
Red, White and Blue, What Do They Mean to You? The Significance of Political Colours*

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The political meaning of colours is a tantalising subject, something with which we may feel very familiar, but which also includes mysteries and controversies. Colours have long been important symbols of political parties or social movements. For centuries people have worn colours to show they identify with a cause and colours have also been part of the emotional life of social movements.

When we see television coverage of election night in the United Kingdom (UK), at the declaration of the poll in different constituencies we see the candidates lining up wearing their huge campaign rosettes. They are red for Labour, yellow (gold) for the Liberal Democrats, blue for Conservatives, and green for Greens.¹ This particular alignment of colours with the political spectrum tends to be taken for granted in much of the world—leading to cognitive dissonance over recent developments in the United

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¹ Historically, however, party colours in the UK varied with the local party organisation, rather than being uniform across the country. When William Gladstone contested Newark in 1832 the local Tory colour was red and this remained a Conservative colour in other areas up into the 1960s. In the 1870s blue was a Conservative colour in Lancashire but a Liberal colour in Cheshire and Westmorland. Purple and orange were Conservative colours in Surrey and Kent, but Liberal colours in Wiltshire.

States of America (USA) where the strongholds of the (conservative) Republicans are now described as 'red states', while the Democrats have become blue. The discomfort caused by this seemingly arbitrary assignment of colours underlines the fairly stable meanings accumulated by political colours in much of the world. These meanings are reinforced by the stories told about them by social movements themselves—now available on numerous movement websites. These websites are the source for much of the following overview of meanings accruing to the colours red, black and green.

Red and its dangers

By the late nineteenth century red was being appropriated by the socialist movement. It was associated with the May Day processions inaugurated by the Second International in 1889 at which red flowers were worn. Red had become a symbol of radicalism in the course of the French revolution. Apart from the red 'liberty caps', the red flag also became the symbol of radicalism and revolt. In 1789 the National Assembly, increasingly worried about mob violence, had prescribed the hoisting of a red flag as the signal that martial law had been declared. Two years later La Fayette raised it in an incident on the Champs de Mars, which ended with his troops firing on a pro-republican crowd. By 1792 the red flag was appropriated by demonstrators, who enscribed their flag 'Martial law of the people against the revolt of the court'.² The symbol of state power had become the symbol of popular protest and was seen again in the upheavals of 1830 and 1848.

By the time of the Paris Commune in 1871 red was used not only for liberty caps and the radical flag but also for ribbons and armbands, and competed with the tricolour of the moderate republicans. After the bloody suppression of the Commune, Christian and radical iconography became merged in the meaning of the flag that 'shrouded oft our martyred dead'.³ The red flag became an emotive symbol, to the extent that its public display was banned in Australia by regulation under the War Precautions Act in 1918. One of those arrested in Brisbane for carrying the red flag in 1919 told the court that he was a socialist and carried the red flag because he believed it was the flag of the working class and symbolic of the ideals he held.⁴ 'Red' was to become shorthand for the international communist movement as well as for social democrats who sang *The Red Flag* at party conferences.

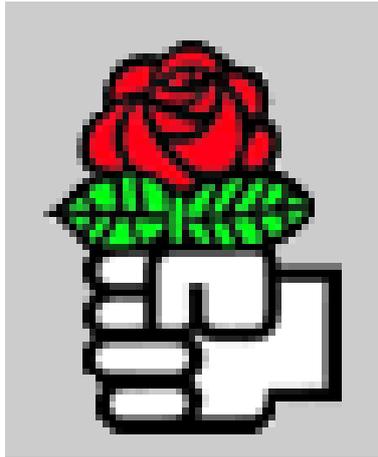


Flag of the Portuguese Socialist Party

² J.A. Leith, 'The War of Images Surrounding the Commune', in J. Leith (ed.), *Images of the Commune*. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978, p. 119.

³ J. Connell, 'The Red Flag', verse 1, line 2.

⁴ G. Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: the Initiation of Australia*. Second edition, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2000, p. 372.



Socialist International logo

Today, modernising labour parties tend to shy away from the use of red unless in the form of the red rose of the Socialist International rather than the blood-soaked flag of popular revolt. The red rose has long been a symbol of the Swedish Social Democrats and has a range of emotional resonances. These were evoked in the 1911 James Oppenheim poem *Bread and Roses*, which in turn was inspired by banners carried by striking women textile workers.

In 1969 a member of the French Socialist Party commissioned the symbol of a clenched fist holding a red rose. This interesting combination of symbols was soon adopted as the official logo of the Socialist International and by some of its members.

In the UK the Labour Party adopted its own new logo, the red rose without the radical fist, in time for its 1986 conference.



UK Labour logo, 1986



Party of European Socialists logo

The Socialist Group in the European Parliament also uses the red rose without the fist, combining it instead with the European Union's ring of stars.

Some have interpreted the replacement of the fist by the rose in the iconography of left parties as an attempt to move away from masculine imagery in the context of the increasing role of women in the Left. The period of the transition from one symbol to another was also the period when the traditional gender gap between male and female support for the Left was closing, and indeed, Left parties in Europe were starting to attract more support from women than from men.⁵

While this lecture will not go into the colour blue, which is usually associated with conservative parties, I shall include here the UK Conservative party logo, the liberty torch borrowed from the Statue of Liberty in New York.



UK Conservative Party logo, 1987

This logo was adopted by Margaret Thatcher in 1987 in response to the Labour Party's rose. It was reworked in 2004 by Maurice Saatchi to give the hand holding the torch a muscular arm to signify 'our determination to roll up our sleeves and get things done.'⁶

⁵ R. Inglehart and P. Norris, *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*. Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press, 2003, Chapter 4.

⁶ Conservative Party (UK), *Conservative Identity Guidelines*, viewed 17 October 2006, at www.conservatives.com



Conservative Party logo, 2004

The red, white and blue, that echo the colours of the Union Jack, are intended to reassert the fact that ‘we are the only major national party which will defend Britain’s sovereignty’⁷—meaning against further integration into Europe. In both the UK and New Zealand, parties now need to register their logos with the Electoral Commission and the logos appear on ballot papers.

