

# New Zealand voters reject flag change in referendum

Matthew Carrington, Tom Peters  
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New Zealand's second and final flag change referendum closed on March 24, with 57 percent voting to keep the current flag featuring the British Union Jack and the Southern Cross constellation. The alternative flag designed by Kyle Lockwood, in which the Union Jack was replaced with a silver fern, lost with 43 percent support.

The first referendum held last December, in which Lockwood's design was chosen from five alternate designs, saw widespread abstention. The second vote drew a higher turnout of 67.3 percent of eligible voters (2.2 million people).

The rejection of change was a significant embarrassment for the National Party government and Prime Minister John Key, who had endorsed the silver fern design. Throughout the months-long flag change process Key appeared multiple times in public wearing a lapel featuring the Lockwood flag. He enlisted celebrities, including the All Blacks national rugby team captain Richie McCaw, to support the design.

At a post-referendum press conference, Key sought to downplay the defeat. He said he was "a little bit disappointed" but stressed that he was pleased with the relatively large turnout in the second ballot and that there had been a "nationwide discussion about our flag, about nationhood, about what we stand for." He added, "I don't think we should shy away from ... a discussion about contentious issues."

In reality, the "nationwide discussion," driven by the political establishment and the media, served mainly as a distraction from far more pressing and contentious issues. These include New Zealand's participation in the war in Iraq, the government's support for US warmongering against China, mass surveillance by the spy agencies, thousands of layoffs in the public sector, and drastic cuts to social services.

The vast majority of the population has been denied any say on these policies. Many evidently saw the referendum as a means to express opposition to the government and its pro-business agenda. Under conditions of widespread disillusionment with the official opposition parties, the vote became a vehicle for generalised discontent over deepening austerity. After eight years of National rule, Labour and its allies are widely viewed, particularly in the working class, as offering no alternative and are unable to generate any significant support in the polls.

One comment on *Stuff.co.nz*, up-voted by more than a dozen readers, said: "Waste of money. Waste of time. Bigger issues to sort. If only we as a nation could address the growing divide between those who have and those who don't."

Significantly, turnout was lowest in Auckland's poorest working class electorates—Manukau East (41.1 percent), Mangere (42 percent) and Manurewa (44.9 percent)—and those who did vote were overwhelmingly in favour of the status quo (67.4, 70.8 and 65.4 percent respectively). The seven special Maori electorates voted 74.9 percent in favour of the current flag. Indigenous Maori are one of the most exploited sections of the working class.

According to a poll by UMR Research shortly before the referendum, people aged 18 to 29 were 70 percent in favour of the current flag. Youth have been among those hardest hit by the government's attacks on tertiary education, unemployment and the soaring cost of living.

The opposition Labour, Green and New Zealand First Parties criticised aspects of the referenda including Key's personal involvement in the change campaign. However, both the government and opposition sought to use the process to whip up reactionary nationalism

and encourage unquestioning respect for the military.

Key emphasised that the purpose of changing the flag was to encourage more people to “use it, to wave it, to be proud of it.” He complained that the flag was not widely used and that it was too similar to Australia’s. The referendum was part of a broader attempt by sections of the ruling elite to refashion New Zealand nationalism to reflect changes since the end of World War II. The country now has much stronger economic and strategic ties with the United States than with Britain and an increasing number of citizens are not from European but from Pacific or Asian backgrounds.

At the same time, Key repeatedly stressed that his preferred symbol of a silver fern has been used by the armed forces throughout New Zealand’s history, as well as being a common logo for sports teams and businesses. The government, supported by the entire political establishment, is currently spending hundreds of millions of dollars on events to celebrate the centenary of World War I, in which 18,000 New Zealand soldiers were slaughtered.

The media heavily publicised the position of the Returned and Services Association (RSA), the military veterans organisation, which opposed a flag change on the grounds that New Zealand troops had fought as part of the British Empire during WWI. The RSA urged its members and supporters to fly the current flag outside their homes, a practice that is rare in New Zealand.

The Labour Party opposed changing the flag and criticised the process as too expensive, with opposition leader Andrew Little accusing the government of dividing, rather than uniting the country.

Labour Party backbench MP Trevor Mallard went further, solidarising himself with the RSA, describing the current flag as the “symbol under which New Zealand soldiers fought and died.” Mallard presented a petition to parliament last year opposing the referendum process.

The Greens criticised the referenda, but encouraged voters to make up their own mind. In the first referendum, the Green Party joined hands with right-wing ACT Party leader David Seymour to support an alternative flag design, known as Red Peak. According to Seymour, the abstract design was “rooted in today’s landscape and culture, not something reflecting our colonial past.” The design failed to gain significant support.

In a speech on March 19 to the Manurewa branch of the RSA, the right-wing populist New Zealand First leader Winston Peters similarly declared that “to throw out our current flag would be abandoning those young people who died for us.” He praised New Zealand’s contribution to a series of bloody imperialist interventions, “not just in the two world wars but in Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, Kuwait, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan.” Following the flag referendum, New Zealand First announced a proposal for unemployed “youth as young as 15 to go into the army” for three years of training.



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