

A Canadian Flag for Canada

Alistair B. Fraser

... it would certainly seem that the Maple Leaf... is pre-eminently the proper badge to appear on our flag.¹

Edward M. Chadwick (1896)

Introduction

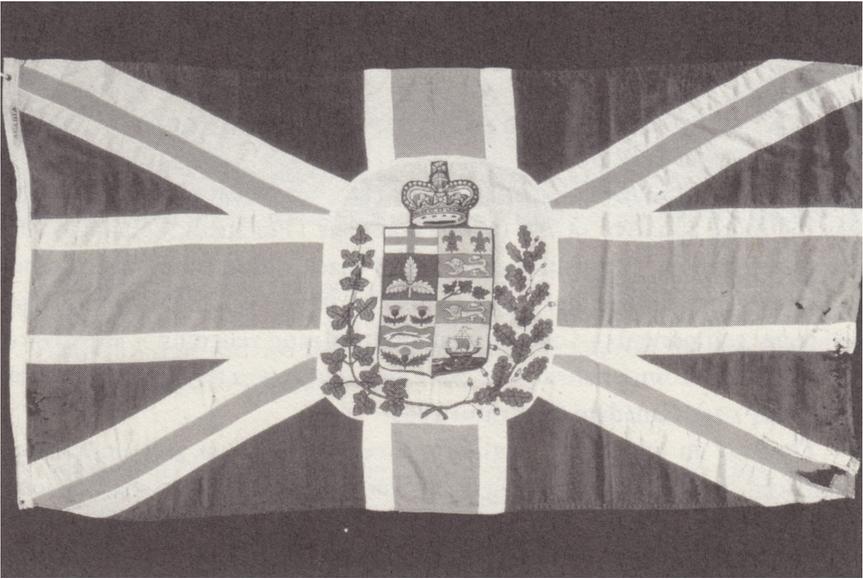
“Nations,” Aldous Huxley asserted, “are to a very large extent invented by their poets and novelists.”² Huxley’s literary bias is clear; the influence of graphic symbols is, presumably, best relegated to art historians. Yet the slow transformation from the Canadian state into the Canadian nation has relied as much or more upon visual as upon verbal ideology. As one observer rightly noted: “the state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved.”³ A nation is conceived through its symbols, the most important of which, for a modern nation, is its flag. Yet, following Confederation, it took Canada nearly a century to gain a national flag. During that time, it did have an official governmental flag that represented Canada as a state, this being the government’s original maritime flag. What Canada lacked was a formal flag that represented Canadians themselves; a flag that individuals could fly to proclaim their Canadianness; a flag of Canada as a nation. For a newly created country to have lacked a national flag for so long seems, by international standards, bizarre and demands some explanation.

¹E. M. Chadwick, “The Canadian Flag,” in *Canadian Almanac* (Toronto: Copp, Clark, 1896), 228.

²Aldous Huxley, *Texts & Pretexts: An Anthology with Commentaries* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), 50.

³Michael Walzer, “On the Role of Symbolism in Political Thought,” *Political Science Quarterly* 82 (1967): 194.

The function of any flag is to send a message. In the closing days of 1964, parliament finally decided that that message should exclusively say: *Canada*. In retrospect, it seems to have been inevitable that the national flag *must* feature the maple leaf. In 1870, the first, official, and *distinctively Canadian* flag bore a wreath of maple leaves in the center. This was the flag of the governor general and only one original of it is known to have survived.⁴ The long road between this inaugural Canadian flag and the first, official, and *exclusively Canadian* flag, which boasted a single maple leaf in the center, was a tortuous one indeed.



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The flag of the Governor General approved in 1870. This is the country's first flag that is both official and distinctively Canadian. It is unlikely that many copies of it were ever produced, and this is the only one known to have survived. Unfortunately, the manufacturer cheated during its construction by using oak for part of the wreath rather than the specified maple.