In Australia and New Zealand both labour and conservative parties now directly use the national flag and its colours in their iconography. Appeals to patriotism are seen to trump appeals to socialist solidarity.



ALP logo, 1979

In 1995 the Australian Labor Party changed the waving national flag logo it had used since 1979. The logo now has a new version of the Southern Cross and excludes other elements of the national flag such as the canton featuring the British Union Jack.

⁷ Ibid.



ALP logo, 1995

But while in some countries political parties on both left and right now use the national flag or its colours to help recruit patriotic emotion, in France the *tricolore* is regarded as too emotive to be used for partisan purposes. The combination of the colours red, white and blue in election posters is forbidden under French electoral law.⁸

Meanings of black

While red was becoming an emotive signifier of the socialist movement in Europe and beyond, black was developing its own political history, in part arising from the conflict between Marx and Bakunin in the First International. The first reports of black flags being flown at anarchist demonstrations come from the early 1880s, when former Commune Louise Michel is said to have flown it at a demonstration in Paris. Soon after it was flown by anarchists in Chicago. The anarchist army of Nestor Makhno marched under black flags in the Ukraine during the Russian Civil War and, famously, black flags were last flown en masse in Russia at the funeral of Peter Kropotkin in Moscow in 1921. In recent years black has been worn and black flags carried by the anarchist and autonomist contingents involved in anti-globalisation protests both in northern Europe and in the USA.

The anarchist symbol of a circle surrounding an *A* is now regarded as one of the most widely recognised political symbols.⁹

⁸ *Code Electoral*, France, Article R.27.

⁹ P. Peterson, 'Flag, torch and fist: the symbols of anarchism', *Freedom*, Vol. 48, no. 11, p. 8.



anarchist symbol

Another widely recognised symbol using white and black is the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) symbol, designed by artist and designer Gerald Holtom in 1958. Although originally designed for the British CND, it became used more generally around the world as a peace symbol, being easier to draw than Picasso's dove.¹⁰



CND badges

The CND symbol is based on the semaphore signals for the initials N and D, but also signifies a human being in an attitude of despair, with arms stretched outwards and downwards as in Goya's image of a man before a firing squad. The first CND badges were black on white ceramic and came with an explanation that the fired pottery badges would be one of the human artefacts that would survive a nuclear explosion.

Various meanings have accumulated around black as the anarchist colour. In particular it has been interpreted as the colour of nihilism, signifying the negation of the flags of the nation state and outrage at the slaughter perpetrated in their name.¹¹ It

¹⁰ A history of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) logo, viewed 17 September 2006, at http://www.scientium.com/diagon_alley/archival/reference_asides/peace_symbol.htm.

¹¹ J. Wehling, 'Anarchism and the History of the Black Flag', 1995, viewed 15 October 2004, at www.spunk.org/library/intro/sp001492/blackflg.html

is a denial of the traditional ‘call to the colours’ and the duping and regimenting of the masses through false patriotic emotions. The historical association between anarchism and socialism has also resulted in the use of flags combining red and black. The anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain has used red and black flags since before World War I and they have also been adopted in Latin American countries with close links to Spain, for example, by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

But black had also become the colour of the fascist movement with the march on Rome of Mussolini’s Blackshirts in 1922—as distinct from the Redshirts who participated in Garibaldi’s campaigns in the previous century. This appropriation completely subverted the political meaning of black. From being a symbol of protest against the use of national colours to arouse false patriotism and send citizen armies to the slaughter, it became a symbol of ultra-nationalism and gender hierarchy. In 1926 the Secretary-General of the Italian Fascist Party sent a circular letter to women’s fascist organisations forbidding them to wear black shirts because they were a symbol of combat. In the UK the British Union of Fascists followed Mussolini in adopting black shirts, leading to the banning of the wearing of political uniforms under the *Public Order Act 1936*. Black had become the colour both of anarchism and of fascism, political ideologies at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of attitudes towards political authority. In different contexts, black is also the colour associated with the robes of Christian clerics and is the colour, for example, of the German Christian Democratic Party.

Shades of green

Exemplifying the diverse meanings carried by political colours in different cultural, national and historical contexts is the colour green. Green is the colour of Islam and today of Islamic political parties. Historically green was a colour of radicalism in Britain and was associated with the Levellers in the seventeenth century and the Chartists in the nineteenth century. The Chartists also borrowed the red cap of liberty from the French revolution.¹² Green has been the colour of Irish nationalism (‘They are hanging men and women for the wearing of the green’) but took on new meaning with the rise of the environmental movement in the twentieth century. Its use to represent the cause of the environment has links with its traditional Christian meaning of growth, life and hope. Around the world it has been appropriated as the name of environmental parties (Die Grünen or The Greens)—helping them demarcate themselves from old-style sectional politics by abandoning the word ‘party’.

Green has become symbolic shorthand for a whole set of values concerning both the environment and the nature of politics.¹³ This symbolic shorthand may have had its origins in the ‘green bans’ imposed by the Builders’ Labourers’ Federation on development projects in Sydney in the early 1970s. The German activist Petra Kelly was inspired by the green bans during a visit to Australia.¹⁴ The German

¹² P. Pickering, ‘Class without words: symbolic communication in the Chartist Movement’, *Past and Present*, Vol. 112, no. 1, 1986, pp. 144–162.

¹³ It should be noted that the term ‘green’ had also been incorporated in the name of the organisation ‘greenpeace’, founded in 1971.

¹⁴ Senator Bob Brown, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 21 March 1997, p. 2189.

environmentalists went on to adopt the name ‘Greens’ when they contested their first national level election in 1980. In order to break through the five per cent threshold for representation in the Bundestag the Greens presented themselves as encompassing many shades of green, including farmers as well as deeper green fundamentalists. The world’s first environmental parties, such as those formed in Tasmania and New Zealand in 1972 and in the UK in 1973 had not used the word ‘green’ in their names.

The role of ribbons

The seventeenth century English Levellers referred to above wore sea-green ribbons and coloured ribbons have been handed out by political parties to their supporters as long as political parties have existed.

