

# Year 12 English Research Paper

## Changing of the Australian Flag

“Do Over”

Joy Richardson

*“I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Woiworung land on which my home is on and recognise their calming and inviting spirits continuing connection to land, water and community looking after us while we are here. Paying respects to Elders past, present and emerging.”*

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## Introduction

In 1998 I undertook a research paper on the topic of whether to change the Australia Flag, this was an English assessment for VCE. At the time my 17 year old self focused on the Australian National Flag, discounting an other flag that had legal recognition. The initial research centred around Australia being part of the Commonwealth and the argument against becoming a republic and changing the national flag.

Now 22 years on and as a member of Aurion Corporation's Reconciliation Action Plan working group in celebration of NAIDOC week I challenged myself to consider a new recommendation to the topic.

## Australian National Flag

The Australian National Flag (the flag) was first flown in 1901. It is Australia's foremost national symbol and has become an expression of Australian identity and pride.

In 1901 Australia's first Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Sir Edmund Barton, announced an international competition to design a flag for the new Commonwealth of Australia. There were 32,823 entries and five nearly-identical entries were awarded equal first.

The flag was flown for the first time on 3 September 1901 at the Exhibition Building in Melbourne, which was then the seat of the federal government. In this original design the stars of the Southern Cross had different numbers of points to signify their brightness.

The flag has three elements on a blue background: the Union Jack, the Commonwealth Star and the Southern Cross.

The Union Jack in the upper left corner represents the history of British settlement.

Below the Union Jack is a white Commonwealth, or Federation, star. It has seven points representing the unity of the six states and the territories of the Commonwealth of Australia. The star is also featured on the Commonwealth Coat of Arms.

The Southern Cross is shown on the flag in white. It is a constellation of five stars that can only be seen from the southern hemisphere and is a reminder of Australia's geography.

(Australian Government – Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Australian National Flag*, viewed 8 November 2020, < <https://www.pmc.gov.au/government/australian-national-flag>>)

## Original Recommendation (to my best recollection)

The Australian Flag should not be changed as this is the flag that men and women fought under during the war and by changing the flag this would be a disrespect to everything, they fought so hard for.

## Revised Research

The following research adds the perspective of inclusions of all people past, present and emerging and the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that was neglected in my initial paper.

## Australian Aboriginal Flag

The Australian Aboriginal Flag was designed by artist Harold Thomas and first flown at Victoria Square in Adelaide, South Australia, on National Aborigines Day in July 1971. It became the official flag for the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra after it was first flown there in 1972. Since then, it has become a widely recognised symbol of the unity and identity of Aboriginal people.

In view of the flag's wide acceptance and importance in Australian society, the Commonwealth took steps in 1994 to give the flag legal recognition. After a period of public consultation, in July 1995 the Aboriginal flag was proclaimed a 'Flag of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953.

In 1997 the Federal Court recognised Harold Thomas as the author of the flag.

The meanings of the three colours in the flag, as stated by Harold Thomas, are:

- **Black** – represents the Aboriginal people of Australia.
- **Yellow circle** – represents the Sun, the giver of life and protector.
- **Red** – represents the red earth, the red ochre used in ceremonies and Aboriginal peoples' spiritual relation to the land.

The Australian Aboriginal Flag is displayed at Aboriginal centres and is well recognised as the flag of Aboriginal peoples of Australia. It is flown during NAIDOC Week to celebrate and promote greater understanding of Indigenous peoples and culture and during National Reconciliation Week in recognition of 27 May as the anniversary of the 1967 Referendum which removed from the Constitution clauses that discriminated against Indigenous Australians and 3 June as the anniversary of the High Court decision in the Eddie Mabo land rights case of 1992.

(Australian Government – Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Australian Flags*, viewed 8 November 2020, <<https://www.pmc.gov.au/government/australian-national-symbols/australian-flags>>)

(National NAIDOC Secretariat, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags*, viewed 8 November 2020, <<https://www.naidoc.org.au/about/indigenous-australian-flags>>)

## Torres Strait Islander Flag

The Torres Strait Islander flag was designed by the late Bernard Namok as a symbol of unity and identity for Torres Strait Islanders. Adopted in 1992, it was the winning entry in a design competition run by the Island Coordinating Council, a Queensland statutory body representing the community councils in the Torres Strait.

In the same year it was recognised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and given equal prominence with the Australian Aboriginal Flag.

In July 1995 the Australian Government recognised it, with the Australian Aboriginal Flag, as an official 'Flag of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953.

