

Q & A – Flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags

1. Why are there two different flags for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples represent two distinct cultures. Therefore, each has its own flag, representing its own unique identity.

It is important to recognise that even within each group, various languages and traditions are practiced all across Australia. Some of these groups have their own flags, or adaptations of these flags.

Flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags demonstrates Australia's recognition of First Nation peoples, promoting a sense of community partnership and a commitment toward reconciliation.

2. What do the flags mean?

Each flag has a different history, and in 1995 both were recognized as official flags of Australia under Commonwealth legislation.

The Aboriginal Flag was designed by Harold Thomas, a Luritja man from Central Australia. According to Thomas, the meaning of the flag is represented through:

Black: The Aboriginal peoples

Yellow: The Sun – the giver of life and protector

Red: The red earth – red ochre and a spiritual relationship to the land

The flag was first flown at Victoria Square in Adelaide on National Aborigines Day, 12 July 1971, after which it was chosen as the flag for the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972.

The Torres Strait Islander flag was designed by the late Bernard Namok of Thursday Island. The flag was recognised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in June 1992 and given equal prominence with the Aboriginal flag. The meaning of the Torres Strait Islander flag is represented through:

Green: Land

Blue: Sea

White: Peace

Black: The Torres Strait Islander peoples

At the centre of the Torres Strait Islander flag is a dhari (headdress) that represents the Torres Strait Islander peoples, and a five pointed star that represents the five major island groups, and the role of navigation in this sea-faring culture.

3. How should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags be displayed?

Flags should be flown and displayed in a dignified manner. This means that they should not be used as a curtain to unveil a monument or plaque, or used as table or seat covers. Flags should not be allowed to fall or lie upon the ground.

Flags should not be flown at night unless they are properly lit. Each flag should be flown from a separate halyard (flagpole).

Each flag flown should be the same size, and usually, flagpoles should be of an identical height. Tattered, torn, or dilapidated flags should not be flown, and may be destroyed privately.

It is important that the local community is consulted prior to the raising of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. It is also important that flags are flown in an upright position. For the Aboriginal flag, this means that the black half is above the red. For the Torres Strait Islander flag, this means that the star is positioned below the dhari.

Both flags are of equal importance, and individual circumstances determine which flag, if not both, should be flown.

4. In what order should the flags be flown in?

The Australian flag should take a position of precedence over other flags. This means that if all flagpoles are of the same height, then the Australian flag is positioned on the extreme left hand side (as seen by the audience facing it). This may then be followed by state/territory flags, and finally the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags.

Where one flagpole is taller than others, the Australian flag should be positioned here, with other flags at the same height below it. These other flags should once again be ordered by precedence from left to right.

On Commonwealth occasions, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occasions for their peoples, the Australian Aboriginal Flag or the Australian Torres Strait Islander Flag may follow the Australian Nation Flag ahead of others.

For further information, visit the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet website, or contact the Commonwealth Flags Officer via nationalsymbols@pmc.gov.

5. What about copyright?

Permission is not required to fly either the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander flags. Different rules however apply to reproduce each flag.

Aboriginal Flag reproduction

In 1997, the Federal Court of Australia found that Harold Thomas was the owner of the copyright in the design of the Aboriginal flag.

Following some licensing and usage controversies, the Federal Government acquired the rights to the Aboriginal flag on behalf of the Commonwealth in an agreement with Harold Thomas in 2022.

With the copyright now with the Commonwealth, the Aboriginal flag is managed in a similar way to the Australian flag; that is it is free to be reproduced on eg clothes or stickers or on digital media, based on the requirement that it is presented in a respectful way.

Torres Strait Islander Flag reproduction

The copyright of the Torres Strait Islander flag is held by the Torres Strait Island Regional Council, previously the Island Coordinating Council (ICC) which along with the 15 Island Communities amalgamated to form the Torres Strait Island Regional Council.

The Torres Strait Island Regional Council permits the reproduction of the Torres Strait Islander flag only under the conditions that:

- Where appropriate, recognition is given to the original designer, the late Mr Bernard Namok
- The original PMS (Pantone Matching System) flag colours must be used
- Permission is to be received in writing from the Torres Strait Island Regional Council prior to its use

As with any product associated with Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander cultures, Reconciliation Australia encourages the purchase of these products only from Indigenous-owned businesses.

6. Where can I purchase an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander flag?

[Flagworld](#) is still the authorised supplier of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags.