FROM ANTI-TRANSPORTATION BANNER TO THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL FLAG



Banner of the Anti-Transportation League, 1851, held by the QVMAG, Launceston

Tony Walker, H.R.A.

For the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston

June, 2019

FROM ANTI-TRANSPORTATION BANNER TO THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL FLAG

Tony Walker

In May of 1850, the Australian League was formed in Sydney, with one of its principal aims being the cessation of convict transportation to the Australian colonies. [1]

Similar movements were active in the other colonies, including Van Diemen's Land where anti-transportation feeling had been building for at least a decade.
1750 people signing "Mr. Pitcairne's Petition" in December of 1845, and this was followed by a series of petitions from clergy, merchants and general citizens addressed to the Queen and Houses of Parliament, including one bearing more than 5,000 signatures in 1847.
It was often argued that the mild Tasmanian climate would be far more attractive to the British settler than the hot pastoral districts of NSW, and it was only the large convict presence which was hampering the colony's development.

A Launceston Anti-Transportation Association was formed in 1850, closely followed by a Hobart Anti-Transportation League.

In December of 1850 planning was commenced for an Anti-Transportation Conference in Melbourne.

The Conference was supported by the anti-transportation movements of New South Wales and South Australia, although neither sent delegates.

The Reverent John West was elected delegate for Hobart Town, with Mr. W.P. Weston representing Launceston.

In preparation for the Melbourne conference, West designed a banner for the Anti Transportation League, to be unfurled at the Melbourne meeting.

The banner is a deep blue, with the Union Jack in the corner, the broad field displaying four stars ("The Southern Cross.") On the upper border are the words, in gold, "Australian Anti-Transportation League;" on the lower margin, "Established 1851."[2]

[1] Hobart Town Britannia, May 23, 1850, p.3
[2] The Argus (Melbourne, Vic.) Mon Feb 3, 1851 Page 2

West initiated and designed the banner but the idea of using the Southern Cross seems to have come from Dr. Greeves, the ex mayor of Melbourne. Weston, the Launceston delegate is quoted as saying:

The league was indebted to many friends for suggestions; but the banner, in effect, came from his valued friend Mr West. It was his proposal to give a flag to the people of Victoria, and they had received one in return. He hoped that all the colonies would make a similar interchange. They were indebted to Dr. Greeves, the ex-mayor of Melbourne, for the suggestion of the Southern Cross.[3]

The popularity of the cause was demonstrated when the delegates left Launceston for Melbourne aboard the Shamrock on January 16:

> *That the people of Launceston regard this last step as the one which will liberate the land of their adoption from its present position of degradation, was most conspicuously manifested on Thursday morning last. At half-past nine o'clock the inhabitants began to assemble, at the place of rendezvous, and in a short time a very large number of persons had congregated. At ten o'clock the procession was formed...and moved along Cameron Street (which was thronged with spectators), and down St. John-street, to the wharf. On the quay a vast crowd of persons had assembled to witness the embarkation, and as the procession advanced the dense mass of human beings opened a passage to allow it to pass to the steamer. At this time there must have been between two and three thousand persons on the wharf.*[4]

On January 27, a meeting of the Tasmanian and Victorian delegates was held in Melbourne at which it was resolved to initiate the Australasian League, with the public meeting set for the following Saturday, February 1.

> *A meeting of the Tasmanian Delegates, and the General Committee of the Anti-Transportation Association was held in the Mechanics' Institution yesterday, the Rev. John West, Delegate for Hobart Town, in the chair, at which orders were given for the immediate preparation of a banner for the League*[5]

[3] Launceston Examiner, Sat Mar 15, 1851 Page 3
[4] Launceston Examiner Sat Jan 18, 1851 Page 4
[5] Port Phillip Gazette, Tue Jan 28, 1851 Page 2

This was the banner to be presented to the Tasmanian delegates at the conference, and is believed to be the banner now held by the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston. It was presented to the Tasmanian delegates on February 13 and the fact that it had to be prepared in such a short time may perhaps explain why the words “INSTITUTED 1851” are in fact reversed on the banner.



The only newspaper account of the banner was in the Launceston Examiner on March 8 and it makes no mention of the “Instituted 1851” lettering being reversed.

