

National flags often include stripes, stars, or other elements of a certain number to symbolise specific aspects of the nation that the flag represents. On the flag of the USA, for example, thirteen red-and-white stripes represent that nation's original colonies, whilst fifty white stars represent its present states. On the current Australian national flag, a large white star in the lower canton, as well as four of the five stars of the Southern Cross, mirror the Commonwealth Star in the Australian Coat of Arms, and with their seven points they represent Australia's six official states and its various territories. Seven is therefore a numerical symbol of Australia, suitable for use on its national flag. However, its manifestation need not be limited to points on stars. There are five stars in the Southern Cross on the current national flag, but adding the Pointer Stars would bring the count to seven. On at least one of Australia's historical flags, in fact, the Southern Cross was depicted in just this way, and these 'Seven Sisters' now appear on the flag of the Anangu Traditional Owners. There is also no reason why the Australian flag cannot include seven horizontal or vertical stripes in its canton, hoist, or fly, or even sixteen stripes to represent *all* of Australia's states and territories. Such stripes would most likely be blue-and-red, but blue-and-gold, red-and-gold, green-and-gold, or other colour combinations might prove to be acceptable as well. Designers should ponder all of the ways in which their flag designs might numerically symbolise Australia's six states and its ten territories.

Whilst the numbers seven and sixteen may be symbolic of Australia within its borders, arguably the three most *internationally*-recognised symbols of Australia, and thus those most suitable for use on its national flag, are the Southern Cross, the kangaroo, and the Commonwealth Star. The Southern Cross is considered [elsewhere](#) in full, so this document will begin with a focus on the kangaroo and on the Commonwealth Star.

The most logical appearance for a kangaroo on the national flag is as a silhouette in a solid colour, and numerous flag designs of this kind have been proposed in the past. Unfortunately the effect has often been logo-like, which is not surprising, since Australia and the wider world have long been inundated with virtually every conceivable abstract kangaroo silhouette as either a corporate or a sporting logo. Therefore more realistic silhouettes may be preferable. Another problem has to do with positioning. Vexillologists may disparage any such design that does not adhere to the 'animals must face the flag pole' convention, citing an obscure heraldic rule about cowardice being indicated by animals that face away from the pole, but there is also a practical reason to observe the convention. No matter how abstract or realistic such a silhouette is, it will basically be diagonally or horizontally oriented. It follows that for a draped flag in windless conditions, the silhouette will be partitioned by the folds of the slack flag, and the head of the silhouette will probably be hidden, perhaps leaving only a bit of a tail and some incongruous coloured sections from which an observer is meant to recognise a roo. For such recognition to be possible, the ideal positioning of a kangaroo silhouette will always be with its head in the hoist, preferably high within the upper canton and as close to the pole as is possible. That settled, a particular silhouette must be selected. Of the many public-domain or otherwise acceptable choices, one of the best may be that used currently in



the roundels of the Australian Air Force, as shown to the left. Once a silhouette has been chosen, its colour will need to be considered. If either the rear or the front edge of the silhouette is to serve as the dividing line at which the field colour of the fly begins, it may be best to avoid silhouette colours of red, white, or azure (light) blue, to avoid clashes with the conventional fly colours of certain civil and Defence Forces ensigns. Also in the case where the front edge serves as the dividing line, these colours should be avoided for the field of the hoist as well as for that of the fly.



Illustrating the concepts above, for the column of three designs at the far left, where fly colour begins at the *rear* edges of the silhouettes, converting the designs into civil ships, Navy, Air Force, and certain other ensigns would require the sacrifice of much of the silhouette. Instead a silhouette colour should be chosen that contrasts with red, white, and azure. On the other hand, if the *front* edges of the silhouettes are to serve as the start of the fly colour, as shown right, distinguishable civil ships, Navy, and Air Force ensigns cannot even be derived. The solution is for



the field colours of the hoist and of the fly to allow changes to the fly colour without a clash. For example, the hoist field could be gold, whilst the silhouette could be blue or green. Other approaches may prove as unworkable as that suggested [here](#), where the designer proposes to 'colour-code' the nation's 30-plus flags, apparently being convinced that Australia (and the world) would happily memorise the entire obscure code.



Having considered various caveats for kangaroo silhouettes, we can move on to the third of Australia's major icons, the Commonwealth Star, a grand symbol of Australia that appears on the current national flag ..... or does it?



**You call that a Commonwealth Star? Now that's a Commonwealth Star.**

The Commonwealth Star as it graces the Australian Coat of Arms is not the flat and bland white star that appears in the lower canton of the current national flag, but rather a three-dimensional looking, two-toned, magnificent 'raised' gold star, one that looks particularly good against a dark blue field. So good, in fact, that it is a bit puzzling that the government abandoned the original, official, and heraldic national colours of blue and gold in favour of a more garish green and gold, notwithstanding the grandeur of golden wattle. Designers may thus do well to include robustly colourful versions of the Commonwealth Star in their flags.

