



## **Australian National Flag Day Ceremony King George Square, Brisbane Tuesday 3 September 2002, 10.30am**

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**The Hon Paul de Jersey AC  
Chief Justice of Queensland**

As a symbol of Australian national identity, our flag stirs the soul, flying aloft and free with precedence over all others. Recall especially Anzac Day, and those who under this banner have valiantly fought for our freedom.

The flag was first raised on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1901 and so, on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, we annually celebrate Australian National Flag Day. The flag may be comparatively young – by contrast, the Stars and Stripes dating from 1777 and the Union Jack from 1606 – but it focuses national pride as if with the clarity of centuries.

Others, like the Eureka flag and the Australian Federation League flag, remain of historical interest; but none but the current flag has endured as our national ensign, and attempts to change its design, even in recent years with burgeoning interest in republicanism, have failed to engage and fire widespread public support.

Redolent of our national unity and some of our historical past, the flag incorporates, on a dark blue field, the large white Federation Star with seven points representing the six States and the Territories; on the fly, the five stars representing the constellation of the Southern Cross; and the Union Jack in the upper quarter of the hoist, next to the staff. Through this design, geography and history were interwoven to call the fledgling nation to independence – and its dazzling future.



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This is a flag for all Australians. As the people of the nation progress together along the path of reconciliation, we hope it may one day be the flag which all Australians embrace.

The flag has an interesting history. It was the product of a national competition announced in April 1901 by our first Prime Minister, Sir Edmund Barton. Extraordinarily, that competition attracted as many as 32,823 entries, representing about 1% of the young nation's overall population. Contrast the 25,000 entries attracted by the design competition of the 1980's: less than .2% of the then population.

Why was this competition a century ago so popular? No doubt national pride had a lot to do with it, but possibly also the prize money: a total of £200, a substantial amount 100 years ago, now worth, according to the Reserve Bank, \$20,848. The subscribers were the Government - £75, the Melbourne magazine, The Review of Reviews - £75, and significantly for contemporary society, £50 from the Havelock Tobacco Company!

Interestingly enough, the winning design – substantially what we cherish today – was submitted by five competitors, and quite independently. They shared the prize money. We would say surprisingly, none of them came from Queensland! The winners were a 14 year old Melbourne schoolboy, Master Ivor Evans; Mr William Stevens, a merchant seaman from Auckland, New Zealand; Mr Lesley John Hawkins, an apprentice optician from Sydney; Mr Egbert Nuttall, a Melbourne architect; and Mrs Annie Dorrington, an English-born resident of Perth, Western Australia. Let me mention the inspiration of young Ivor Evans: he saw the Southern Cross as symbolizing the nation's bright future, and the brightest stars in that constellation denoting the four virtues Australians should

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endorse, virtues of which Danté had written, justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude.

It was not until 20<sup>th</sup> February 1903 that King Edward VII approved the winning design. It has since undergone three changes. Early on, for ease of manufacture, the number of points on the stars in the Southern Cross – originally ranging from five to nine to reflect their relative brilliance in the night sky, was brought to a uniform seven, save for the smallest which retains five. Then in 1909, the Federation star acquired its seventh point, to acknowledge Australia's acquisition of the Territory of Papua three years earlier. Finally, in the mid-1950's, the blue ensign was adopted for nationwide use, private use having previously been limited to the red ensign.

While the flag has been used since 1903, it was not formally recognized until as long as five decades later. In 1953, the government of Sir Robert Menzies introduced the *Flags Act*, which came into force the following year. That legislation established the precedence and form of the blue ensign as our national flag. Upon Queen Elizabeth II's first visit to Australia in 1954, she gave her assent to that Act: the first Australian Act of Parliament to receive royal assent from a reigning sovereign while present on Australian soil. British sentiment explained the continuing presence of the Union Jack atop the Australian flag in certain situations well into the 1960's. But through recent decades, our flag has garnered the respect it deserves, flying with precedence throughout the nation.

Our flag uniquely expresses this great nation's history and geography. It denotes, with eloquent silence, stipulations precious to our way of life: parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech. Alone in the world,

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it flies over an entire continent. It has inspired our service men and women in all wars since 1901, our Olympic and Para-Olympic athletes, and has dignified countless days of national commemoration. It is displayed with prominence daily at the entrance to our courts of law. It is flown with pride by many private citizens. It reflects our greatest triumphs, and our most poignant defeats.

To fly our national flag is the right and privilege of every Australian citizen. May we all continue to cherish that right!