In all that time, the maple leaf had been at the center of every initiative to establish a distinctive national flag, but it rarely was given more than a secondary role. Rather, Canadians used a shifting variety of flags to identify themselves, and although some of these flags had limited official functions, none ever went beyond being pretenders to the honor of being the national flag itself. Some still believe otherwise, but neither the Union Flag (alias

⁴The flag of the Governor General was authorized on 16 July 1870. The only known example of this inaugural flag to have survived is in a private collection.

Union Jack) nor any of the manifold versions of the Canadian Red Ensign ever was Canada's national flag. The question of why it took the maple leaf so long to dominate Canada's flag is really a question of why it took so long for there to be a flag of the Canadian nation.

The long-running controversy over the flag of Canada had its roots in two separate dichotomies: one internal to Canada, one external. The internal dichotomy was found in the ambiguous loyalty that Canadians divided between nation and empire. The external dichotomy was found in the disparate usage of flags in the United Kingdom and the United States. If either of these dichotomies had been absent, the controversy would have been muted; with them, confusion and acrimony ensued.

Canadian Nationalism versus Imperialism

Along the way, the internal division between nationalism⁵ and imperialism was the more apparent of the two dichotomies. For many Canadians, imperialism had long encapsulated a pride of place within the British Empire and a reverence for the ideals of a British heritage. While this imperialism had many components — commercial, political, and religious — it is the romantic vision of imperialism that came first and it was this vision that held suzerainty over Canadian flags until 1965.

The way in which the duality between nationalism and imperialism influenced the long-running flag controversy is brought into sharper focus through a comparison of the stands taken by Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson and former Prime Minister, and leader of the opposition from 1963 to 1968, John G. Diefenbaker, two of the many individuals who were involved in it over the years. Although both Diefenbaker and Pearson were ardent Canadian patriots, they adhered to different visions of Canada. Indeed, these different visions are, in many ways, encapsulated by the symbols each chose to represent his country.

Diefenbaker's views had been on record longest. His position, varying only slightly over the years, was stated first during a campaign speech at Macdowall, Saskatchewan in 1926: "I want to make Canada all Canadian and all British. The men who wish to change our flag should be denounced by every good Canadian."⁶ For Diefenbaker, Canada and the Canadian flag must

⁵Nationalism in this essay is taken to mean Canadian nationalism, so it includes the sentiments found in both founding nations that promoted a Canadian as opposed to British, or even an American, identity.

⁶Peter C. Newman, *The Distemper of Our Times* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), 254.



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An early proposal for the national flag of Canada. In the 1890s, the cluttered nature of the badge on Canadian Red Ensigns prompted suggestions to make a maple leaf the flag badge of Canada. Support for this design continued into the 1960s.

be “all British.” Ultimately there was a sense of tragedy in Diefenbaker’s continued adherence to this stand. In his election campaigns of 1957 and 1958, he had engendered a tremendous feeling of national pride among Canadians. But now the Canadianism which he espoused had blossomed beyond his vision, and he was left in its wake as the champion of the old Canadian imperialism.

Pearson’s position on the flag had only been on record since early 1960. He acknowledged an inescapable reality: neither the Canadian Red Ensign nor the Union Flag was “acceptable to many Canadians as a distinctive flag of Canada.”⁷

Then in May 1964, Pearson followed the lead of seventy years’ worth of nationalists as he sought “a flag that is. . . as Canadian as the Maple Leaf which should be its dominant design.”⁸ In June, he opened the Great Flag Debate with the simple message: the flag must be “exclusively Canadian,”

⁷ John Ross Matheson, *Canada’s Flag: A Search for a Country* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980; Belleville, Ont.: Mika, 1986), 66.

⁸ Lester B. Pearson, speech to the Royal Canadian Legion at Winnipeg, 17 May 1964. See also, Matheson, *Canada’s Flag*, 74.

and “say proudly to the world and to the future: ‘I stand for Canada.’”⁹ Like Diefenbaker, Pearson sought to produce a flag that embodied history and tradition, but for Pearson a Canadian emblem should occupy the position of honor.