BANNER OF THE AUSTRALASIAN LEAGUE.— The splendid banner presented to the Tasmanian Delegates by the Melbourne Association, is formed of blue satin with a white border. At one corner is the union-jack; on the top are the words "Australasian League:" on the lower edge — " Instituted 1851." There are five stars in the centre, emblematic of the Southern Cross[6]

The fifth star had been added to West’s design to represent New Zealand, joining the four Australian colonies of Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania.

Clearly there were multiple copies of the flag made. The Northern Tasmanian branch of the League offered them for sale.

[6] Launceston Examiner, Sat Mar 8, 1851 Page 6

The League Banner

> *THE COUNCIL of the Northern Tasmanian Branch, have contracted for the supply of SHIPS ENSIGNS, facsimiles of the Banner of the Australasian League, which will be supplied to ship owners and masters at the wholesale cost price. On sale at R. G. Gibbons', Wharf, Launceston. April 25*[7]

The banner was flown from ships around the world and featured in many local ceremonies. In a march in Hobart in August

> "*Four beautiful League Banners were carried in front by Tasmanians*"[8]

and in an October procession

> "*A large number of the native-born young men followed with three large league banners*."[9]

It is uncertain whether these reproduced flags carried the wording "Australasian League" or "Instituted 1851", although many seem to have retained the white border, as recorded in South Australia:

> *A new and handsome flag has been noticed flying from the masts of some of our inter-colonial traders lately. It is blue, with a broad white border, the union jack in one corner, and five stars on the field. We first noticed it on the Peri, Captain Tregurtha; it is the banner of the Anti-Transportation League. The five stars, representing the provinces that have joined the League, namely, Tasmania, New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, and New Zealand, are grouped in the shape of the Southern Cross; the off one, called a pointer, representing New Zealand, the whole collected being in the position of the respective colonies.*[10]

In fact the new banner, flown from the brig Alert, caused a stir in San Francisco in 1852:

> *There was one particular flag which attracted a great deal of attention. It floated from the brig Alert, and none could tell what it represented, or to what nation it belonged, as no one had ever seen anything like it. On inquiring of Capt. Thomas Abbott, the master of the Alert, the anxious public were informed that it was the flag of the Australasian League, and represented*

[7] The Cornwall Chronicle, Sat Apr 26, 1851 Page 2
[8] Colonial Times, Tue Aug 26, 1851 Page 2
[9] Colonial Times, Fri Oct 24, 1851 Page 2
[10] South Australian Register (Adelaide, SA), Thu May 22, 1851 Page 3

the States of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, New Zealand, and Van Diemen's Land, which in all probability will before long be a free and independent confederacy like our own. Captain Abbott was very courteous to the numerous persons who enquired of him respecting the strange flag, and fully explained the circumstances to which the flag in question may be traced. San Francisco Herald, July 19, 1852[11]

The Australasian League banner seems to have quickly gone out of use following the cessation of transportation in 1853. Although the Southern Cross had featured in stylised form (on the cross of St George) in the "Australian Colonial National Flag" designed by Captain John Bingle and Captain John Nicholson in 1824, the Anti-Transportation League banner was certainly the first Australian flag to use the Southern Cross in its natural formation, as it appears on the Australian national flag today.

For the next 50 years the "Australian ensign" became the de facto national flag of Australia. This was a modification of the former "Colonial National Flag" - the British white ensign with a blue cross of St George, carrying five white eight pointed stars.



Most Australian vexillographers recognise a clear lineage between the Australasian League flag and the current national flag. In recent correspondence Australian flag historian John Vaughan says:

"*The Australasian Anti-Transportation League Flag of 1851 does have a claim to having a direct lineage to the Australian National flag since 1901.*

[11] The Courier (Hobart, Tas.), Sat Oct 2, 1852 Page 3

Having researched the history of the various flags of Australasia for decades the lineage is evident for all to see who study the early flag designs of Australia and New Zealand."[12]

While this seems an intuitive assumption, given the similarity of the flags, a direct connection is much harder to establish.

The current design for the Australian flag was arrived at through a national Government sponsored Federal Flag Competition in 1901. The competition attracted 30,000 entries from all around Australia and the £200 prize was shared between five entrants; Ivor Evans, a fourteen-year-old schoolboy from Melbourne; Leslie John Hawkins, a teenager apprenticed to a Sydney optician; Egbert John Nuttall, a Melbourne architect; Annie Dorrington, an artist from Perth; and William Stevens, a ship's officer from Auckland, New Zealand.

