

Ask any vexillologist or other self-appointed 'expert' for the main rule of good flag design, and they will be very likely to immediately chunder up the word 'simplicity'. Ask them to explain their reasoning, however, and they may stutter for a moment. After gathering their wits they may claim that only simple flag designs can be identified in all wind conditions, or that only flags with simple design elements can be reduced in size without becoming unrecognisable, but these arguments are easily belied by the flag of the United States, which has a complex arrangement of fifty small white stars in its canton yet is the most recognised flag in the world, whether it is waving, hanging limp, or adorning the lapel of a crooked politician as a tiny pin. They may say that only simple flags can be efficiently manufactured, which hasn't been true since the nineteenth century, or they may say that complex details tend to horribly clutter a design, which is a conflation of simplicity with the avoidance of needless complexity, chalk and cheese. In the end, the best you are likely to receive is obfuscation, dissembling, and circular argument, perhaps something on the order of 'the reasons are obvious', delivered with severe disdain due to your heresy in suggesting that the rationale behind the 'rule' might be specious. Parrots, they are, repeating what they have heard from other parrots.

The mere fact that several national flags have simple designs is no justification for requiring any new national flag to follow suit. Many national flags are the same as they were in previous eras, when flags could only be sewn together from separate bits of coloured fabric, hence the simpler the better, and such flags have become too traditional to be easily changed, whilst others have been chosen under the influence of the aforementioned parrots, who tend to simply ignore examples of brilliantly complex flags that are both widely recognised and deeply loved, such as the flag of Brazil, with its celestial globe of stars as they would have appeared over Rio de Janeiro when Brazil became a republic, or the flag of free Tibet, with its eight colours, radiant sun, flames, dragons, yin-yang symbol, and much else. Simplicity is actually the bane of national flags, which on the whole are a lacklustre lot. The number comprised of only three stripes, often in varying orders of red-white-and-blue, is nauseating. Without recourse to a labelled chart, such flags are often not well-recognised beyond the borders of the nations that they represent. Recently this confusion was put to good use for a gag involving the Russian flag, which has horizontal white, blue, and red stripes, ordered top-to-bottom. Enterprising tricksters had 'TRUMP' printed across hand-held Russian flags, and then passed them out to obsequious Trump supporters at one of his rallies. By the time the ruse was sussed out, many a snapshot of oblivious Trumpians waving Russian flags had found its way onto the Internet. It was a brilliant joke, but it also illustrated that simple flag designs can be moronic, especially for morons.

Anyone claiming that simple designs always make for the best flags will inevitably offer the flags of Japan and Canada as evidence, but neither actually proves the point. Although the Japanese red circle on its white field is certainly iconic, in windless conditions the red bit can be swallowed up in the flag's folds, leaving mainly a white flag of surrender. Also, the Japanese flag was simply mandated into existence, although the nineteenth century Japanese public could never have had a say in its selection. Nowadays they have heaps to say about that imperialistic and ultra-nationalistic red sun, and not much of it good, as when they are comparing it to a menstruation stain on a white bed sheet. The Japanese public tends to avoid displaying the flag, even on ceremonial occasions. Their flag is indeed simple, but it is far from being one of the best.



The Canadian flag also has its shortcomings, although certainly not the maple leaf, which in one form or another has been the de facto symbol of Canada for three hundred years or so. During the Canadian flag debate of the early 1960s, there was never much doubt as to whether the national flag would eventually bear a maple leaf, and the abstract leaf of the current flag was a good choice, representative of all of the ten native maple varieties of Canada without precisely imitating any particular species. The arguments were mostly about whether there should be one leaf or three, or whether the leaf or leaves should be red, green, or gold, or whether the design should tip a hat to both English and French heritage. Although Canadians were allowed to offer suggestions, which they did by the thousands, there was no public referendum. Instead the flag was slated to be chosen by parliamentary decree, based upon the recommendations of a fifteen-member committee. However, a disciple of simplicity named George F.G. Stanley managed to sneak a wild card into the proceedings, and after a great deal of heated debate and some shrewd political manoeuvring, his design was eventually made official, in 1965.

Although they never had any actual say in its selection, the Canucks have certainly come to love their flag, so it can't be faulted on that front, but although the flag's design is certainly both iconic and aesthetic, it lacks the practicality that a more considered design might have enjoyed. Unlike many nations that use a single, all-purpose flag for every other flag and ensign that they may require, Canada is largely subject to the UK model, where every type of civil and Defence Force ensign has differing treatments of field colour and content. Canada does not completely adhere to the UK template, at least not as thoroughly as certain other

former colonies such as New Zealand and Australia, so that, for example, its national flag doubles as its civil ships ensign, and apparently also as its civil aviation ensign. However, the various Canadian Defence Force ensigns do adhere to the UK pattern, by reducing the national flag to the cantons of the required ensigns. As explored elsewhere on the nz.flagoptions.com website, this treatment can often result in drawbacks, making such flags less than optimum. For example, suppose Canada *were* to follow the UK model of a red field for its civil ships ensign, with the Canadian flag reduced to the canton of the ensign. The result would tend to look odd, because of the lack of contrast between the red field of the ensign and the large red areas of the canton. However, the main downside of cantons versus full-size flags is that a canton occupies only a quarter the area of a full flag, making it up to four times more difficult to recognise from any given distance.

