



New Zealanders who actually lived through the 2015/2016 flag referendums may be put off by this post-mortem, but lessons are best learned from mistakes that are well catalogued. For a possible New Zealand in future, or for other nations that may hold flag referendums, here is that catalogue.

New Zealand was the first nation on earth to grant its populace the power to change its national flag by means of a democratic referendum process. The national pride that might otherwise have accompanied this historic precedent was blunted by the fact that the process did not take place because of the will of the people but because of the will of the New Zealand Parliament, or perhaps more accurately because of the will of a single person, then Prime Minister John Key.

National polarisation was the inevitable result. A sizeable portion of the New Zealand citizenry resented the heavy-handed way in which the flag referendums were thrust upon them without even a hint of majority public support or consent. Many New Zealanders saw the referendums as Key's vanity project, or at best as a trivial diversion from far more pressing national problems, and they accordingly found fault with the taxpayer-funded price tag of the affair.

The NZ Parliament enshrined several mistakes in the legislation that was produced to govern the referendum process. One such mistake was to legally exempt civil and Defence Forces ensigns from being impacted by any new national flag design. Other exempted ensigns included those of the Police and Fire Services, as well as the flags of Niue, the Cook Islands, and other areas of the full Realm of NZ. These exemptions effectively allowed flag designers to decouple their flag designs from reality, instead of forcing them to consider the practical effects of their designs on the many other flags and ensigns of the nation. Designers were not even required to show how their designs could be adapted into shorter-length versions for New Zealand's United Nations flag.

In its largest legislative mistake, however, Parliament vested the full authority to select flag design candidates in a twelve-member Flag Consideration Panel. The Panel actually asked Parliament to instead use public online voting to select flag design candidates, but was given the specious excuse that the cost would be too prohibitive. Thus no matter how conscientiously the Panel parsed ten thousand flag design entries down to their final selections, they were doomed to be mercilessly disparaged for their demographic biases as well as for their lack of collective 'flag expertise', whatever that is. Since only one of the panellists was a bona fide vexillologist, there were those who said that the Panel should have had more of them, notwithstanding that 'vexillology' is just a pretentious word for 'flag study', and 'vexillologists' are for the most part little more than flag hobbyists. Others grumbled that there were no 'designers' on the Panel, never mind that recognition of good design is not a skill limited to designers. Any other twelve citizens, no matter their abilities or backgrounds, would have been equally impugned, and on equally baseless criteria.

However, several criticisms of the Flag Consideration Panel were richly deserved. During the flag design submission period, the Panel met with iwi for a Waitangi hui. As a result of that and other meetings the Panel was forbidden from including either the Tino Rangatiratanga flag or the United Tribes flag in the design competition, yet the Panel made no mention of such restrictions in their published ['Flag Design Guidelines'](#). As a result, numerous submitted designs obviously incorporated either all or part of these Māori flags, and in turn the Panel went right ahead and posted them online, effectively insulting all Māori. The Panel also indicated that it would summarily reject flag designs that included complex objects, which was a witless restriction, given that many of the best national flags in the world contain complex objects. The Panel's guidelines further suggested that flag designs with any dimensional ratio would be acceptable, when the only valid dimensional ratio for designs should have been 1:2, that of the current national flag and of all the other flags and ensigns of the nation. Moreover the Panel did *not* reject several flag designs that were overtly absurd, and all of these designs were posted online, right alongside more valid designs. National and international media gleefully seized upon cartoon kiwis with laser-beam eyes, 'Pepe the Frog' faces, and rainbow farts. Besides designs that invited media ridicule, the Panel also accepted those that made sarcastic political comments, such as the design that combined a Chinese flag with the Southern Cross, and the one that alluded to New Zealand's membership in the 'Five Eyes' intelligence alliance. They were even daft enough to post the flag designs of little children, which no matter how adorable had no legitimate place in the competition. In yet another lapse of judgement the Panel published designs for online viewing as soon as they were accepted, instead of publishing all accepted designs simultaneously, the sole approach that would have given all of the designs equitable exposure and equal time for consideration. The Panel was not transparent enough to publish the designs that they rejected, nor even the number of such rejected designs, making it impossible to know whether they rejected perfectly good flag designs, tossing out babies with the bathwater. And finally there was the fiasco of the 'what we stand for' campaign, in which the Panel sought public comments but cynically skewed their resultant 'word cloud' to dishonestly portray the major gists of those comments.