The Weekly Times commented:

many of them have discarded precedent altogether, and fearful and wonderful indeed to behold are many of the products of their imagination. Many of the designs submitted can only be regarded as miracles of misplaced ingenuity.[13]

The judge's report read in part:

"*It was apparent that a Commonwealth flag, to be representative, should contain: the Union Jack, on a blue or red ground; a six pointed "star", representing the six federated states of Australia directly under the Union Jack, and the Southern Cross on the fly, as being indicative of the sentiment of the Australian nation."*[14]

The winning design was of course strikingly similar to the Australasian League flag, and also to the flags of Victoria and New Zealand.

The Southern Cross in its natural form was also briefly featured on the first flag of Tasmania, proclaimed by Governor Sir Frederick Weld on 9 November 1875.

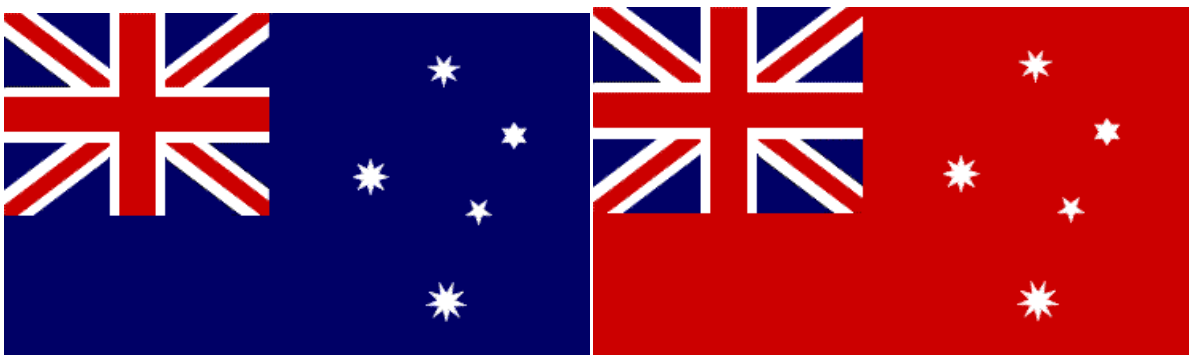


[12] John Vaughan, personal correspondence, April 9, 2019
[13] Weekly Times (Melbourne, Vic.), Aug 31, 1901 Page 14
[14] Review of Reviews, September 20, 1901

This flag was not approved by the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London and the current Tasmanian flag, featuring the lion rampant, was adopted i n 1876.

There is no evidence that the Australasian League flag influenced any of the five successful designers. I have been able to find no newspaper interviews with, or articles about the winners that may shed any light on their creative process. This was simply not the journalistic style of the day. Ivor Evans' father reportedly had a flag making business in Launceston, so there may be a reasonable expectation that he was aware of the original Tasmanian design. Despite an extensive search, I have been unable to find any publication, printed prior to 1901, that may have shown the Australasian League flag. All entrants would however, have been aware of the Victorian flag, with its similar use of the Southern Cross, and this must have been an influence in their design process.

The original Victorian flag, proclaimed in 1870, was strikingly similar to the Australasian League flag, carrying only the Union Jack and the five stars of the Southern Cross.



The Imperial Crown above the Southern Cross was added in 1877, although the Victorian Red Ensign (without the crown) was used on commercial shipping up until federation. It seems a very reasonable assumption that the designers of the original Victorian flag would have been aware of, and influenced by, the Australasian League design, which had been so prominent in their state less than 20 years earlier.

This appears to me to be the most likely lineage connecting the Australasian League flag in the QVMAG's possession to the current Australian national flag.

A connection through the New Zealand flag is less plausible, although of course the Australasian League spread to New Zealand and they would certainly have been aware of its banner in the mid nineteenth century. Whether this awareness would have extended to 1902 when the New Zealand flag was adopted is far less certain.

In conclusion I think it can be very plausibly argued that the Australasian League banner was a strong influence on the designers of the Victorian flag, and that the connection between the Victorian flag and the current Australian national flag is clear to see.

I also believe you can make a very good case that (as suggested by Patricia Ratcliff) the flag in the QVMAG is the one presented to the Tasmanian delegates in Melbourne on February 13, 1851, and paraded triumphally through the streets of Launceston when the delegates returned on March 5. This was the first Australasian League flag made - the one taken to Victoria by the Tasmanian delegates had the wording Anti-Transportation League.