The Torres Strait Islander flag has three horizontal panels, with green at the top and bottom and blue in between. These panels are divided by thin black lines. A white *Dhari* (traditional headdress) sits in the centre, with a five-pointed white star beneath it.

The meanings of the colours in the flag are:

- **Green** – represents the land
- **Black** – represents the Indigenous peoples
- **Blue** - represents the sea
- **White** – represents peace

The *Dhari* represents Torres Strait Islander people and the five-pointed star represents the five island groups within the Torres Strait. The star is also a symbol for seafaring people as it is used in navigation.

(Australian Government – Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Australian National Flag*, viewed 8 November 2020, <<https://www.pmc.gov.au/government/australian-national-symbols/australian-flags>>)

(National NAIDOC Secretariat, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags*, viewed 8 November 2020, <<https://www.naidoc.org.au/about/indigenous-australian-flags>>)

## Australia Day

Captain Arthur Phillip took formal possession of the colony of New South Wales on 26 January 1788 and raised the British flag for the first time in Sydney Cove.

In 1818, on the 30th anniversary of the founding of the colony, the Governor of New South Wales gave all government employees a holiday (but only in that year).

Initially, it was only New South Wales that celebrated the day (for obvious reasons), and it was known as 'First Landing Day', 'Anniversary Day' or 'Foundation Day'.

In 1838, 50 years after the First Fleet arrived, Foundation Day was declared Australia's first public holiday in New South Wales.

By 1935, January 26 was known as Australia Day in all states except New South Wales where the name 'Anniversary Day' prevailed.

In 1946 the Commonwealth and state governments agreed to unify the celebrations on January 26 and call it 'Australia Day'.

Before 1994 Australia Day was the closest Monday to January 26 to ensure a long weekend. (This tells you a lot about Australian priorities!) Since 1994, Australia Day has been a public holiday throughout the country.

(Creative Spirits, *Australia Day - Invasion Day*, viewed 8 November 2020, <<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australia-day-invasion-day>>)

## Invasion Day, Day of Mourning, Survival Day

For those who mark January 26th as 'Invasion Day', this date represents the British occupation of Indigenous land. Invasion Day events are held across the country and often include protests and marches rejecting the celebration of Australia Day on this date and calling for sovereignty and social justice for Indigenous Australians.

Others commemorate January 26th as a day of mourning, recognising the violence of the Frontier Wars, including massacres, rape and murder, as well as trauma caused by government policies of assimilation and separation which removed many people from their lands, families and culture. The first 'Day of Mourning and Protest' was organised by pioneering Aboriginal rights activist, William Cooper, in 1938, during Sydney's 150th Anniversary celebrations. Day of Mourning protests have been held on January 26th ever since.

Still others celebrate January 26th as Survival Day, an opportunity to recognise the survival of Indigenous people and culture despite colonisation and discrimination. Survival Day events include festivals celebrating Indigenous culture, taking pride in Indigenous achievements and showcasing Indigenous artists and musicians. These events generally have a more positive vibe than Invasion Day and Day of Mourning events.

(Australians Together, *Australia Day*, viewed 8 November 2020,  
<<https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/australia-day/>>)

## Indigenous Disadvantage in Australia

In 2008, the Australian government made a formal commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, known as 'Closing the Gap', the gap refers to the vast health and life-expectation inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian. This inequality includes;

- Social and cultural determinants of health
- Infant mortality and life expectancy
- Physical and mental health
- Education and employment
- Family and community wellbeing; and
- Incarceration.

(Australians Together, *Indigenous disadvantage in Australia*, viewed 8 November 2020,  
<<https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/the-wound/indigenous-disadvantage-in-australia/>>)

## Unconscious Bias

Unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups, and these biases stem from one's tendency to organise social worlds by categorising. Our brain automatically tells us that we are safe with people who look, think and act similar to us.

Neuroscientists have uncovered brain regions involved in racial and gender stereotyping and shown that such stereotypes begin to form early in childhood.

Scientists believe that stereotypes in general serve a purpose because clustering people into groups with expected traits help us navigate the world without being overwhelmed by information. The downside is that the potential for prejudice is hard-wired into human cognition.

The evidence is overwhelming that unconscious bias seeps into decisions that affect recruitment, access to healthcare and outcomes in criminal justice in ways that can disadvantage people from ethnic minorities.

However, at the individual level, the extent to which such biases are internalised and acted on varies widely and in complex ways. Life experience, such as dating outside your racial group or having a boss from a minority group, can strongly protect against holding negative stereotypes. And there is dispute about the extent to which such biases are truly unconscious.