The famous sequence of paintings by William Hogarth, *An Election*, on the subject of the 1754 election in Oxfordshire, depicts the blue ribbons of the Tories and the orange ribbons of the Whigs being worn on hats and clothes. But ribbons have also been associated with modern social movements, signalling the political allegiance and values of the wearer.

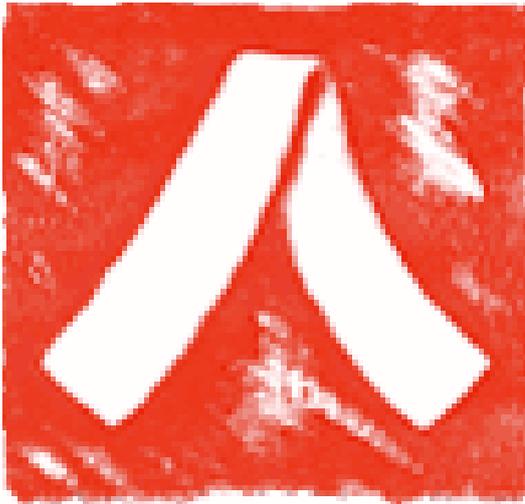
In the nineteenth century white ribbons were worn by the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), an important player in the early suffrage victories in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The WCTU in New Zealand started publishing its journal *White Ribbon* in 1895, and the same or similar titles were used for WCTU journals in other countries and internationally.



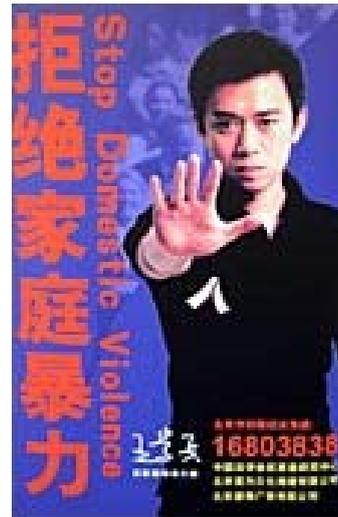
WCTU white ribbon

In Canada, Louise McKinney, a WCTU leader who often wore the white ribbon, became the first woman elected to a legislature in the British Empire when she was elected to the Alberta legislature in 1917. Later she was involved in the ‘person’s case’ of 1929, which finally decided women’s right to be appointed to the Canadian Senate. When she died, over a hundred WCTU women lined up at the graveside to deposit white ribbons on the casket.

Today the white ribbon is used to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November. The white ribbon campaign was initiated in 1991 by Toronto academic, Michael Kaufman, and by Jack Layton, now Leader of the New Democratic Party. The white ribbon was adopted as a symbol of men’s opposition to violence and was soon taken up by men’s groups all over Canada as well as internationally.



white ribbon logo



its use in China

In Australia the 2005 white ribbon campaign was launched by the federal Labor Leader, Kim Beazley, and the Labor Party provided white ribbons for its parliamentarians and party members to wear.

The white ribbons worn by 'men working to end violence against women' have significant resonances with the earlier WCTU campaigns. Domestic violence or wife-beating, as it was then known, was one of the catalysts of the temperance campaigning of the WCTU, which saw alcohol as the major cause of male violence against women.

As I have said, the wearing of coloured ribbons to signal political allegiance was already popular in the eighteenth century, but it seems to have undergone a general revival in 1991. This year saw not only the start of the white ribbon campaign but also of the wearing of red ribbons to signify support for those living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

The symbol was devised by painter, Frank Moore, of the Visual AIDS Artists Caucus in New York State. He saw red as signifying blood and danger and the tails pointing down as life flowing away. It was worn by British actor, Jeremy Irons, at the Tony awards in 1991 and is now worn around the world on International AIDS Day on 1 December each year. The success of these campaigns led to the adoption of coloured ribbons for many other causes.



AIDS Ribbon

The colours of Indigenous and other social movements

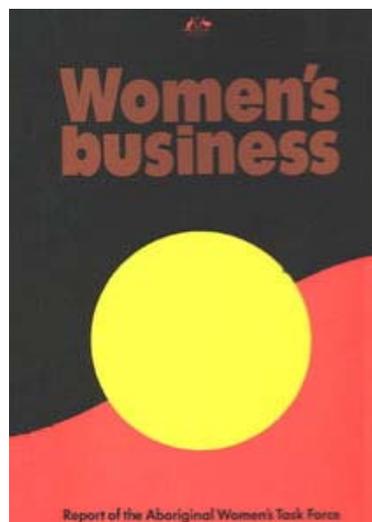
Colours have also been important for contemporary Indigenous movements. In Australia the red, yellow and black of the Aboriginal flag designed by Harold Thomas became a major part of the assertion of a collective Aboriginal identity. The black symbolised the Aboriginal people and the red, the land and Aboriginal relationship to it. The yellow sun was the giver of life. The flag was first flown in Adelaide in 1971 and in the following year at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy outside Old Parliament House in Canberra. It has been flying outside Old Parliament House since the revival of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1992, and indeed, became an official flag of Australia in 1995 under section 5 of the *Flags Act 1953*.

Aboriginal journalist and photographer, Brenda Croft, wrote of the emotional impact of the colours on her at the time of the bicentenary of white settlement:

Everywhere you looked you saw the colours of red, black and yellow; and it really struck me that the Aboriginal flag was absolutely the symbol that united all Indigenous people in Australia, regardless of whether they came from traditional communities or from urban environments.¹⁵

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have come to use the colours, to signify their support for a whole process of redress for historic wrongs.

In 1978 the Australian Public Service Board, for example, approved the use of the colours on Aboriginal recruitment material and they were soon used in a range of government publications.



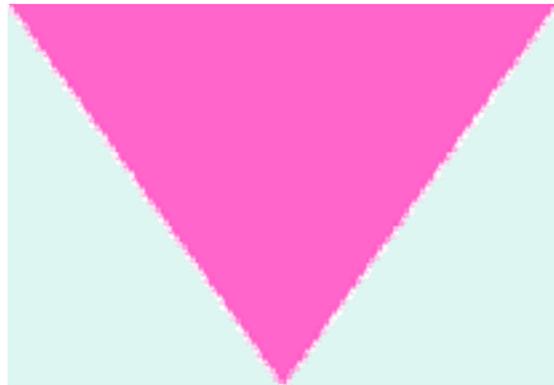
Report of the Aboriginal Women's Task Force, 1986

¹⁵ B.L. Croft, Account of Invasion Day, 26 January 1988, *Cook's Sites* exhibition, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 16 March to 18 June 2006.

