

Nick Dall

When you think about it, the “new” SA flag – officially unveiled 28 years ago this week – is something of a miracle worker. How else could it be that the same guy who will take any chance to denigrate the “cANcerous” government, is happy to pull on a pair of socks, a Lycra cycling suit or even a speedo emblazoned with its red, green, blue and gold stripes?

That flag has somehow come to represent that most elusive of things: a united SA. It’s a remarkable feat for something that was designed in just one week.

On Saturday February 26 1994, Fred Brownell received a late-night phone call requesting a new national flag. His deadline? The following Friday.

“It scared the living daylight out of me,” Brownell told the BBC in 2014, five years before his death.

As the state herald, he had been involved in the selection process for a new flag: in September 1993, members of the public had been invited to submit their ideas. But none of the 7,000 sketches sent in cracked the nod, and professional design agencies proved a flop. Now Brownell was a last resort.

Luckily the request didn’t catch him completely cold. While listening to an “interminable speech” at an international flag conference in Zurich in August 1993 it had dawned on him that the new flag should represent “convergence and unification”. On the back of the conference programme, he had sketched three arms converging from the flagpole side of the flag and becoming one.

In his early sketches, he placed green at the top, red in the middle and blue at the bottom. But he soon realised the flag looked better with red at the top and green in the middle.

Then he added black and gold (found on the flags of the ANC and the IFP), and messed around with the red so it was neither pillar-box red (as in the Union Jack on the old flag) or orange (as favoured by Afrikaners), settling instead on a “chili red”.

The final tweak came from his daughter. “Dad, use your brain!” she told him. “People will stand that on its head and turn it into the nuclear peace sign. The middle leg must go.”

At her request, three converging arms became two ...

POLES APART



Fred Brownell: The face behind SA's flag
Waldo Swiegers

A flag is so much more than a colourful piece of cloth. How did the old *oranje-wit-en-blou* go from ‘reviled by Afrikaners’ to a symbol of apartheid in just 20 years? And why does our current flag still unite South Africans even as they despair at the state of the country?

Mad rush for the finish line

Five designs – two of Brownell’s and three others – were presented to then president FW de Klerk, who asked his cabinet to help him choose.

“I noticed their eyes,” Brownell later said. “They were being drawn to my design.”

But – as with any decision in early 1994 – getting the Nats’ approval was only half the battle. So De Klerk sent the design on to ANC negotiator Cyril Ramaphosa.

We’ll let Ramaphosa pick up the tale: “[Nelson] Mandela was away in Rustenburg. There was no question of proceeding without his approval ... So we faxed a drawing of the flag to him

and got someone in Rustenburg to colour in the various shapes with the appropriate colours.”

As Brownell later told Adrienne Harris, who is producing a book about the flag, they were all waiting nervously for a reply from Ramaphosa when Roelf Meyer, the government’s chief negotiator, rushed in with a huge smile, saying: “*Hy sê ja* [He says yes].”

With Mandela’s thumbs-up, the flag was approved that very day: March 15 1994. For some unknown reason, however, it was gazetted only five weeks later, on April 20.

Immediately after the initial March approval, the Transitional Executive Council placed an order for 6,000 flags

with three different companies. But closer to 100,000 flags would be needed when SA turned out for its first democratic election on April 27.

Any company that wanted to profit from this potentially huge demand would need to take on a relatively substantial risk: the design could change. SA's two largest flag manufacturers decided to focus on smaller, private sector sales. But Karel Kuiper, a Dutch-born chemical engineer who'd never made a flag in his life, took a bigger gamble. At the urging of a friend who owned a flag company in Holland, he secured orders for 65,000 flags.

Now he just had to make them.

Initially Kuiper's Dutch buddy could just about keep up with the printing demands – but the sewing was another story. Huge bolts of printed cloth were airfreighted to SA, where Kuiper outsourced sewing to clothing factories, sewing clubs and township seamstresses. Before long, all the flag material in Europe had been used up, and more had to be flown in from Japan.

On the Saturday before the elections, a huge consignment of unsewn flags landed at what was then Jan Smuts Airport. Only, customs had already closed! By now Kuiper had the president's office on speed dial, and the matter was swiftly resolved.

On April 26, with less than 24 hours before the flag was to be hoisted across SA, Kuiper's suppliers mutinied. Stuffing R65,000 in a bag, he rushed to court to seek a last-minute injunction. Not all the suppliers were happy with the terms – one threw a “blompot” at him from a second-floor window – but when the sun rose on April 27 1994, Kuiper recalls: “I still had angry customers, but at least the flag was all over the place.”

