

Focused on flag's future



A promise is a promise, but the Government's commitment to kick-off public discussion about the future of our national flag is shaping up as an all-too-expensive talent contest.

The Government expects to spend nearly \$26 million on a two-year process to find some new flag designs and to hold a pair of referendums as to what we want to run up the flag pole.

A group of respected New Zealanders will seek some new flag designs to be presented for a referendum. The winner will be pitched against the current flag in another referendum in 2016.

The last Government promised this well before the election and Prime Minister John Key says he thinks the current flag symbolises a colonial and post-colonial era whose time has passed.

That might be true, but an opinion poll early this year showed more than 70 per cent of people were happy with a flag that, with its Union Jack, so obviously referred to their country's past.

In this response, it could be argued that, after years of independence, a flag that might otherwise be a colonial throw-back has been recontextualised to represent what New Zealand has achieved.

It was the flag flown in competition and war, the flag our country had as it grew from a Dominion into an active and influential member of the international community.

As the debate is reignited, we will see the flag has come to be much more than an anachronistic reference to a colonial past: for many New Zealanders, it symbolises how far we have come.

And this is the most important point. The flag must be considered for its importance to New Zealanders rather than what we – currently – think it says about New Zealand overseas.

Of course foreigners sometimes get our flag mixed up with Australia's – our flag is not important to them. In this context, it seems strange to spend \$26 million to show the world how important it is to us.