Speaking of golden wattle . . . . . Although it is far from being Australia's only authentic national symbol\*, golden wattle can certainly be included in a flag design, although perhaps not without some cautions. The actual golden wattle blossoms are spherical, but on a flag they can only be shown as flat, two-dimensional circles (the more detailed approaches that have been taken for the badge and ribbon of the Order or Australia honour, as shown to the left below, are unlikely to translate well to a flag). However, golden circles alone may do little to call the actual plant to mind. Flag designers should remember that real golden wattle has stems and leaves as well as blossoms. Also, any further abstraction of the blossoms into non-circular shapes may only serve to decrease their recognisability, and a ring of seven such circles may seem less evocative of golden wattle than of a yellow-petalled version of the Sturt's Desert Rose, as it is stylised for the fly of the [Northern Territory flag](#). Such a ring may also produce a centre area with a ghostly suggestion of a Commonwealth Star, but given that this document has already lamented the lacklustre white Commonwealth Star, it cannot muster awe for an invisible version, which would be even less recognisable on a flag than the white one, especially internationally.



Even if limited to constellations, kangaroos, Commonwealth Stars, and *Acacia pycnantha*, truly creative flag designers should be able to produce good national flag designs, but they do have additional options. For example, roos are not the only iconic Australian fauna, nor are they the only Australian critters that have easily identifiable silhouettes. Consider koalas, and perhaps emus as well. Kookaburras, crocs, and king browns, not so much.



A variety of slouch hats have historically been used by the armed forces of many nations, but nowadays they are largely worn only by Australian Army troops, with one brim pinned up to allow clearance for the barrel of a shoulder-slung rifle. [Rising Sun Badges](#), having pinned up brims for over a century, are themselves now widely-recognised icons of Australia.



The iridescent colours of Opal, Australia's national gemstone, might at first seem impossible to include in a flag design. Although modern flag fabrics are available in a suitable range of colours, even the most sophisticated appliqué techniques cannot be used to sew such fabrics together into a semblance of opal. However, nowadays most flags are printed. Of several current flag printing methods, the oldest is screen printing, in which solid colours of ink are sequentially 'squeegeed' entirely through a flag fabric. This technique might theoretically be capable of producing realistic images of opal on flag fabrics, but only after hundreds of separate operations, utterly prohibitive in terms of time, labour, and cost. More modern flag printing methods are all 'digital', with sub-categories that each have their virtues and drawbacks. The simplest is ink-jet printing, in which flag fabrics are printed using essentially the same technology as that used for paper. This method is quick and economical, and it is capable of printing photo-realistic images onto flag fabrics, but usually the inks do not penetrate very deeply, and they are often not very durable, tending to fade rapidly

when exposed to sun and rain. Far more sophisticated are flags that are printed using 'dye sublimation'. Typically an advanced printer inks a reverse image of a flag design onto special paper, and the paper is then sandwiched with a flag fabric under heat and pressure, 'sublimating' the inks into a gaseous form that thoroughly penetrates the fabric. Such flags can display brilliant and durable, photo-realistic images, and printers are now emerging that can sublimate inks directly into fabrics, without any need for intermediate, single-use 'heat-transfer' paper. So who knows? If the expense of dye sublimation printing eventually approaches that of screen printing or of ink-jet printing, opal may indeed one day grace the Australian flag.



Finally, any discussion of Australian symbols that might be suitable for use on a national flag will be woefully incomplete without a mention of Uluru. For Australians this will be patently obvious, whilst flag designers of other nationalities will be able to quickly grasp the symbolic significance of Uluru by performing an Internet search. All that remains is a consideration of how the iconic outcropping might best be depicted on a flag. A look at previous attempts may prove instructive:



As can be seen, Uluru has usually been portrayed in past designs as a stylised red arc, and one that has been completely divorced from any depiction of the flat and stark, ochre-tinted plain from which Uluru emerges. Whether this approach will result in best-possible international recognition is debatable. It can be argued that most of the world beyond Australia will only recognise Uluru as it is typically displayed in photographs, a majority of which are strikingly similar to the photo provided at the top of this page. For such non-Aussie viewers, a red arc on a blue field may be more likely to suggest a rising or a setting sun than it does Uluru.