While anyone who lived through that time will probably have heard the odd mutter about Brownell's design, these were largely silenced on May 10, when Mandela was inaugurated at a Union Buildings reinvigorated by a flag that rendered the Rainbow Nation visible. The last remaining naysayers retreated into their laagers after the Boks' triumph at the Rugby World Cup final on June 24 1995.

SA's new flag was an unmitigated success – much more than could be said of its predecessor.

'An ugly flag unworthy of SA'

One of the things that most surprised me and my co-author Matthew Blackman while researching *Spoilt Ballots*, our recent book about the history of elections in SA, was that when the “old” SA flag was unveiled in the 1920s, it was reviled by English and Afrikaners alike (the rest of the populace wasn't consulted).

Before the SA War the two British colonies – the Cape and Natal – flew the Union Jack, while the two Boer republics had their own flags. In 1908-1909, when the leaders of the four provinces met to explore the possibility of union, “the question of a national flag was not discussed”, writes historian Harry Saker. “It had not been forgotten; rather it was tacitly recognised as wiser to leave the subject in abeyance.”

For the first 18 years of united SA's existence the “red ensign” (a modified Union Jack featuring some grotesque bobbies and an ox-wagon) was adopted as the unofficial flag. But, as Saker writes, it “never became popular”, and “remained unfamiliar”.

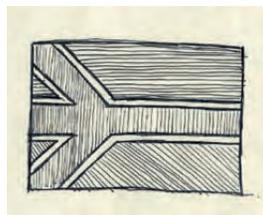
Of course, SA's first two prime ministers, Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, had more important issues to worry about than a flag – the Boer Rebellion, for example, and World War I. But this all changed when Afrikaner nationalist JBM Hertzog defeated Smuts in the 1924 election.

In 1925, DF Malan, the portly, bespectacled domineer who was minister of the interior, introduced the Nationality & Flag Bill. It proposed that a new national flag should replace the Union Jack as an “outward expression and symbol of the Union's independence”.

Malan's proposal, writes Smuts's biographer HC Armstrong, “roused all the hostility, which had begun to disappear, between the English and the Dutch. It became the topic of conversation in every village and dorp, and the burning argument in every hotel and bar and farm.

“It grew quickly into a quarrel, which boiled up angrily. Englishmen and Dutchmen insulted each other openly, swore they would shoot each other rather than give way.”

Bizarrely, Smuts, who had been a Boer hero in the SA War, took up the fight for the Union Jack. At a meeting in Bloemhof, “Hertzog's supporters raided the hall



In design: The SA flag, from the rough sketch Brownell drew on the back of a conference programme in 1993, to the final product Fred

Brownell archive

where Smuts was due to speak, broke the furniture, chased out the police, tore up the Union Jack ... and swore that they would kill Smuts if he persisted” with his defence of that flag.

In 1928 a compromise was reached. A hodgepodge national flag comprising “the old orange, white and blue banner of the House of Orange, with the two [Boer] Republican flags and the Union Jack imposed upon its white field” (in other words: the “old” SA flag that still makes the odd appearance at Loftus Versfeld) would fly alongside the Union Jack.

The compromise left no-one happy. As Armstrong describes it, the new national flag was “an ugly flag unworthy of SA”. And the Nats moaned about having to put up with two Union Jacks instead of one.

After 1948, when the Nats came to power, the SA flag started on the road to being a symbol of apartheid oppression.

This dual flag agreement continued until 1957, when the Flags Amendment Act consigned the Union Jack to the trash heap.

By the time white South Africans voted to become a republic in 1960, Afrikaners had grown to live with the tiny Union Jack in the middle of their flag, and took the *oranje-wit-en-blou* to their hearts.

The moral of the story?

Looking back, it's pretty obvious that the democratic selection process used in 1994 knocked the socks off the hostile, heavily politicised atmosphere of the 1920s. Brownell's design really does embody unity and convergence, and it's also a lot more visually appealing than its predecessor.

In corporate speak, he pulled off the perfect rebrand.

But why it has proved so durable is a mystery. While the spirit of optimism that was everywhere in 1994 has been largely forgotten, South Africans from all walks of life still proudly bear – and wear – the flag every day. If only you could put such magic in a bottle. ✕