

Why are flags important?

National flags are created to distinguish one country from another. They are used to exhibit a sense of nationalism, belonging and pride.

In addition to countries, flags can represent individuals, families, corporations, cities, schools, religious groups, social or political movements, sport teams, military units and groups of allied nations.



Flags were first used to assist military coordination on a battlefield

Flags are symbols that are easy to carry with you and are very noticeable blowing in the breeze. They can be raised up a flagpole to get attention, hung on a wall to make an important statement, or used on clothing and uniforms.



Oldest Flag: The Dannebrog (Denmark) has been around since the Battle of Lyndanisse in 1219



The "Living Flag", Manitoba Legislature, Winnipeg 2018

Symbolism & Design

The colours, shapes and designs on a flag are always very symbolic, making a visual representation of someone, some thing or some place.

The best flags follow these rules:

① Keep it simple

The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory...

② Use meaningful symbolism

The flag's images, colours, or patterns should relate to what it symbolizes...

③ Use 2-3 basic colours

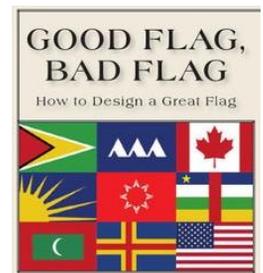
Limit the numbers of colours to three, which contrast well and come from the standard colour set...

④ No lettering or seals

Never use writing of any kind or an organization's seal...

⑤ Be distinctive or be related

Avoid duplicating other flags, but use similarities to show connections...



Except from Ted Kaye's book

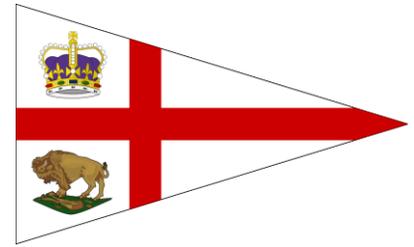
Types of Flags



LGBTQ2S+ Pride Flag
(Organization Flag)



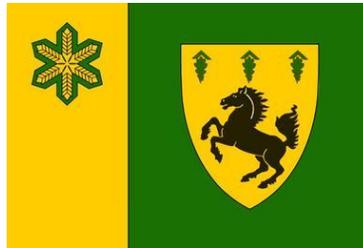
Co-op Gas
(Corporate Flag)



Royal Manitoba Yacht Club
(Maritime Burgee)



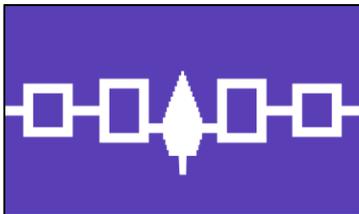
Winnipeg Jets Hockey
(Sport Flag)



City of Brandon, MB
(Civic Flag)



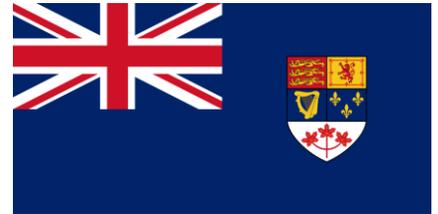
Vancouver Olympics 2010
(Special Event Flag)



Iroquois Confederacy
(Cultural Flag)

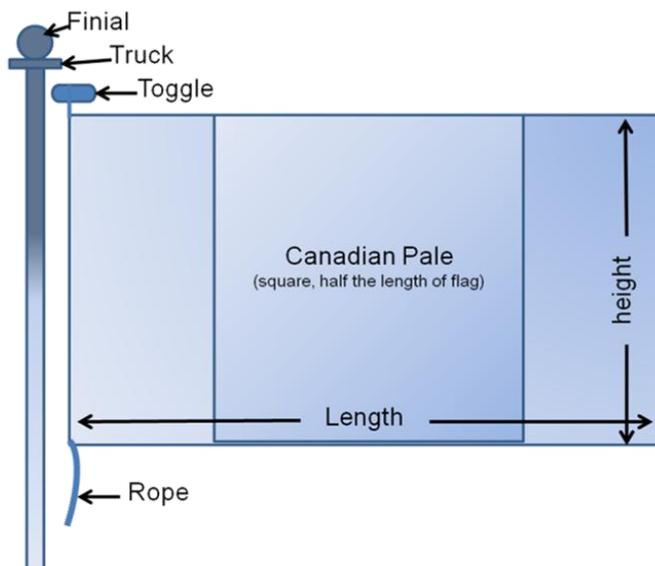


Manitoba Lieutenant Governor
(Personal Flag)



Canadian Blue Ensign
(Historic Flag)

Flag Terminology



Did you Know?

