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# It Takes a Whole Country to Raise a Flag

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# Abstract

New Zealand is one of the world's longest standing democracies. Building on this democratic history, the New Zealand Flag Consideration Process has offered the country an opportunity to engage in a unique democratic exercise—voting on a possible new flag. This thesis identifies this situation as a unique opportunity to apply a design research methodology to investigate the research question: how can a democratic design process be facilitated, as explored through the New Zealand Flag Consideration Process?

Subsequently, this brings into question how the New Zealand Government implemented the Flag Consideration Process as a democratic approach to the design process. Through this line of enquiry, observations and analyses of the Flag Consideration Process point to a disregard for principles of deliberative democracy (a form of democracy in which deliberation is central to decision-making) and design process. The theoretical framework of this research suggests that these processes have similarities and mirror each other in intent, offering a basis in which to explore this research question.

The established scope of this project sites this research at the intersection of design process, democracy, and vexillology (the study of flags). While design follows a segmented and iterative process, the principles of deliberative democracy, such as dialogue and inclusion, suggest a means of facilitating this national flag design process democratically.

The main methodological approach used in this project was *applied design research* that was informed by the examination of the principles and models offered by design process, deliberative democracy, and vexillology.

Two design components explored the application of this theoretical framework: *Flagpost* (2015), an online platform designed to enable voting, discussion, and tagging of flag design submissions, and *Red Peak of New Zealand* (2015), a website that enables the submission and sharing of creative visualisations and responses to the Red Peak flag design. This research project is concluded by a reflection on how these models and principles worked in practice with the Flag Consideration Process as well as this project's own investigations. The outcomes from this reflection are subsequently embodied in the final applied design component—*Flagpost 2020*.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

# How can a democratic design process be facilitated, as explored through the New Zealand Flag Consideration Process?

New Zealand is one of the world's longest standing democracies. Since the foundation of its parliament in 1852, it has frequently been referred to as both a social and political laboratory (Miller, 2015), with tweaks being made over time to become a distinctly New Zealand system of democracy. Building on this democratic history, the New Zealand Flag Consideration Process has offered the country an opportunity to engage in a unique democratic exercise—voting on a possible new flag.

This thesis identifies this situation as a unique opportunity to apply a design research methodology to investigate the research question through applied design components centred around the New Zealand Flag Consideration Process as an overarching case study. Subsequently, this brings into question how the New Zealand Government implemented the Flag Consideration Process as a democratic approach to the design process.

Through this line of enquiry, observations and analyses of the Flag Consideration Process suggest a disregard for principles of deliberative democracy and design process. The theoretical framework of this research suggests that these processes have similarities and mirror each other in intent, offering a basis in which to explore this research question.

The established scope of this project indicates that this research sits at the intersection of design process, democracy, and vexillology (the study of flags). While design follows a segmented and iterative process, the principles of deliberative democracy, such as dialogue and inclusion, suggest a means of facilitating this national flag design process democratically. In addition to this, conducting this research through the Flag Consideration Process provides opportunity to contribute to the discussion surrounding the process and outcomes.

This research project aims to investigate how a democratic design process could be facilitated. Through the research methodology, the intent is to respond to

the process by creating meaningful design outcomes, whilst engaging the general public in the topic of vexillology and vexillography (the art of flag design).

The first applied design component of this research was *Flagpost* (2015). It was an online platform designed to enable voting, discussion, and tagging of flag design submissions during the Flag Consideration Process' design competition. The second applied design component, *Red Peak of New Zealand*, is a website that enables the submission and sharing of creative visualisations and responses to the Red Peak flag design. The final applied design component, *Flagpost 2020*, responds to a reflection on the overarching process. It is a speculative evolution of the previous design components, targeted at a possible revisit of the New Zealand Flag Consideration Project in the near-future.

The main methodological approach used in this project was applied design research informed by the examination of the principles and models offered by design process, deliberative democracy, and vexillology. This research is concluded by a reflection of how these models and principles worked in practice with the Flag Consideration Process as well as this project's own investigations, with outcomes subsequently embodied in the final applied design component—*Flagpost 2020*.

The following section of this chapter elaborates on the history and context of the New Zealand flag debate. Chapter 2 outlines the Flag Consideration Process as put forward by the New Zealand Government. Chapter 3 outlines a theoretical framework for the basis of this project's line of enquiry; design process, democracy, and vexillology. Chapter 4 details the main methodological approach used in this research; *applied design research*. Chapter 5 covers the case study analyses and subsequent explored design components used to investigate the New Zealand Flag Consideration Process. Chapter 6 takes another step in exploring the research enquiry through a final reflection of the overarching process and responding applied design component. Chapter 7 reflexively considers this thesis in context, and poses further questions for future enquiry.