The colours have been used by all the organisations set up to promote reconciliation and were worn by many of the hundreds of thousands of Australians who participated in the Journeys of Healing or Walks for Reconciliation that took place around Australia in mid-2000. In Sydney a 'river of people' flowed for five hours across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, bearing and wearing the colours.

Another set of colours that have come to represent Black pride are the Rastafarian colours of red, gold and green, which have spread far beyond those actually professing the Rastafarian religion. The Rastafarian religion dates from the 1930s and sought to promote pride among Jamaicans in their African origins. It was popularised by reggae musician, Bob Marley, in the 1970s and is said to have about a million followers worldwide, but many more would recognise the colours, to which black is sometimes added.

The emergence of the gay liberation movement in the early 1970s saw another search for symbols of identity.



the pink triangle

The pink triangle used by the Nazis to identify homosexual prisoners in concentration camps was rediscovered in the mid-1970s and, like other symbols already mentioned, appropriated by the oppressed as part of the new politics of pride. The colour pink became a signifier of gay identity and in Sydney the lead float in the 2001 Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras promoted the rights of gay and lesbian families under the banner 'Beyond the Pink Picket Fence'. Articles appeared in the business pages about the power of the 'pink dollar'.

Another gay symbol is the rainbow flag designed by San Francisco artist, Gilbert Baker. Originally with eight stripes, practicalities quickly led to a six-stripe version (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet).



rainbow flag

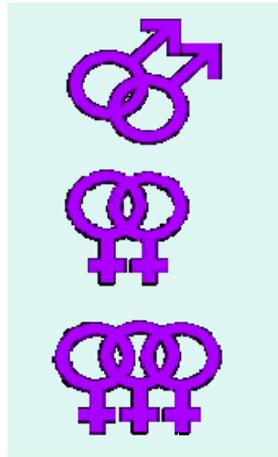
When Harvey Milk, San Francisco's first gay city supervisor was assassinated at the end of 1978, there was a mobilisation of the local gay community that helped popularise the new rainbow flag. It is seen in gay pride marches internationally and is flown above the Harvey Milk Plaza in Castro Street in San Francisco.



Castro Street flag

The colours are different from those of another rainbow flag, the Buddhist flag (blue, yellow, red, white, orange), which was invented in the nineteenth century and is used during Buddhist celebrations in almost 60 countries.

The colour lavender became associated with lesbians in the 1930s in the USA. Thirty years later Betty Friedan, founder of the National Organization for Women, famously regarded lesbians as the 'lavender menace'. She believed the lesbian issue was dangerous and diversionary for the women's movement. In 1970 she refused to join other feminist leaders in donning a lavender armband to show solidarity with lesbians.¹ Other visual symbols of lesbian identity included linked female symbols and the double-headed axe, a symbol of the Greek earth goddess, Demeter. The use of such symbols has formed part of the assertion of lesbian visibility.



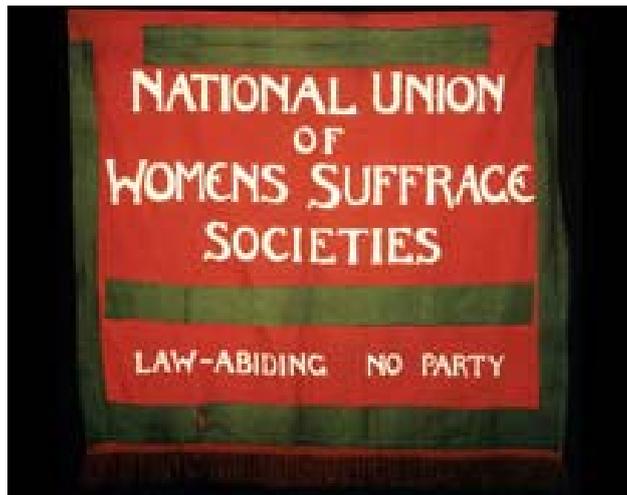
gay, lesbian and sisterhood symbols

The wearing of political colours is a significant statement of identity and/or values. Such public displays help engender an emotional unity and can be an important resource in building social movements and other campaigns. The colours may be chosen because of existing political meanings, but they also develop new meanings as they become part of the vocabulary of collective action and cross oceans and time zones. The case study that follows presents the story of how a set of political colours crossed the world and, over time, signalled both emotional solidarity and more complex themes of contestation and co-option.

The invention of women's movement colours

Green, white and purple became important colours for the women's movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century, although they were originally only the colours of one organisation in one country in the years before World War I. This case study explores how colours which originally expressed organisational identity (and rivalry) within the British suffrage movement, came to be a signifier of sisterhood and of the international women's movement.

In the UK the women's suffrage organisations all adopted distinguishing sets of colours in the first decade of the twentieth century. The largest and longest established organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was the first to adopt identifying colours (red and white), which it did for its first big street demonstration in 1907. It later added green so its colours became red, white and green.



NUWSS colours

The following year the more militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded by Emmeline Pankhurst, decided to adopt its own political colours to distinguish it from NUWSS.¹⁶ The idea for the WSPU colours came from Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. She described the colours as white for purity in public as well as private life, purple for dignity, self-reverence and self-respect, and green for hope and new life.

From the start the WSPU tricolour was a huge commercial success and manufacturers seized on the opportunity to provide anything from playing cards to bicycles, but particularly clothing, ribbons, scarves, brooches and hatpins in 'the colours'. The estimated 30 000 marchers in the 1908 WSPU demonstration wore mainly white or cream with purple, green and white accessories. Some 10 000 scarves had been sold just before the march.



WSPU colours

¹⁶ See L. Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–14*. London, Chatto & Windus, 1987, pp. 93–96, for the fullest account of the adoption of the WPSU colours.

Emmeline Pankhurst's daughter Christabel wrote of 'The Political Importance of the Colours', emphasising their emotional significance: 'To members of the Union the tricolour is full of meaning and they now understand to the full the devotion of a regiment to its colours.'