Canada's 2nd largest museum flag collection is located in Argyle, MB as part of **Settlers, Rails & Trails Inc.**

The famous **Canadian Flag Collection** has over 1,700 flags (as of 2025) representing Canada's historic, corporate, regional, sport & special events.

The museum promotes & preserves flags, photographs, documents, books and other flag related artifacts.

www.settlersrailsandtrails.com

History of Flags in Canada

Pre-Confederation

The earliest known “flag” flown in Canada was apparently brought to the shores of present day Newfoundland, by the Vikings around 1000 BCE. Known as the **Raven Banner**, it would have flown on Viking ships as they crossed from Europe.

500 years later, as European countries were colonizing parts of the world, they arrived in Canada, bringing their flags with them. In 1497 John Cabot planted the **Kingdom of England Flag**, claiming territory for the English. The French did the same in 1534 when Jacques Cartier arrived with the **Royal Arms of France**. Martin Frobisher flew the **St. George’s Cross** (England) on his ships when he was exploring a route through the Northwest Passage in 1577. Starting in 1670, merchant ships from England were flying the **Red Ensign**, indicating their ownership by English companies. The **British Union Flag** (aka: Union Jack) was flown from 1707 its design used heavily in Canadian flags until the 1960s.

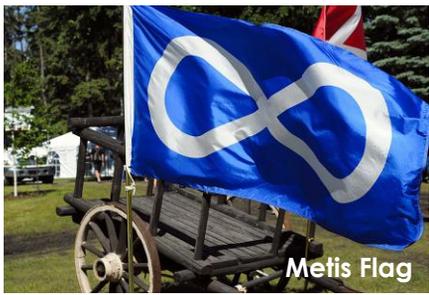
Did you Know?

These early flags were used for official purposes. As symbols of the royal families of Europe, permission was only granted to select officials & explorers.

In the past, it was European tradition to “Plant a Flag” in foreign lands, an act that claimed new lands for a nation.

Flags of Canada timeline

- 1000  Norseman's Flag (Danish)
- 1497  Kingdom of England (England)
- 1534  Royal Arms of France (France)
- 1577  St. George's Cross (England)
- 1670  Red Ensign (Merchant Marine - England)
- 1707  Royal Union Flag (England/Scotland)
- 1801  Royal Union Flag (England/Scotland/Ireland)
- 1829  Hudson's Bay Company (England)
- 1868  Canadian Blue Ensign (4 provinces)
- 1870  Canadian Red Ensign (4 provinces)
- 1870  Canadian Red Ensign (5 provinces)
- 1873  Canadian Red Ensign (7 provinces)
- 1907  Canadian Red Ensign (9 provinces)
- 1922  Canadian Red Ensign (Green leaves)
- 1957  Canadian Red Ensign (Red Leaves)



Use of flags accompanied the arrival of European traders in Western Canada. The **Hudson Bay Company** (since 1670) and **Northwest Company** (since 1779) flew company ensigns at their fur trading forts. Both companies introduced unique flags to the Metis with whom they did business.

Post- Confederation

When the first four provinces in Canada joined confederation, they also needed a distinct symbol to represent this new country. By 1868, a decision was made to repurpose a common flag used on British ships. The **Canadian Red Ensign** was created by using the well-known British Merchant flag, with the addition of the original four provincial Coats of Arms.



Merchant Navy Ensign, flown on the stern (back) of British ships



Canadian Red Ensign c1868, with coats of arms:
(clockwise from top left) Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia

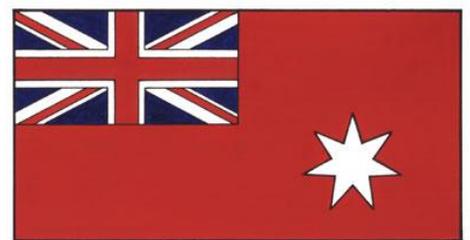
Each time a new province joined Canadian Confederation, their coat of arms would be added to the ensign. In 1921, the Canadian Government found the flag to be too cluttered, at this point they redesigned the flag using the official Canadian Coat of Arms.