Some may argue that the Canadian flag is so iconic that it is as recognisable as a canton as when it is full size. The validity of that claim can be tested, using the Canadian Naval ensign shown to the left below, which is accompanied by the Canadian Army, Air Force, Border Services, and Coast Guard ensigns.



It is not difficult to distinguish a flat image of the Canadian Naval ensign from, say, that of Myanmar, shown to the left, but what about when the flags are viewed in real life, at a distance, and particularly in a lack of wind? As shown in the image to the left below, those conditions could make it considerably more difficult to distinguish the Canadian Naval ensign on the left from the Myanmar Naval ensign on the right.



Admittedly, the deck has been 'stacked' for this demonstration, but it still serves to illustrate that, given a choice, canton-based ensigns may not be the best way to go. It also reveals another weakness in the design of the Canadian Flag, whether it is full size or a canton, namely that its hoist edge, in the area of the canton closest to the flagpole, is a solid block of red. This area of a flag's canton is sometimes referred to as the 'place of honour', a 'sweet spot' that will always tend to be most prominent, especially when the flag is draped in windless conditions. It is therefore the spot where an identifiable national symbol, or at least an identifiable part of such a symbol, is ideally placed. There is very little about a nondescript red block at the top of a draped flag that says 'Canada', much less 'Canadian Navy'.



Taking a look at the other Canadian Defence Forces ensigns towards the top of this page, that of the Canadian Army serves to illustrate the point that a flag with a red fly does not work very well when it is 'cantonised' into a red ensign, even with the addition of some gold fimbriation, particularly when the fimbriation is so narrow that it seems to disappear when viewed through a squint. It is baffling that, having avoided this very pitfall with a red civil ships ensign, Canada nevertheless chose to succumb to it with a red Army ensign, and here again, as shown to the left, most of the distinguishing features of the ensign can tend to become lost in a lack of wind.

There is much less to criticise about the Air Force ensign, which stands a fair chance of being identified in any wind, first by its UK-standard, azure-blue field colour, and then by its duplicate maple leaves, and the Canadian Border Services ensign is also not bad.

The Border Services ensign does show some numerical symbolism that is lacking in the Canadian national flag, with its circle of thirteen small gold maple leaves, representing Canada's ten provinces and its three territories, so one could argue that the current abstract red maple leaf would do well to sprout two more points.



The Coast Guard ensign serves to illustrate some admirably independent thought, by completely eschewing a canton in favour of the actual symbolic heart of the national flag, the maple leaf alone, big and bold. One

wonders why the designs of the other four Defence Forces ensigns did not take an approach similar to that of the Coast Guard ensign, given the improved recognisability of its large red maple leaf within the solid white field of its hoist. That recognisability could be even further enhanced by shifting the maple leaf more fully towards the hoist edge, and perhaps by giving it a 45-degree tilt as well, to ensure that at least some of its iconic points would always appear in the canton's place-of-honour or sweet spot, no matter the wind.

After collecting all of our observations and setting an imaginary 'wayback' machine to 1965, maybe we can slip a different wild card into the parliamentary proceedings, something along the lines shown below.



How do you think we fared in our little 'what-if' exercise? In your opinion, is the simple Canadian flag design still the best, or do you prefer our somewhat more complex version? Which design is more practical in terms of its probable impact on civil and Defence Forces ensigns, or on other Canadian flags and ensigns, such as those of police, fire, and emergency services, as well as those of the Canadian provinces and territories? Which design is apt to be more recognisable from a distance, and in all wind conditions?

The intent of this treatise has not been to disparage the Canadian flag nor to immodestly claim that a 'better' version has been presented here. As noted earlier, a majority of Canadians love their flag, and no national flag design can ever expect to do better than that. The intent has rather been to show, objectively, that the simplicity of the Canadian flag design may not actually be as admirable as is generally thought, a lesson that should not be ignored by Kiwis, should they eventually seek their own new flag. Also, the Canadian Parliament was nearly as imperious as old Japan when it foisted a new flag on its citizenry without a popular vote, and the New Zealand Parliament could theoretically be just as heavy-handed. However, the Canadian Parliament was also lucky. Initially there was widespread resistance to the new flag, but fortunately it grew on its populace, helped along by international admiration. NZ's parliament would not be wise to count on having such luck.

Summing up, rather complex problems can attend simple flags. However, the most insidious thing about the notion that good flag designs must be simple is that it tends to cause a mental block in would-be flag designers, preventing them from even *considering* the idea that more complex designs may often be better. When designers buy in to such pedantry, pursuing only simple design approaches rather than considering the full range of possibilities, they have shunned degustation in favour of a diet of pabulum. Simplicity in flag design is not necessarily a bad thing, but one should never 'keep it simple' just to please the parrots.