
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication may contain images or names of people who have since passed away.

Q and 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. Each cultural group 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 across Australia. Some groups may have their own flags or adaptations of these flags.

2. Why is flying the flags important?

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. Flying the flags is a highly visible symbol of respect and can be used to promote a sense of community, create a welcoming environment and can demonstrate a commitment towards closing the gap.

3. What do the flags mean?

In 1995, both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags were recognised as official flags of Australia under Commonwealth legislation.

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

- Black: the Aboriginal peoples of Australia
- 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 from 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: the land
- Blue: the sea
- White: peace
- Black: the Torres Strait Islander peoples

At the centre of the Torres Strait Islander flag is a dhari (headdress), which represents the people of the Torres Strait Islands. The five pointed star in the middle of the dhari represents the five major island groups, as well as the importance of stars for navigational purposes.

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

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 flagpole. It is considered best practice for each flag flown to be the same size and on flagpoles of the same height. Tattered, torn or dilapidated flags should not be flown, and may be destroyed privately.

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

It is very important that community is consulted prior to the raising of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. This is a way of showing respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their concerns and their right to self-determination.

5. What about copyright?

In 1997, the Federal Court of Australia declared that Harold Thomas was the owner of the copyright in the design of the Aboriginal flag. This means that for all uses of the Australian Aboriginal flag, permission must be sought from Harold Thomas. Since 1997, Mr Thomas has awarded world rights solely to Carroll and Richardson Flagworld Pty Ltd for the manufacture and marketing of the flag.¹ Flags that do not have a white header at the left side or flags that do not show the Carroll and Richardson label could be infringing copyright.²

<http://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aboriginal-flag>

² <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/fastfacts/aboriginalflag.html>

The copyright of the Torres Strait Islander flag is held by the Torres Strait Island Regional Council. The Torres Strait Islander Regional Council permits the reproduction of the Torres Strait Islander flag only under the conditions that:³

- 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

Although official permission is not required to fly either the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander flag, Reconciliation Australia always encourages consultation with the local community when doing so.

6. 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, the Australian flag is positioned on the extreme left hand side (as seen by those facing it). This may then be followed by state/territory flags and then the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags. The Aboriginal Flag or the Torres Strait Islander flag may be flown in either order, as they are both of equal standing in the order of precedence. Where one flagpole is taller than others, the Australian flag should be placed on the tallest flagpole, with other flags below it. Other flags should once again be ordered by precedence from left to right.

On some occasions, the Aboriginal flag or the Torres Strait Islander flag may follow the Australian Nation flag ahead of other flags.

7. Where can I find out more?

We recommend seeking further reading on how best to respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and histories through flying the flags. [Queensland Health](#) has a comprehensive resource and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) has useful information on the background and meaning of both the [Aboriginal flag](#) and the [Torres Strait Islander flag](#).

Further information can be obtained from the [Australian Government website](#) or via:

Commonwealth Flag Officer
Honours, Symbols and Territories Branch
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
CANBERRA ACT 2600
nationalsymbols@pmc.gov.au

³ <http://www.tsirc.qld.gov.au/%3Cfront%3E/torres-strait-flag>

Example 1: Australian flag, Aboriginal flag, Torres Strait Islander flag. Note: the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag may be placed on either side of the Australian flag.



Example 2: Australian flag, ACT flag, Aboriginal flag.



Example 3: Australian flag, ACT flag, Torres Strait Islander flag.



Example 4: Australian flag, ACT flag, Aboriginal flag, Torres Strait Islander flag, ensigns or pennants.