She contrasted the appeal to reason made in speeches to the visual appeal of the colours:

Heralded by music, with colours flying, the dress of everyone in the ranks lending itself to the colour scheme, the procession of women marches through the streets, by this means proclaiming to the world that they have joy in their political battle and confidence of victory.¹⁷

She also saw the colours as compensating for media neglect—while the press might lead people to think that suffragettes had given up the fight, the public display of the colours afforded visible proof of the continuing struggle.

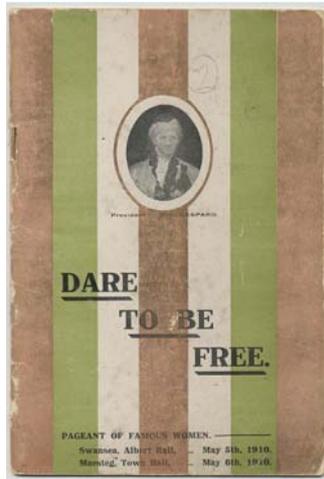
But despite the popularity of the WSPU's purple, green and white colours it was still the NUWSS that dominated the women's coronation procession of 1911 in which all the suffrage organisations participated. This huge procession through the streets of London was timed to coincide with the coronation of George V, for which journalists and statesmen had gathered from around the world. Journalist Henry Nevinson reported that 'it seemed as though the red, white and green flags would never cease.'¹⁸ Nevinson was himself a WSPU supporter and carried a purple, green and white flag on horseback during this demonstration.

And these were not the only suffrage colours to be seen in such processions. The Women's Freedom League (WFL) used the colours gold, green and white and these were the colours worn by Australian Muriel Matters when she soared above the House of Commons in an airship painted with the slogan 'Votes for Women'. She scattered 56 pounds of leaflets in the colours from the airship, describing them as floating down to the people below 'like beautifully coloured birds'.¹⁹ The WFL was one of the 'militant' suffrage organisations, but broke away from the WSPU on the issue of internal democracy (or lack of it). Significantly the WFL chose its colours through a referendum of its branches.

¹⁷ C. Pankhurst, 'The political importance of the colours', *Votes for Women*, 7 May 1909, p. 632.

¹⁸ H. Nevinson, *Votes for Women*, 23 June 1911.

¹⁹ *Daily Mirror* 17 February 1909.



WFL colours

Other suffrage organisations, and even the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, each had their own unique combination of colours. Nonetheless, the WSPU colours were displayed in dramatic incidents such as when Emily Wilding Davison ran in front of the King's horse at the Derby, carrying folded WSPU flags under her coat. Davison's funeral was the occasion for a massed display of WSPU iconography in London streets, including the black draped WSPU flag and the coffin with a purple velvet pall embroidered with silver arrows, the symbol of her earlier imprisonment.

Conserving the colours

Mrs Pankhurst suspended WSPU militancy during the war, in favour of patriotic activity, supporting the conscription cause in Australia and the harsh treatment of conscientious objectors in Wales. After having started her political career as a member of the Independent Labor Party, she became increasingly identified with the Conservative Party for which she stood as a parliamentary candidate after the war. The WSPU eventually transmuted into the Suffragette Fellowship, founded in 1926. Over the next 50 years the Fellowship devoted itself to memorialising the WSPU campaign in various ways and to commemorative activities.²⁰ For example, each year it celebrated women's suffrage day, prisoners' day and Mrs Pankhurst's birthday.

After Mrs Pankhurst's death the Suffragette Fellowship organised a fundraising drive for various memorials of her, the most famous being a statue at Westminster. Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin had committed himself to dedicating it before his election defeat, and unveiled it in March 1930. The Fellowship had ordered all the bunting, banners and canopy in the WSPU colours, thus ensuring the historic pre-eminence of the WSPU in the public memory of the suffrage campaign, now co-opted as part of the Conservative celebration of nation and sacrifice. The annual celebrations of Mrs Pankhurst's birthday now involved a procession after a church service and the laying of flowers and wreaths at the foot of the statue. Mrs Thatcher, as a young Conservative MP, spoke at the commemoration in 1960. In 1993 she was

²⁰ L.E.N. Mayhall, 'Domesticating Emmeline: representing the suffragette: 1930–1993', *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, viewed 27 March 2005, at <http://www.iupjournals.org/nwsa/nws11-2.html>

present at the wreath-laying and then dedicated a plaque in honour of the 75th anniversary of women's suffrage.

The Suffragette Fellowship could be categorised as an 'abeyance structure'—a structure that continues during a period of social movement downturn and preserves the collective memory of the struggle and the identity and meanings associated with it.²¹ This public memory was not politically innocent—the Suffragette Fellowship was ensuring it was the WSPU that was identified with the suffrage campaign, not the much larger constitutionalist movement, nor the non-violent wing of the militants. But as an abeyance structure, the Suffragette Fellowship was enshrining a particular narrative of sisterhood and of women's collective agency—the 'sisterhood is powerful' theme that was to re-emerge in the second wave. So while Conservative politicians were annexing the WSPU to a conservative narrative of British rights and freedoms, of sacrifice and reward, the Suffragette Fellowship was also preserving memories of sisterhood and political agency.

At the centre of this narrative of sisterhood were the WSPU colours. As with other important political colours, different and plausible etymologies grew up around them. Mrs Pethick-Lawrence herself contributed to the mythologising of the colours in later years and the sometimes contradictory meanings attributed to them.²² The meaning of purple was sometimes given in the press as loyalty or courage. Later the colours were also explained as an acronym for Give (green) Women (white) the Vote (violet); this explanation turned up in government publications in Australia in the late twentieth century and was confidently repeated in women's movement newsletters:

Ever wondered why feminists tend to turn out to special women's functions and marches etc wearing various shades of violet?

The women's movement as we know it today, flowed from the suffrage movement of the late 19th century and early 20th century when women considered the right to vote was paramount in the fight to achieve their many other rights. The banners and voices cried out 'Votes for Women' and 'Give Women the Vote'.