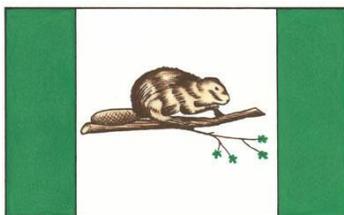
Canadian Red Ensign 1921-1957

Early Proposals for a Canadian Flag

The Canadian Red Ensign was used from 1868 to 1965, yet some people felt there was a better design for a flag. Here are some proposals:



Sanford Fleming, 1895



1963 Proposal



Ligue du Drapeau National, 1943



Parliamentary Committee Flag, 1946

The Great Flag Debate

Background

By the 1960s, Canada had grown to include a more culturally diverse population, and people felt that flags used in the past were no longer an appropriate representation of all Canadians.

Liberal Party leader Lester B. Pearson, during his 1963 election campaign, promised to introduce a new Canadian flag, within two years of taking office. After an election victory, he initiated the process of creating a new flag in 1964, which proved to be very controversial.

Pearson knew that creating a new flag could be divisive to the country, and politically dangerous for him and his party. When Canadian governments attempted this in the past, they received much opposition and plans were eventually scrapped. However, Pearson felt that Canadians in the 1960s were ready to take another serious look at the creation of a new national symbol.



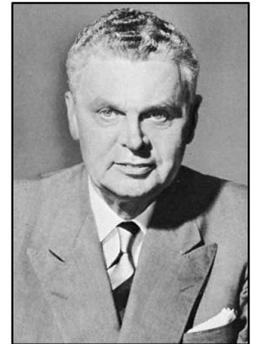
Pearson believed this flag design was best, maple leaves with two blue bars representing "from sea to sea" The Flag was dubbed "Pearson's Pennant" by the press.

Did you Know?

The "Great Flag Debate" officially began June 15, 1965 and quickly became one of the most debated topics in Canada's history. Lasting six months, it greatly divided Canadians, and was one of the "ugliest" debates in the House of Commons.



Lester B. Pearson
(Prime Minister)



John Diefenbaker
(Opposition Leader)

Opposition

Many Canadians opposed the idea of a new flag including veterans, British Loyalists, provincial leaders and conservatives. In parliament, John Diefenbaker in parliament argued that a new flag erased Canada's British heritage.

Pearson was famously heckled by members of the Royal Canadian Legion, when he spoke at their 1964 annual convention in Winnipeg.



Logo of the Royal Canadian Legion.

Pearson, in response to criticism, reminded veterans that a maple leaf was part of their organization's logo

The Flag Committee

With much negative debate in parliament, it was agreed that a special committee would be formed to produce a flag for Canada. 15 Members of Parliament were chosen, from each major political party. This committee interviewed many Canadian artists, experts and designers. Over 3,500 designs were submitted to the group, from people across Canada and beyond.



The Parliamentary Flag Committee with flag designs displayed in their chambers



Parliamentarians celebrate the choice of our national flag, Dec. 1964



The Flag Committee chose these **three finalists**, and voted unanimously for our current flag



George Stanley submitted his hand-sketched idea of a "perfect Canadian Flag"

After much debate and discussions, the new National Flag of Canada was raised at a special ceremony, in front of the Parliament Buildings, **February 15, 1965**. This day would eventually become known and celebrated as **National Flag of Canada Day**.



February 15, 1965, our National Flag of Canada is raised for the first time

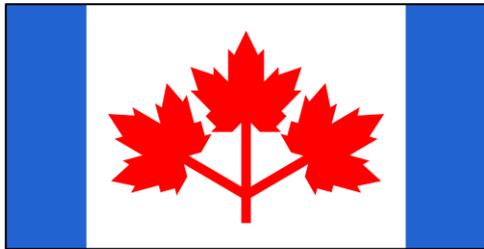
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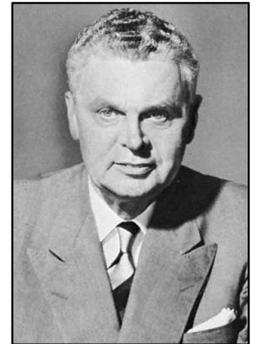
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