Making matters worse, the website 'gallery' of accepted designs was shabbily implemented. In the end, the website's visitors were forced to step through 172 separate web pages in order to view all of the submitted designs, when a few pages of small, linked thumbnail images would have sufficed. The designs were not indexed to be sortable by number, design name, and designer, but were instead presented randomly, often making searches and efficient review virtually impossible. They were also only presented as flat images, when the website could have taken advantage of an existing [utility](#) to show how each design would have appeared when waving or when draped in windless conditions, important but difficult-to-visualise considerations. Ultimately though, the criticisms of the Panel would have been more properly laid at the feet of Parliament, who arguably only created the Panel to serve as a scapegoat so that they could wash their hands of a process that they knew would fail, as perhaps Bill English did when he reportedly said that ['the collection and assessment of submissions on the flag was not his responsibility'](#). 'Minister in charge' of what?

The creators of the more than 10,000 flag design submissions were never given practical nor specific guidance, but only the inadequate generalities of the Panel's design guidelines. Told only to keep their designs simple, they naturally tended to submit designs that were not only simple but simplistic, hackneyed, and lacklustre. As a result, the Panel's entire long-list of forty semi-finalist flag designs was uninspiring, and it was accordingly subjected to widespread derision as a collection of 'tea towels'. The Panel's final short-list of four flag designs attracted yet further scorn, to such a degree that a reactionary social media campaign was even able to secure the inclusion of a fifth flag design from the original long-list, following clumsy parliamentary acquiescence.

For the first referendum, Parliament made the mistake of forbidding the inclusion of the current flag in the voting. Moreover the almost survey-like question "Do you want the flag to change" was not allowed to appear on the ballot, based on the specious theory that "people are not happy to vote for change unless they know what the change is", as argued on page 15 of '[New Zealand Flag Facts](#)'. Had Parliament allowed either or both of these modifications to the first referendum, New Zealand taxpayers might well have been saved the cost of the second, which actually only deserves mention for being the end-point of two years of divisive furore, national embarrassment, and relentless public and political sniping and back-stabbing.

A couple of general blunders should also be noted. Staging the flag change referendums during the period of the World War I centenary commemorations was an affront to the sentiments of the members of the New Zealand Returned and Services' Association, if not to the sentiments of every patriot in the nation. For many of these individuals the whole affair was not merely insensitive but insulting. In consequence there was an extensive backlash that resulted in organised campaigns for 'no voting', 'protest voting', and the like. Bad enough that a paternalistic Parliament forced the referendums down the public's throat, but the tone-deaf timing made the referendums all that much more difficult for many citizens to swallow. The referendums were also needlessly rushed, from conception to completion. In their [post-referendums report](#), the Flag Consideration Panel lamented the speed at which they were forced to implement their many responsibilities, and in particular the inadequate time that they were given to develop comprehensive design guidelines. Still worse, the flag design submission period lasted less than two-and-a-half months, a paltry amount of time for flag design ideas to fully germinate and to be brought to fruition.

The lessons in a nutshell:

- Use a full-nation [survey](#) to definitively determine majority attitudes towards flag change.

With and *only* with the blessings of a majority of voting-age citizens:

- Carefully develop official flag design [guidelines](#) in four comprehensive subcategories: what is required (e.g. dimensional ratio of 1:2, specific graphics formatting), what is prohibited (e.g. designs that are absurd, amateurish, lewd, insulting, insensitive, humourous, political, or religious), what is allowed (e.g. complexity, many colours, emblems, letters, words), and what is recommended (e.g. inclusion of the Southern Cross, inclusion of some red-white-and-blue, exclusion of Māori iconography, exclusion of red, white, or azure/light blue fly).
- Solicit flag designs for a period of six months to one year, with the explicit understanding that no designs will be publicly displayed until the close of the submission period. Require all flag designs to be submitted on [a standard 'fillable' form](#), which can be completed and submitted either online or offline. Completed forms must not only depict a national flag design but its possible adaptation to the other major flags and ensigns of the nation.
- For several months, display an online thumbnail-grid of accepted designs for public rating, including [the current flag](#). Link each flag thumbnail to a detailed, single-page, A4-size PDF, displaying the full details of the design. The ratings website must be 'user-friendly', searchable and sortable by design number, design name, and designer(s). A built-in provision should show how flag designs appear when waving and in windless conditions.
- Do not go on to a binding vote to change the current national flag unless at the close of the rating period at least one alternative flag design has a rating above that of the current flag.