The colour violet (vote) came to represent suffrage and a renewed fight for women's rights. The combination of the colours green, white and violet represented the acronym: (Green) **Give** (white) **Women** the (Violet) **Vote**.²³

The colours come to Australia

Australian suffragist Vida Goldstein, who first stood for the Senate in 1903, was responsible for the initial introduction of the WSPU colours into Australia. She had been in correspondence with the Pankhursts and adopted what she then thought were

²¹ P. Bagguley, 'Contemporary British feminism: a social movement in abeyance?' *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2002, pp. 169–185.

²² A Brisbane activist in the latter 1970s believed that purple stood for strength, white for purity and green for truth (L. Singh, 'Taking to the Streets', Museum of Brisbane, July 2006).

²³ This confident assertion had its origin in the NSW Department for Women website.

the WSPU colours of lavender, green and purple for the Women's Political Association in 1909, in time for her Senate campaign of 1910. She described their meaning as being lavender for the fragrance of all that is good in the past, green for growth, unfolding and development, and purple for the royalty of justice and the equal sovereignty of men and women.²⁴ The following year she came to the UK to campaign for the WSPU for eight months. While in London she persuaded Margaret Fisher, wife of the Australian Prime Minister, and Emily McGowen, wife of the Premier of New South Wales, to pin on the WSPU colours when they joined the Australian and New Zealand contingent in the women's coronation procession.

After her return from the UK Goldstein continued to use the WSPU colours, for example, in her campaign for Kooyong in 1913, and corrected them to purple, green and white. These were the colours she used for the flag of the Women's Peace Army when opposing conscription during World War I—somewhat paradoxically, given the opposite stance on the issue adopted by Mrs Pankhurst. I have not found any further evidence of the use of the WSPU colours in Australia between the two waves of the women's movement, although they were used on the dust jacket of a Goldstein family memoir in 1973.²⁵

From 1975, however, which had been designated by the United Nations (UN) as International Women's Year (IWY), the WSPU colours were to become a generalised visual cue for the women's movement. The way this happened is an interesting story in itself. At first there were no distinguishing colours used by the women's liberation groups that appeared in the USA and elsewhere in the late 1960s. There was, however, a new iconography—the widespread use by women's groups of the female symbol. This stylised version of Venus's looking glass had been long used in science to denote the female. After so many centuries of scientific research demonstrating the mental and other forms of inadequacy of the female, the symbol was appropriated in much the same way as the gay movement appropriated the pink triangle used by the Nazis to denote homosexuals.

In Australia, as in the USA and the UK, women's liberation groups placed the radical symbol of the clenched fist in the mirror and often used the radical colour of red. This was also true of women's liberation groups in other countries, such as the Women's Front of Norway, active for more than 30 years from 1972. Because of its traditionally masculine as well as radical connotations, the image of the clenched fist in the mirror provides the same kind of visual jolt as the Socialist International's clenched fist holding the rose.



²⁴ J.M. Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein*. Carlton, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 1993, p. 93.

²⁵ L.M. Henderson, *The Goldstein Story*. Melbourne, Stockland Press, 1973.

In 1975 Midge Mackenzie's very popular BBC series *Shoulder to Shoulder* was shown on television and the accompanying large format Penguin book presented a wealth of photos depicting the 'stirring history of the Militant Suffragettes'. It was almost entirely about the WSPU; other militant organisations, such as the Women's Freedom League, were not mentioned. Published in IWY, a time of raised consciousness nationally and internationally, the Mackenzie book and television series provided a narrative of women's heroic struggles and achievement, which many women's movement activists were happy to appropriate.²⁶

So it was the WSPU and its colours that came to represent the collective power of women. The colours came to be part of the historical memory of the struggles for suffrage even in countries far away from the UK and where strategies quite different from those of the WSPU had been employed in the suffrage campaign. It should be remembered that the visual imagery of the successful suffrage campaigns in New Zealand and Australia tended to focus on the white ribbon of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, no longer seen as a symbol of women's empowerment in the 1970s.

Others apart from Mackenzie were also promoting the Pankhurst legacy. From 1980, Dale Spender, the best-selling feminist author of *Man Made Language* and many other books, played an important role in promoting the WSPU colours. Spender was Australian but based in London from 1975–88. She had clothes made in purple, green and white when she launched the Pankhurst Trust in the late 1970s.²⁷ Subsequently she began wearing only purple and this shorthand for the WSPU colours also became quite common as a feminist signifier.

The colours of state feminism

The full WSPU colours became particularly important in Australia and this appears to have been, in part, because of their adoption and promotion by 'femocrats' (feminist bureaucrats) in government. Femocrats became 'colour entrepreneurs' (to use a phrase applied to those building on the power of colour as an institutional resource and a source of group meaning). So the story of the colours is also partly the story of the significance of so-called 'state feminism'. The way movement activists who had moved into government brought movement repertoires with them can also be seen in the use of 'cartooning for equality'.²⁸

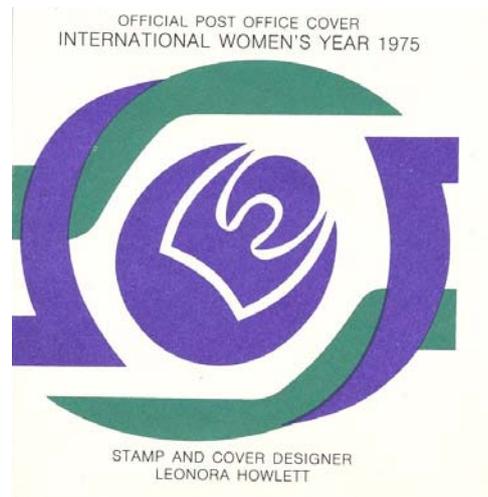
In 1973 there was much hullabaloo in the Australian media over the appointment of a women's adviser to the new Labor Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam. The successful candidate was Elizabeth Reid, who, on appointment, plunged into innovative policy work and initiated government funding of a range of women's services. She obtained a relatively large financial commitment for the celebration of IWY, which provided grants for many innovative feminist projects across the country—a national consciousness-raising exercise that had long-lasting repercussions. Part of this consciousness-raising was the revival of the WSPU colours. Reid directed they be

²⁶ Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder*. New York, Knopf, 1975.

