

A proposed new flag that everyone's talking about ... but what do Aboriginal people think about it?

Written by The Conversation

Like a lot of people, I'm embarrassed to be living in an advanced industrialised OECD nation where our national flag includes that of a foreign nation. I just want us to grow up. Canada, a significant Commonwealth nation, got rid of the Union Jack in 1965. New Zealand is in the process of voting on a change, which leaves Australia and a [handful](#) of tiny Caribbean and Pacific nations still clinging onto Britannia's apron strings.

Over the years I've seen a lot of suggestions for a new Australian flag that mostly range from bland to execrable. Among these are a handful that seem promising, but until about a year ago, I'd never seen anything that instantly made me feel "yes!"

I was alerted to the flag at the top of this page by a tweep I follow @Captainturtle who [wrote](#) in September 2014:

Heard Union Jack on Oz flag shouldn't change because it's 'history'. Yet 50,000 years doesn't rate a mention.

Precisely. I personally like it a great deal.

Eleven years ago in 2006, an Epping (Sydney) resident John Joseph entered the flag in a Sun Herald competition to design a potential new Australian flag. I joined in the enthusiasm in January last year, [tweeting](#) : "This idea for a new Australian flag is just stunningly good. Pass it around."

Plenty did. It has since been retweeted 575 times and "liked" 351 times. It has had 50,572 twitter impressions and more came in this week around Australia Day. Of more than 17,000 tweets, only two I have posted have been retweeted more.

Many more are highlighting it too. Vexillology (flag study) blogs are discussing it and the Hoopla blog ran an [article](#) on it on Australia Day.

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Here's what the [Sun Herald](#) said about John Joseph's entry:

John submitted an Aboriginal design which replaced the Union Jack with a dot painting from Aborigines in central Australia. He says this is "red and white Aboriginal art symbol for a campsite or a home country". Then he says this flag would reflect "the past present and future of our country" and encourage people to focus on our island nation and its unique environment with its spiritual presence rather than looking back to Britain and its past Empire.

To me, this seems just perfect. But I worry about this: however well-meaning and inclusive of Indigenous culture the designer wanted to be, how is his design perceived by those in that culture? I've looked hard and enquired but not found anything to indicate that the design arose from any process that involved Indigenous agencies or representatives participating or endorsing the design. If I have failed to find this information, my apologies in advance.

Perhaps John Joseph is just a fine designer who wanted his inspired idea to be "out there" and discussed. How well he has succeeded.

Over the years that has been a lot of fake "Aboriginal art" paintings on eBay and made in China "Aboriginal art" in tourist junk stores. Some might think these are harmless decorative panels and souvenirs to brighten walls. Others might think they are crass and disrespectful, regardless of how attractive the occasional one might be. But here we are talking about a potential formal statement or symbol of Aboriginal culture that could be one of two major messages on our national flag.

Stan Grant's [anti-racist speech](#) reminded us so powerfully last week week about the contempt, neglect, abuse and murder of Aboriginal people. To further advance a design meant to represent Aboriginal culture without full engagement of that culture would be just wrong.

It seems to me unassailable that if an Aboriginal symbol is to become part of a new national flag – as surely it must – that the Aboriginal community should have ownership of the process from now on that proposes the symbol that will represent its peoples.

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That process may well concur with so many that John Joseph's design is wonderful. But it may produce something else. The long used and highly recognised Aboriginal black, red and yellow flag will have many supporters as well. Whatever the outcome, it will be critical to remember that we are all likely to be asked to vote on any change, as is finally happening in New Zealand in March. There the [vote](#) will be between the current flag and a new design where the fern leaf replaces the Union Jack.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/a-proposed-new-flag-that-everyones-talking-about-but-what-do-aboriginal-people-think-about-it-53959>