Now, at this point the reader may be ruminating, "Fair enough, mate, but what about the boomerang?" Well, the boomerang is an Indigenous invention of thousands of years ago. If an Indigenous Australian were to design a new Oz national flag that incorporated a boomerang, no one could justifiably complain. However, designs including a boomerang have typically not been forwarded by Indigenous but by Aussies of European descent. Often such flag designs are called 'reconciliation' designs, and they may not only include boomerangs but other Indigenous creations and motifs such as hand prints and dot art, giving them something of a 'Dreamtime' flavour. Opinions about whether such usage is presumptuous or not will of course vary, but in the view of the author of this document, more than enough has already been appropriated from Indigenous by Australia's dominant white culture, and it is in no way an act of reconciliation to usurp even more from them for the design of an Australian national flag. Therefore this document recommends that all Indigenous creations, art forms, icons, motifs, and symbols be off-limits.

To bolster this proviso, consider the brilliant Aboriginal Flag, which was created by the Luritja artist Harold Thomas to serve as a symbol of ongoing [Indigenous struggles for land rights and other acknowledgements](#). It is broadly admired not only by Indigenous but by non-Indigenous, such that there are many Australians who think that it should replace the Union Jack in the canton of the current flag, or that it should otherwise be adapted to become a prominent feature. Some of these Aussies have even been courteous enough to ask for Harold Thomas' opinion, and Mr. Thomas has in turn been polite enough to gently but firmly discourage the idea. He has even copyrighted the design to prevent its use in this way, not that this has served as an actual deterrent, as evidence by the number of oblivious violations of his wishes that have been offered up:



*(The last flag above deserves special mention. In 1993 it was entered into an Ausflag contest by the Australian vexillologist Anthony 'Tony' Burton, [who was awarded a third-place prize](#) of \$4000 for his effort. Ausflag disparages the Aboriginal Flag as having a [vexillologically poor design](#), but a blatant rip-off is apparently worthy of prize money. Harold Thomas, of course, received none of it.)*

Cultural theft cannot be disguised as ‘reconciliation’, an originally well-meaning term that has perhaps devolved into a popular but vacuous buzzword, and one that has so far been largely devoid of any real meaning for Indigenous. The Aboriginal elder Wadjularbinna Nullyarimma has put it best:

“The Federal government opposes everything the platform of the Tent Embassy stands for and constantly tries to remove us. Less than 100 metres away they [have built] Reconciliation Place to fool Australians and the rest of the world into believing that we accept reconciliation. But we do not.

Reconciliation Place even goes against our spiritual and religious beliefs because, in our culture, we do not worship monuments or idols. It is for the benefit [of] the Commonwealth government as a propaganda exercise and a money-making venture from tourism at our expense.

The government is trying to conceal what they are doing to us—stealing our lands, harming our people and destroying our culture.

There can be no reconciliation without justice. When all of these issues are dealt with, reconciliation will happen automatically and they will not have to build monuments to prove reconciliation.

Reconciliation Place is about creating a ‘warm and fuzzy’ feeling for the government and Australians in general. It is not recognition of our grief and pain. It can never heal our pain, suffering and trauma, but, instead, will be a constant reminder of the evil acts of the colonists, who we believe are the Masters of Terrorism, oppressing many Peoples around the world.”

Many Indigenous certainly see the current national flag as a symbol of their historical oppression, but a so-called reconciliation flag design will only be another kind of hollow, insincere, and ultimately insulting monument. Watering down the impact of the Aboriginal Flag by incorporating some version of it into the national flag will not be conciliatory, and no sincere Australian can truthfully maintain that Indigenous creations, art forms, and motifs have somehow come to belong to broader Australia, as if through osmosis.

Further, there is no need for the Australian national flag to honour Indigenous cultures. Indigenous have already created their own flags to perform that task. They are also far better represented by those flags than the dominant culture has ever been represented by the Union Jack. Besides the Aboriginal Flag there is the Torres Strait Islander flag, with its representation of a distinctive traditional headdress, the flag of the Tiwi Islands, with its detailed renderings of three traditional carved poles, the flag of the Anangu Traditional Owners, with the seven-star Crux constellation that they call 'kungkarangkalpa', and numerous others:



*(The last flag again deserves mention. Not long after drawing his Ausflag third prize money in 1993, Tony Burton designed a flag for Australian South Sea Islanders, and his design was officially adopted by the ASSI United Council in 1998. At the time of this writing, Burton, as the Vice President of the Flag Society of Australia, had for twenty years continued to retain the intellectual property rights to the design, [despite his stated 'intention' to transfer the rights to an ASSI agency.](#))*

Designers who use elements of Indigenous flags or of other Indigenous creations, art forms, and symbols in their flag designs under the pretext of reconciliation should be mercilessly mocked. Flag-based reconciliation can only exist in one valid form, an illustration of which is depicted to the right.



\* As dubiously averred [here](#), on a website that is perhaps far more flash than the flag design it promotes.