The divided emotional loyalties of the nation contributed greatly to the battle over the national flag. Canada’s long-running flag controversy has been described as a shallow emotional issue of low priority,¹⁰ yet this assessment is, itself, one of consummate superficiality. The battle was not a trivial spat over the choice of a commercial logotype; rather, it was a fundamental and inevitable battle between two powerful but disparate cultural views of the nation. It was a battle waged on the deepest possible level, that of one’s personal symbolic sense of identity.

Alas then, the issue had not been whether the *maple leaf* was pre-eminently Canadian, but whether the *nation* was pre-eminently Canadian.

Cleaving to American Practice and British Propriety

The internal dichotomy was highly visible, because conflicting loyalties polarized every discussion of a Canadian national flag. The external dichotomy was insidious; it arose from the disparate functions served by flags in the United Kingdom and the United States. The American citizen had a flag with which he could proclaim his Americanness. The Stars and Stripes was the flag of the people since its inception by Congress in 1777.

A British subject had no such flag. The Union Flag was a flag of the sovereign and his or her representatives; subjects were not formally entitled to its use. Indeed, reflecting the structure of the society itself, every flag in the British pantheon served to distinguish one individual or group from all others. There were flags for royalty, the navy, the army, custom’s houses, port authorities, lighthouse ships, the merchant marine — the list goes on — but there was no appropriate flag to be flown voluntarily by a subject to denote his Britishness. Although now thought of as the national flag, the Union Flag was adopted informally by the public, and mainly so in this century. To this day, the United Kingdom differs from most other countries in that *it has no official national flag*.¹¹

⁹Pearson’s speech of 15 June 1964 can be found in its entirety in House of Commons, *Debates*, 15 June 1964, 4306–9, 4319–26. Most of it is also found in the pamphlet *I Stand for Canada!* (Ottawa: Liberal Federation of Canada, 1964).

¹⁰Patrick Nicholson, *Vision and Indecision* (Don Mills: Longmans, 1968), 347.

¹¹E. M. C. Barraclough and W. G. Crampton, *Flags of the World* (London: Frederick Warne, 1978), 22. Most authors are not as careful with their language as these are. As a

In clear imitation of the Americans, Canadians sought a flag which they could hoist as individuals to proclaim their Canadianness. Yet within the British system, there was neither precedent nor provision for the institution of a flag to represent the people *per se*. For Canadians, an irreconcilable gulf grew between their simultaneous yearning for American practice and British propriety. The Canadian public would proudly hoist its identity, and the Canadian authorities would denounce either the flags or the public's use of them as improper.

The Canadian's imitation of American flag-flying practice was more than unconscious mimicry; he looked south of the border and liked what he saw. Indeed, the present practice of flying flags at Canadian schools originated in the 1890s in direct imitation of the American practice.¹²

Initially, there had been no question in the mind of the government that if a Canadian flag were to be adopted, its form should be determined by bureaucrats, after the British manner, rather than by elected representatives, after the American manner. In 1925, when a request arose within the bureaucracy for the adoption of a Canadian national flag, the Cabinet viewed it as a purely internal governmental matter to be decided by a committee of public servants. Only when the press caught wind of it was Prime Minister Mackenzie King forced not only to dissolve the committee, but to posture that "the Government would not for a moment consider adopting a national flag other than by resolution of this House and the full sanction of the Parliament of Canada."¹³ Canada was now irretrievably committed to the American approach, although fruition was still forty years off.