(Living Institute, *Unconscious Bias Training*, viewed 8 November 2020, <[https://livinginstitute.com/unconscious-bias-training/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAy579BRCPARIsAB6QoIY36sCOdAO316xCNRXXHf7KBvy7UOQd1eDgCbFgPvjF2RjlgjK6uHlaAld7EALw\\_wcB](https://livinginstitute.com/unconscious-bias-training/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAy579BRCPARIsAB6QoIY36sCOdAO316xCNRXXHf7KBvy7UOQd1eDgCbFgPvjF2RjlgjK6uHlaAld7EALw_wcB)>)

(University of California, San Francisco, *Unconscious Bias*, viewed 8 November 2020, <<https://diversity.ucsf.edu/resources/unconscious-bias#:~:text=Unconscious%20biases%20are%20social%20stereotypes,organize%20social%20worlds%20by%20categorizing.>>>)

(Devlin, Hannah, published 3 Dec 2018, *Unconscious bias: what is it and can it be eliminated?*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/dec/02/unconscious-bias-what-is-it-and-can-it-be-eliminated>>)

## Reconciliation

Reconciliation is an ongoing journey that reminds us that while generations of Australians have fought hard for meaningful change, future gains are likely to take a greater emphasis on effort.

Reconciliation Australia outlines five dimensions;

### *Race Relations*

All Australians understand and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous cultures, rights and experiences, which results in stronger relationships based on trust and respect and that are free of racism.

**Goal:** Positive two-way relationships built on trust and respect exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians throughout society.

**Action:** Overcome racism



### *Equality and Equity*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples participate equally in a range of life opportunities and the unique rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised and upheld.

**Goal:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians participate equally and equitably in all areas of life—i.e. we have closed the gaps in life outcomes—and the distinctive individual and collective rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are universally recognised and respected. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are self-determining.

**Action:** Renew focus on Closing the Gap

### *Institutional Integrity*

The active support of reconciliation by the nation's political, business and community structures.

**Goal:** Our political, business and community institutions actively support all dimensions of reconciliation.

**Action:** Capitalise on the RAP Program to create a wider range of opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

### *Unity*

An Australian society that values and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage as a proud part of a shared national identity.

**Goal:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and rights are a valued and recognised part of a shared national identity and, as a result, there is national unity.

**Action:** Achieve a process to recognise Australia's First Peoples in our Constitution.

### *Historical Acceptance*

All Australians understand and accept the wrongs of the past and their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Australia makes amends for past policies and practices ensures these wrongs are never repeated.

**Goal:** There is widespread acceptance of our nation's history and agreement that the wrongs of the past will never be repeated— there is truth, justice, healing and historical acceptance.

**Action:** Acknowledge our past through education and understanding.

(Reconciliation Australia, *What is Reconciliation?*, viewed 8 November 2020, <<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/what-is-reconciliation/>>)

## New Recommendation

Overall my conclusion remains the same, I don't believe the Australia National Flag, Australian Aboriginal Flag or Torres Strait Island Flag should be changed to be a singular Australian Flag.

Until our country and more broadly the world recognises true equality, inclusion and acknowledges the heritage of our land and country we are not representative as one country nor in unity.

I believe it would be a mistake to represent our country under one flag, in my opinion this would be seen similar to Australia Day which to the Indigenous community is known as Invasion Day, Day of Mourning or Survival Day. Another moment the "white" privilege takes away from their heritage.

However the following recommendation does take into consideration that our country recognises more than one flag, it is important when analysing a topic to consider research in a broad sense and acknowledge all perspectives. My initial recommendation did not do this, it was based on a narrowed focus and unconscious racial bias. My recommendation was based on my connection to my family and the narrative I grew up to know, however now 22 years on, I'm not 17 years old nor did I have the educational narrative set out for me. I have learnt to open my thinking and broaden my education, I know that by no means am I disrespecting those men and women that fought for our country in the war including my Grandfather that meant the world to me.

Therefore my recommendation is to focus on reconciliation and reckoning, addressing social injustice and racism, education of our heritage and being open, kind and truly addressing inequality within the Indigenous population and embrace the beauty of having an Australian National Flag, Australian Aboriginal Flag and Torres Strait Island Flag that is reflective and representative of our country.

At the 2000 Olympics when Cathy Freeman did her victory lap around Sydney Olympic Stadium draped in the Australian National Flag and Australian Aboriginal Flag, rather than reflecting on this moment negatively, I now reflect on this moment with admiration. She was using her platform to commence the conversation in terms of reconciliation but she was displaying vulnerability and congruence into her pride to her country but paying respect to her heritage.

## References

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