

Widespread abstention in New Zealand flag referendum

By Sam Price
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Voting in the first of two referenda on whether to change the New Zealand flag closed on December 11. The initial poll selected an alternative flag design based on the native silver fern. A second referendum in March, 2016 will ask voters to choose between the existing flag and the alternative design.

Only 48 percent of eligible voters took part in the first poll, the lowest turnout for any government-initiated referendum in the country's history. Moreover, of the votes received, 9.7 percent were listed as "informal," with many people deliberately spoiling their ballots as a protest. The referendum is widely viewed as a waste of money, designed to promote nationalism and distract from issues such as deeply embedded social inequality.

The low participation was despite a \$26 million budget for the referendum, including incessant advertising encouraging people to submit designs for consideration and to vote. Prime Minister John Key made numerous personal statements urging people to vote.

One official pamphlet described the referendum as an historic occasion giving people "the chance to share what you stand for as a New Zealander, hear what others have to say and suggest a flag that makes you proud to be a Kiwi."

Submissions for flag designs were whittled down by a highly-paid "flag consideration panel" of 12 people, including business leaders, celebrated sports people, academics and a former chief of the New Zealand Defence Force. The panel toured the country to promote the referendum, but public meetings in two major cities, Christchurch and Auckland, only managed to attract around 10 people. While over 10,000 flag designs were submitted, the panel had to wade through many crude drawings that mocked the process and New

Zealand patriotism.

The flag change is clearly being exploited to distract the population from more pressing political issues. The corporate media has devoted considerable air-time and articles to the flag change, dwarfing the attention given to matters such as the involvement of New Zealand troops in Iraq.

An editorial in the *Listener* on November 12 attacked opposition to the referendum declaring, "those who complain the flag change is a feel-good stunt by the Prime Minister... need to reflect on whether their indifference to a democratic opportunity to vote—denied so many around the world—shows the requisite maturity."

To claim the process is "a democratic opportunity" is absurd. The public, after all, has had no say in far more significant decisions such as the signing of the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership, sending troops to Iraq, the privatisation of state housing and the legalisation of mass spying on the population.

Many people have criticised the cost of the flag change, at a time when the government has cut spending on health, welfare and other social services. A typical comment from a reader on Fairfax Media's web site declared: "Great society we live in when the government is ready to spend \$26 million on changing our flag when there are so many children going hungry."

Amid deepening social inequality and discontent, all sections of the political establishment, both supporters and opponents of a flag change, are using the debate to promote national unity and militarism. Key explained in a video posted on the *Guardian's* YouTube channel on August 13 that the flag change was needed to build "overt signs of patriotism, to get out there and celebrate modern New Zealand, this incredibly multicultural

society, this young country as we take our story and our people to the world.”

The current flag features Britain's union jack in the top-left corner, which Key wants to replace with a silver fern. The fern is used by many of the country's sports teams, including the All Blacks rugby team, and numerous business logos. Key also told the *New Zealand Herald* on December 12 that the silver fern was used on “the Commonwealth war graves to mark the ultimate sacrifice made for our country.”

The government, supported by the opposition parties, is spending hundreds of millions of dollars glorifying New Zealand's involvement as part of the British Empire in World War I—including a new war memorial park and two patriotic museum exhibitions. Key has made clear he has no intention of breaking from the British Commonwealth.

The push to remove the union jack, however, indicates that the New Zealand ruling elite requires a new form of nationalism. In recent decades, New Zealand has become far more ethnically diverse, with high levels of immigration from China, India and Pacific Island countries. Moreover, since the end of World War II, US imperialism has supplanted Britain as New Zealand's most important military and strategic ally.

Almost all Commonwealth countries have adopted new flags without the union jack, as Key has noted. Most of these countries, such as Canada, Uganda, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Singapore, have also strengthened military ties with the US.

Seeking to exploit public hostility towards the referendum, New Zealand's opposition Labour Party, the Green Party, New Zealand First and the Maori-nationalist Mana Party have all made various criticisms of the flag change process.

Their opposition, however, is no less bound up with the promotion of reactionary nationalism. Labour MP Trevor Mallard presented a petition to parliament on March 19 with over 30,000 signatures opposing a change. On August 13, he told parliament, “Over the last couple of years and the next few years the government and communities around New Zealand are spending over \$100 million commemorating the First World War. The symbol under which New Zealand soldiers fought and died was the New Zealand flag.”

Mallard solidarized himself with the Returned

Services Association (the military veterans organisation), which attacked the government for holding the referendum during the WWI centenary commemorations. Its webpage titled “Fight for our Flag” states: “It's symbolic of the sacred oath that our forces have made to protect the peace and security of New Zealand,” and “Yes, the flag really matters and, to lose it, is to destroy too much of our Kiwi pride, heritage and identity.”

The Green Party eventually swung behind the referendum. It campaigned vigorously in favour of an alternative flag design, known as “Red Peak,” which it claimed was somehow more representative of a “multicultural modern New Zealand.” These efforts failed to win a significant response, with just 8.7 percent of votes supporting the design.

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