²⁷ Dale Spender, personal communication, 18 October 2004.

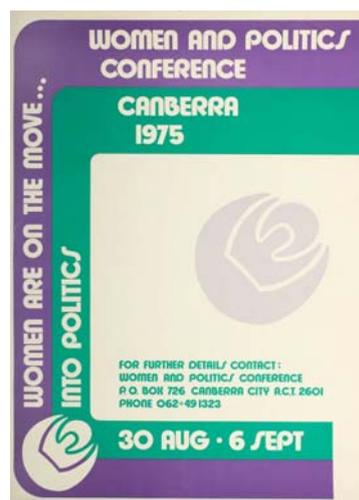
²⁸ M. Sawyer, 'Cartoons for the cause: cartooning for equality in Australia', *Ejournalist*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2001, p. 114, at <http://www.ejournalism.au.com/ejournalist/sawyer.pdf>

used for the IWY symbol designed by artist Leonora Howlett. They were first widely seen in a first day cover and stamp released by the Australian Post Office in March 1975.



Australian IWY stamp

The highlight of IWY was the Women and Politics Conference, which brought some 700 women to Canberra. For many, like those from local government, it was their first encounter with the new women's movement. But the conference was also reaching back to the first wave of the women's movement. The conference newspaper, *The New Dawn*, echoed the name of the first feminist newspaper in Australia, *The Dawn*, founded in 1889.²⁹ *The New Dawn* made a different kind of connection with the first wave of the women's movement by using a masthead with the WSPU colours. The colours were also used for the conference posters and the cover of the two volume conference proceedings, probably the first use of the WSPU colours for an official government publication.

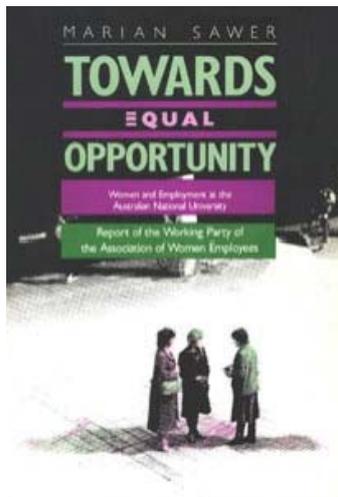


Women and Politics conference poster, 1975

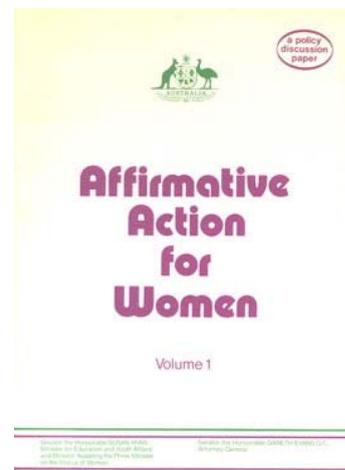
²⁹ *The Dawn* survived a boycott by the Typographical Association, angered by its use of women printers, and was published from 1889 until 1905. The name was also used for newsletters of the Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia and the Australian Federation of Women Voters.

After 1975 purple, green and white became more generally used by government bodies such as the National Women’s Advisory Council (NWAC) appointed by conservative Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser. NWAC adopted a logo that had the women’s symbol in green with a purple keyhole through which a woman was walking.³⁰ The colours were used extensively by NWAC in conducting consultations around Australia over a plan of action for the UN Decade for Women. The colours were also taking to the streets and International Women’s Day marchers in Sydney handed out purple and white gladioli to women shoppers in 1980, with a leaflet ‘Glad to be women’. The retrospective appropriation of British militant activism was being used to fortify current struggles, whether by government advisory bodies or at the more radical end of the women’s movement.

By the 1980s the prominent second wave organisation, Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL), was also using the WSPU colours—WEL had previously used a women’s symbol containing its acronym but with no particular set of colours. Now purple, green and white adorned both WEL and other women’s movement banners, posters, T-shirts and badges. It was used by the newly-elected Hawke Labor government for its many reports and policy initiatives relating to the status of women and also by women’s policy units in state governments and by women’s information services, signalling solidarity with the women’s movement. It was used by women’s research centres in universities and by equal opportunity commissioners.

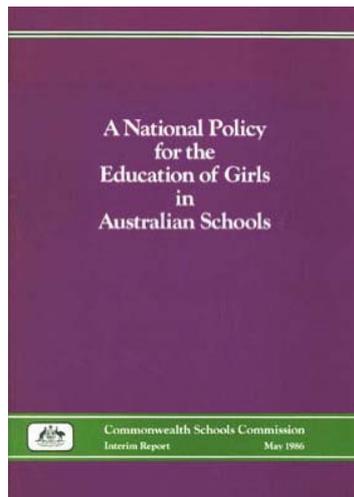


Towards Equal Opportunity, 1984



Affirmative Action for Women, 1984

³⁰ When the Hawke Labor Government was elected in 1983 its advisory body, the National Women’s Consultative Council, maintained the use of the WSPU colours for its publications and newsletter.



National Policy for the Education of Girls, 1986

When the conservative Howard Government was elected in 1996 there was, at first, a retreat from the use of women's movement colours in the federal bureaucracy. However, they were revived with the official celebration of the Australian suffrage centenary and the Office of the Status of Women produced commemorative publications in the correct pantones.³¹ The Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women announced the commissioning of a commemorative fountain in the 'suffragette shades of green, white and purple'.³² In fact, women were both voting and standing as candidates for the Commonwealth Parliament in Australia well before the invention of either the term 'suffragette' or the WSPU colours.

The emotional meaning of women's movement colours today

While the colours were not part of the Australian suffrage struggle, they have been part of the women's movement both inside and outside the state in Australia for the past 30 years and so have an emotional resonance. A small sample of women's movement activists was surveyed in 2005, with equal numbers of women who joined the women's movement in the 1970s and the 1990s.³³ Even among those who had joined the movement in the early 1970s none remembered having worn the colours before 1975 and most started wearing them later, for movement events such as International Women's Day. They gave reasons as to why they started wearing the colours such as 'to identify myself visually as being in solidarity with other women on particular women-oriented occasions' (R5); 'an expression of solidarity with sisters in their/our continuing struggle' (R10); 'a manifestation of my feminism and my commitment to the women's movement' (R7). One said: 'I wanted to be like Dale

³¹ Myra Scott, *How Australia Led the Way: Dora Meeson Coates and British Suffrage*. Canberra, Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2003.