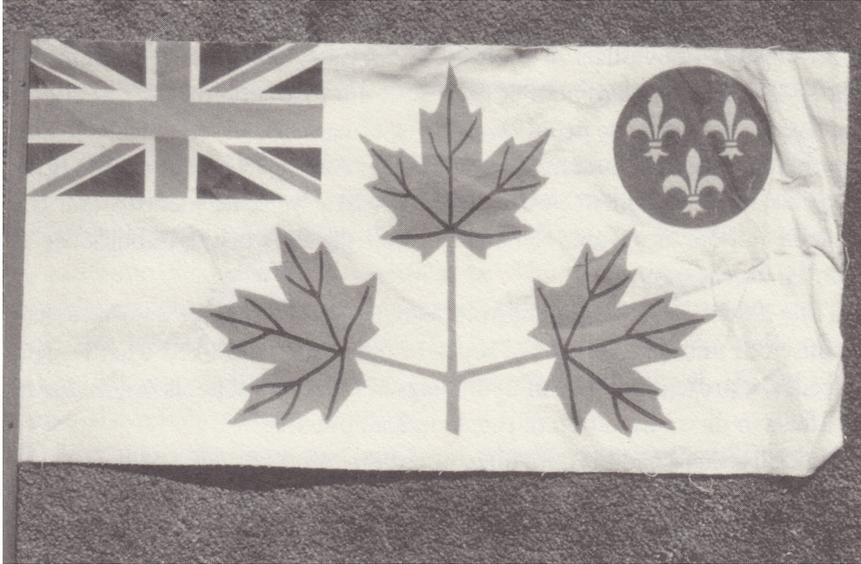
The distinction between the two approaches was dramatically underscored in 1964, when the parliamentary flag committee sought the advice of various experts, among whom was a representative of the authoritative College of Arms in England. The Chief Herald, Sir Anthony Wagoner pompously assured the committee that it was irrelevant: if Canada wanted a flag, he would assign one to the country. This antediluvian man was promptly dropped from the guest list.¹⁴

result, the number of authors who categorically name the Union Flag as the national flag of Britain is legion. Such authors seem unprepared to make a distinction between a flag being regarded as, or being used as, a national flag, and a flag actually being the national flag. Yet, for Canada, this distinction is crucial, for in its absence, the order-in-council of 5 September 1945, which only authorized "the flying of the Canadian Red Ensign wherever place or occasion may make it desirable to fly a distinctive Canadian flag," would have created a national flag. However, it did not.

¹²George T. Denison, *The Struggle for Imperial Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 134–36.

¹³Matheson, *Canada's Flag*, 29

¹⁴Matheson, *Canada's Flag*, 120–21.



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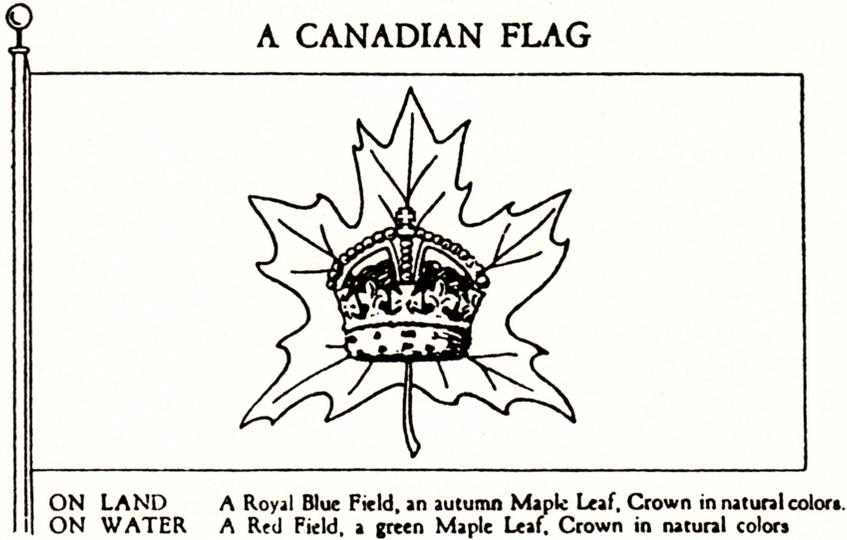
A little something for everyone. Based upon the two flags and three maple leaves found on the Arms of Canada, this design was proposed in the mid 1920s and resurfaced as the Battle Flag of Canada during the Second World War.