## 1.1

# The New Zealand Flag Debate

New Zealand's national flags have been intimately entwined with the country's history and heritage. Two national flags have represented the country before the existing design. The first flag was the flag of the United Tribes of New Zealand—voted for by Māori leaders in 1835 to represent the newly independent nation. When the Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840 the Union Jack replaced the United Tribes flag. With the Colonial Naval Defence Act that passed in 1865, it became a requirement by all ships owned by British colonial governments to use the Blue Ensign with a colonial badge. It is from there where the current flag originates and was officially declared the national flag in 1902.

However, the relevance of the third and current flag has been a contentious issue for some time, with the proposition to change to a new design being debated as far back as the 1920's (Mulholland & Tawhai, 2010). This has usually been tied to questioning New Zealand's relationship to Britain and the Union Jack, and a recognition of the country's bicultural/multicultural heritage. Canadian politicians, with a flag debate starting in their own country, had asked the New Zealand Government if they had any desire to change their flag. The politicians said in response that *"there needed to be a groundswell of public opinion in order for another flag to be flown to represent New Zealand"* (Mulholland & Tawhai, 2010, p.239). In the coming decades, many proposed solutions came from a broad spectrum of New Zealanders, with many unsuccessful attempts to bring the debate to the fore of national political discourse.

The most notable attempt to bring about change was 102 years later, when the NZFlag.com Trust was founded in 2004 by Lloyd Morrison. The Trust had the aim of starting a Citizen's Initiated Referendum (CIR) on the subject—a referendum that may be held on any issue if 10% of electors sign a petition which is then presented to Parliament. The Trust launched their petition in 2005 but were unsuccessful in reaching the required number of signatures.

Figure 1.  
The three historical flags of New Zealand, including the existing design; the flag of the United Tribes of New Zealand (left), the British Union Jack (middle), and the New Zealand Ensign (right)



Despite the public having the potential to bring about change through a CIR, “the power to make changes to our symbols of nationhood ultimately rests with politicians” (Katene & Mulholland, 2013, p.13). This rang true in 2014, when the New Zealand Government instigated the New Zealand Flag Consideration Process. As described in the following section, this was without a groundswell of public opinion behind them.



Figure 2.  
Frederick Hundertwasser’s ‘Koru flag’, gifted to New Zealand

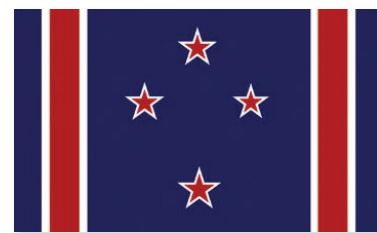


Figure 3.  
Alternative New Zealand flag design suggestion by Dick Frizzell

### Opposition

During 2015, the Government met with stiff political and public opposition to the prospect of changing the national flag. From the outset, public opinion on the New Zealand flag leaned overwhelmingly against change. Polls in August 1999, February 2014 and September 2015 had shown support for a new New Zealand flag as low as 19%, 28% and 25% respectively (Moody, 2001; “Three quarters of Kiwis”, 2014; “Most Kiwis don’t want flag change”, 2015). This is a stark contrast to the Canadian public where in 1958, six years prior to their flag change, a poll showed 85.3% wanted to see Canada with a national flag “entirely different from that of any other country” (Odesi, 1958).

Various arguments have been put forward for not changing the flag. Some suggest that because the national flag has not been changed for many years means it has stood the test of time (Chapman, 2005). Some also argue that the

flag is already representative of New Zealand—the Union Jack representing New Zealand’s past and existing ties to the United Kingdom, and the Southern Cross to the country’s location in the South Pacific (Round, 2005). Many, including Royal New Zealand Returned and Services’ Association (RSA) president Barry Clark, also argue that the current flag shouldn’t change because generations of New Zealanders who were drafted into the army have fought and died under the Union Jack or the current flag (“Calls for a new flag,” 2015).

In addition to this sentiment, much of the public and political backlash focussed on the sheer cost of the proposed process and the priority given to it over other initiatives. Approximately \$26 million needed to be allocated to the process, with a large portion dedicated to referenda costs (English, 2014). Various parties, including the Labour Party, criticised the cost and argued it could be better spent elsewhere (Hunt, 2015).

### Support

Despite an overwhelming amount of opposition to the possibility of changing the flag, there were various voices in support of change and eager to go forward with a process to consider it. Supporters of change, ranging from politicians and celebrities to average New Zealanders, have argued a variety of reasons for change (NZFlag.com, n.d.). Some argue that the current flag is too similar to the flag of Australia—often leading to moments of confusion (Sweeny, 2004). Some also argue that because it is derived from the United Kingdom’s Blue Ensign, it does not represent the current status of New Zealand as an independent, sovereign nation but instead alludes to the country being a colony of the United Kingdom (“Flags,” 2016). Also related to this argument is that the current flag prioritises British heritage over the indigenous Māori population and other ethnic groups (“Have Your Say,” n.d.).

Regardless of support or opposition to changing the New Zealand national flag, the Government would still move forward with its ambitions. The following chapter elaborates upon the approach of the Government to realise this, and sets the scene for this project.