³² K. Patterson (Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women), 'Fountain to celebrate the Centenary of Women's Suffrage', media release, Parliament House, Canberra, 23 November, 2003.

³³ Ten women were surveyed in November 2005, five being older and five younger feminists. They were asked questions about why and when they started wearing the colours, the meaning the colours had for them and their emotional response to them. (Response=R).

Spender, who only ever wore purple clothes' (R6), while another indicated that for her purple had taken over from the full set of colours (R2).

Both the older and younger feminists stressed that they saw the colours as an externalisation of feminist values and an expression of a collective identity as feminists. Seeing the colours made them 'feel happy that there are a lot of people who share my values' and gave them 'a feeling of belonging' (R3). As one said: 'I enjoy the feeling of community, of sharing a political identity with others. And of knowing that others share the struggle' (R4). One spoke of 'Warmth from kinship, seeing kindred spirits and recognising the numbers of them, especially at big events like the women's day breakfast when about 1000 women in purple would turn up ... It is reinforcing and encouraging' (R6). Or as another said: ' ... it's a welcoming, embracing thing. It reminds me of the number of women in the room who are part of what I am part of and that is very important for feeling as though the movement moves on.' (R8)

A number of both older and younger women felt the colours were an important link to the history of the women's movement. For one they meant 'wearing my politics on my sleeve, as it were, and identifying with first-wave feminists who initially proposed these as signifiers of the women's movement.' (R5) They were 'A connection with our foremothers and their long and painful struggle and remembering the suffragettes and the symbolism of Green, White and Violet.' (R10) Most saw the link to the suffragettes as important, 'although they now mean feminism.' (R1) One said: 'they give me a strong sense of the history and ongoing struggle of women to achieve equality' and provided 'a sense of solidarity with other women, a strong sense of belonging to a very large community, gratitude to the women who wore the colours originally and worked so hard at great personal cost to make gains for women's equality.' (R7) Another described 'A feeling of pride knowing how hard women have fought for equal rights in the past, in the present and will still need to do so in the future. I feel part of herstory.' (R9)

On the other hand, for one of the young activists the colours were a symbol that had lost its force for many young women and were more a matter of nostalgia (R3). One of the older feminists was more hopeful of the colours being taken up by new groups of women:

If the colour purple is used vividly and strongly, as it was for all the bags etc. of the Women in Policing Globally Conference held in Canberra in October 2002, that is a sign of being a consciously assertive feminist organisation ... I felt that the women in this organisation were at the stage of struggle that most women in Australia were in 20 years ago, and with good reason. (R10)

Conclusion

In 2005 the WSPU colours were flown by two governments in Canberra during the week of International Women's Day: the Labor government of the Australian Capital Territory flew them outside its Legislative Assembly building while the conservative federal government displayed them on street banners.



*Banners outside ACT
Legislative Assembly
building, 2005*



Commonwealth banners in Northbourne Avenue, 2005

The use of the WSPU colours by a very conservative federal government, which had just demoted the last women's unit in government to the Department of Family and Community Services, signals perhaps yet another shift in their historical meaning. They were to signify celebration of national history—not an oppositional discourse of struggle and engagement with the state.

The visual strategies of political parties and social movements tell us much about how they are trying to connect with their supporters. They are creating symbolic languages that are about emotional identification as well as about organisational needs for distinctive brands and brand loyalty, to use the language of modern marketing. These symbolic languages may long outlive their organisational origins, as we have seen in the case of the WSPU colours. They may become part of the contestation over public memory, with radicals appropriating symbols associated with past oppression and with conservatives appropriating once radical symbols.

Symbols may be adapted to appeal to changed constituencies, as we have seen with the red flag transmuting into the socialist rose, but with the red signalling continuity with the emotional legacy of past struggles. Political colours are part of the language of collective action and we need to appreciate the emotional significance of colours in providing a sense of political community and shared values.



Question — Firstly, I don't understand why the rose is a symbol. Secondly, have you heard that the dominant form of the Australian flag until Prime Minister Menzies was the red version of what we've got now? I have heard that he gazetted the blue version because of his dislike of the symbolism of red.

Marian Sawyer — The rose was meant to symbolise that workers were not just interested in some material comfort, in the struggle for bread, but also in the struggle for some spiritual beauty in their lives. The rose is the symbol of that; that in things like the eight hour day you must have time for recreation, not just beer and skittles, but also engaging in the cultural life of the community. On the blue and red ensigns, I'm sure there are people here who know much more about this than I do. There is a wonderful book by Elizabeth Kwan on the Australian flag which looks at how both the red and the blue ensign were used until the adoption of the blue ensign in 1953. It took a long time for the Australian flag to become uncontested.

Question — I'm wondering what symbols and colours we may see in the future?

Marian Sawyer — This is an enormous challenge. What will the symbols of the future be which will give us new hope beyond the current situation? I don't know what they are going to be. I just hope they appear—but in the meantime I think we are going to have a lot of red, white and blue which is probably why I titled my talk that way. I do hear very often at home, my husband, who is an unassimilated Englishman, singing in the shower: *There'll always be an England*:

Red, white and blue,
What does it mean to you?
Surely you're proud,
Shout it aloud,
Britons awake!
The Empire too,
We can depend on you.

So I think there is going to be a lot more emotional mobilisation around those colours in the next few years.

Question — Our national colours are green and gold and yet our major political parties seem reluctant to identify with them in any emblematic way. Do you think there is subterranean thinking that's been going on for a long time in this country that, indeed, the use of green and gold may be a differentiator as we move forward, perhaps, to a republic?

Marian Sawyer — The Australian Democrats have used the green and gold of the national colours. The Australian Greens also use green. I don't know why we are afraid to make more of the green and gold, I think that would be a very good idea. There are efforts to promote Wattle Day and so on and maybe that's one of the things that will unfold in the future.