The duel dichotomies long rendered any attempt to settle the national flag controversy impotent. If either the emotional loyalties or the flag usage had been less ambiguous, Canada might have settled the issue in the nineteenth century when it first arose. For the flag controversy, however, the dichotomies only provided the background; it was the flags which provided the battleground.

The Contenders

Although the maple leaf was the Canadian element in all of the more popular proposals for a national flag, its prominence changed markedly over the years in a manner that reflected the evolving emotional and constitutional status of the country.

From Confederation until the passage of the Statute of Westminster in 1931, all attempts to establish a distinctively Canadian national flag were directed at merely establishing a Canadian beachhead upon a British flag. The maple-leaf beachhead arose first as a wreath on the Canadian Red Ensign informally created in 1871 in imitation of the flag of the Governor General.



Frank McDonagh's proposal of 1937. This design was seminal for it was the first one to attempt to capture the whole flag for Canada. (The crown represented the King of Canada.)

Numerous contenders followed, but always the maple leaf was secondary to the Union Flag, which held Britain in the place of honor over Canada.

Although contenders, such as these in the form of ensigns, continued to play an important role right up through 1964, they never proved successful because, in the early years, the imperialists deemed them to be too nationalistic; in the later years, the nationalists deemed them to be too imperialist. By the end of the Second World War, the inclusion of the Union Flag upon a Canadian national flag was favored by fewer than one in seven adults.¹⁵ However, this minority was adamant and vocal, and it systematically strangled attempts to gain a solely Canadian flag by its displays of moral and religious outrage.¹⁶

After the Statute of Westminster, and with independence confirmed,

¹⁵For example, of the flag submissions to the parliamentary committee in 1946, 60% featured the maple leaf, but only 14% included the Union Flag. Similarly in 1958, an extensive poll revealed that, of those who expressed opinions on a national flag, 60% wished it to bear the maple leaf; only 13% wanted it to include the Union Flag.

¹⁶The many pamphlets that the British-Israel-World Federation published in the 1950s and 1960s presented the Union Flag as a religious icon, and even John Diefenbaker charged that atheism lay behind the proposed removal of the crosses of the Union Flag from Canada's flag.

there arose the first attempts to capture the whole flag for Canada. Now proposals surfaced that moved the maple leaf to center stage and omitted all reference to the Union Flag in an attempt to cut the umbilical cord to the banner of Britain.

The final stage in evolution began in 1937 with a seminal proposal by Frank McDonagh, who placed an autumnal maple leaf in the center of a plain field.¹⁷ The crown represented, not Britain but, the King of Canada. This seed fell on infertile ground, published, as it was, in imperialist Toronto, but it was soon followed by a more successful proposal from Québec.

In a bilingual pamphlet,¹⁸ the Ligue du Drapeau National urged adoption of a flag that bore many of the same simple design features which were to characterize the ultimate choice: a single centered maple leaf and the national colors of red and white. However, the Ligue's flag was divided diagonally, red over white, and the leaf was green. Having an effective design, this flag was a major contender in both the parliamentary brouhaha in 1945 and the Great Flag Debate of 1964.



The infamous “Pearson Pennant,” which added two blue bars to Matheson’s first design.

¹⁷ Frank G. J. McDonagh, *A Canadian Flag for Canada* (Toronto: Privately printed, 1937).

¹⁸ *Pour un Drapeau National — For a National Flag* (Québec: Ligue du Drapeau National, [ca. 1943]).

In 1963, Pearson's parliamentary lieutenant, John Matheson, proposed a design lifted directly from the Canadian arms, but it was criticized, as logotypes on a plain white field should be, for looking too much like the surrender flag. The elegant simplicity of Matheson's design, which used only the national colors, was soon muddied when, in May 1964, Pearson embraced a design proposed by Alan Beddoe, which added blue bars to carry the message "from sea to sea." Thus was created the infamous Pearson Pennant.

