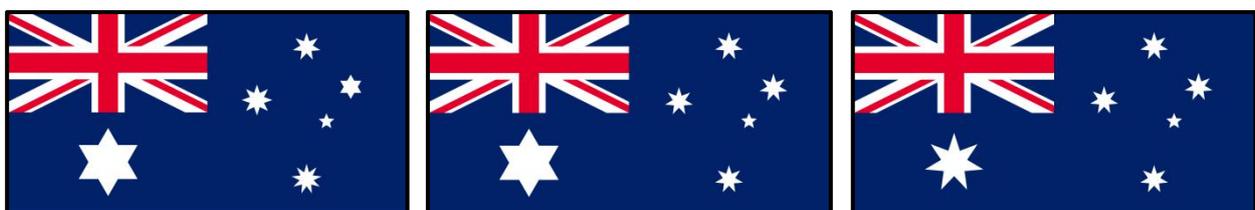
On behalf of the judges –

JW Evans
JA Mitchell



Entries to the 1901 Federal Flag Design Competition. The design submitted by William Stevens is seen top right.

A simplified version of the competition-winning design was officially approved as the 'flag of Australia' by King Edward VII and a notice to this effect published in the *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette* on 13 February 1903. The British admiralty had standardised the number of points on the four largest stars of the Southern Cross to seven ostensibly for ease of manufacture. The original scheme had 9, 8, 7, 6 and five points to reflect the relative brightness of each star in the night sky. In 1908 a seventh point was added to the Commonwealth Star to represent the territories.



The competition winning Australian flag (left) and the 1903-1908 (centre) and 1908 (right) versions.

In the decades following federation the red ensign was the preeminent flag in use by private citizens on land. This was largely due to the Commonwealth government and flag suppliers restricting sales of the blue ensign to the general public. By traditional British understanding, the blue ensign was reserved for official government use although the red ensign was nevertheless still in military circulation until after the 1953 legislation, meaning the 1st and 2nd Australian Imperial Forces served under both the blue and red versions. State and local governments, private organisations and individuals were expected to use the red ensign.

The blue ensign replaced the Union Jack at the Olympic Games at St Louis in 1904. It was raised in victory for the first time at the 1908 London Olympics when the Australian rugby team won the gold medal. On 2 June 1904, due to lobbying by Richard Crouch MP, it had the same status as the Union Jack in the UK, when the House of Representatives proclaimed that the blue ensign "should be flown upon all forts, vessels, saluting places and public buildings of the Commonwealth upon all occasions when flags are used." In 1908, Australian Army Military Order, No 58/08 ordered the blue "Australian Ensign" to replace the Union Jack at all military establishments. From 1911 it served as the saluting flag of the Australian army at all reviews and ceremonial parades (M.O.135) with the Union Jack being reserved for "all occasions when a representative of His Majesty the King reviews the Commonwealth forces" (M.O.391).



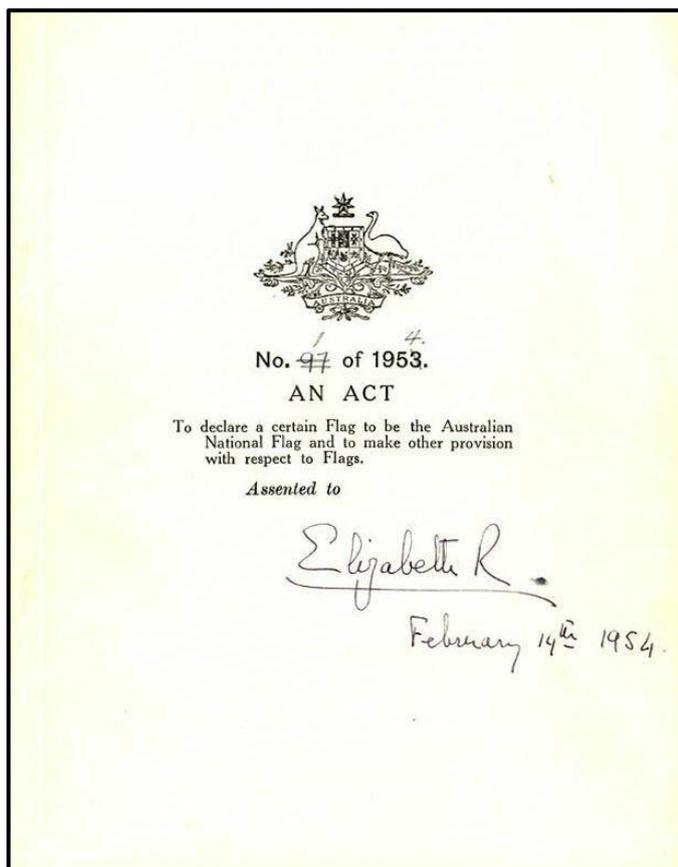
Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig reviews the Australian 5th division at Ebbw Vale on 29 August 1917 (left), a commemorative postcard of the 1919 London victory parade and a dugout at Gallipoli circa May 1915 (right).

In the 1920s there was debate over whether the blue ensign was reserved for Commonwealth buildings only, culminating in a 1924 agreement that the Union Jack should take precedence as the national flag and that state and local governments were henceforth able to use the blue ensign. In 1940 the Victorian government passed legislation allowing schools to purchase blue ensigns. The following year prime minister Robert Menzies issued a media release recommending that the blue ensign be flown at schools, government buildings and by private citizens and continued use of the red ensign by merchant ships, providing it was done so respectfully. Prime Minister Ben Chifley issued a similar statement in 1947.

On 4 December 1950, the Australian cabinet proclaimed the blue ensign as the national flag and in 1951 King George VI approved the government's recommendation. When the Flags bill was introduced into parliament on 20 November 1953, Menzies said:

"This bill is very largely a formal measure which puts into legislative form what has become almost the established practice in Australia ... The design adopted was submitted to His Majesty King Edward VII, and he was pleased to approve of it as the Australian flag in 1902. However, no legislative action has ever been taken to determine the precise form of the flag or the circumstances of its use, and this bill has been brought down to produce that result."

The *Flags Act 1953* (Cth) has the distinction of being the first to be given royal assent by a reigning monarch when it was signed into law on 14 February 1954 by Queen Elizabeth II during a visit to Canberra to open the 3rd session of the 20th federal parliament.



The front cover of the *Flags Act* as signed by Queen Elizabeth II (left) and the second schedule containing illustrations of the *Australian national flag* and *Australian red ensign* (right).