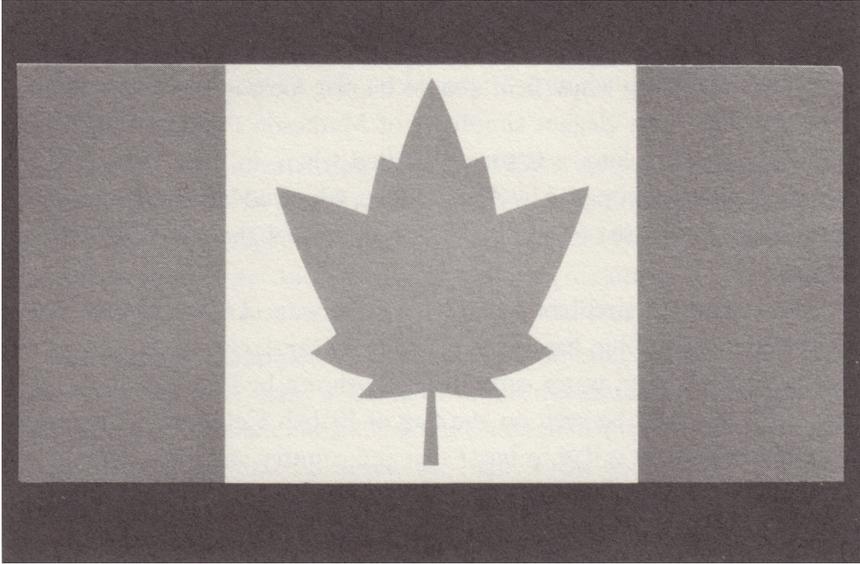
Along with the predictably captious comments, knowledgeable critics noted that vertical blue bars do not normally represent water, as was the attempt here. Rather, water is traditionally shown by blue and white wavy lines, such as could be seen on the flag of British Columbia. Further, it was a tad hollow for a flag to boast that the country stretched from sea to sea when many other nations shared that non-distinction. Finally, Canada's colors were red and white only; that Canadians had been conditioned by the British, French, and Americans to think of a flag as red, white, *and blue* was hardly ample reason for its inclusion. Nevertheless, the three-leaf design, both with and without the blue bars, quickly developed a following among Canadians. They ranged from flag-carrying demonstrators on Parliament Hill to Toronto nightclub strippers who climaxed their acts by jiggling on stage with three strategically placed red maple leaves.

Of the thousands of flags suggested by the public, one proved particularly influential when it prompted a further evolution in the design. George M. Bist, a graphic designer from Toronto, noted that three leaves should not be used when one would do. This idea was promptly adopted by many, including the New Democratic Party.

By this time, John Matheson had become persuaded that, independent of its good or bad qualities, the Pearson Pennant was not politically viable, so the design evolved for the last time. Adopting the single leaf, lifted almost intact from a governmental shipping crate, and changing the color of the side panels, Matheson's quintessential design displayed the national symbol in the national colors.

The Land of the Maple Leaf

Immediately upon adoption on 15 February 1965, the Maple Leaf Flag became a juggernaut of the emotions and swept aside all antecedents. This is not to say that the nation is now confined to a monolithic symbol — far from it. The National Flag, it seems, is the cement which binds a mosaic of images.



George Bist's proposal of 1964. His suggestion to reduce the number of leaves to one and change the proportions greatly influenced the final design. The leaf is red and the side bars are a light blue.

Soon a parade of provinces, cities, villages, associations, and businesses followed suit and enthusiastically hoisted their own identities upon masts. This proliferation of flags, often including either the characteristic Canadian pale or a modern maple leaf, now fills both the large cities and a deep need.

Ninety-five years separates the adoption of Canada's inaugural flag and the adoption of its National Flag. The distance between the two flags is great, but the maple-leaf trail connecting one to the other is continuous. A flag sends a message. For too long the message had been that the nation was not pre-eminently Canadian. Finally, the maple leaf, which always was pre-eminently Canadian, was joined by both the flag and even the nation itself to say, in the words of Lester B. Pearson, "I stand for Canada."