

Page 3. Analysing the anthems

Both 'God save the Queen' and 'God defend New Zealand' have been criticised as poor choices for New Zealand's national anthem. Some people have even questioned the need for a national anthem.

Criticism of 'God save the Queen'

Before 'God defend New Zealand' became an official anthem, the main criticism of 'God save the Queen' was that it contained no mention of New Zealand and therefore did not reflect local feelings of patriotism. In 1938 historian James Cowan, an outspoken critic, asserted that "'God save the King' is the world's worst national anthem ... it has become trite and a burden to the ear."¹

Once, the anthem was played in picture theatres before films were screened, and the audience stood up respectfully. During the 1960s some people refused to stand, to the outrage of traditionalists.

The triple star debate

One of the most baffling lines in 'God defend New Zealand' is 'guard Pacific's triple star'. There have been various attempts to suggest what 'triple star' means. The most convincing explanation is that it refers to New Zealand's three main islands – the North Island, South Island and Stewart Island.

Hear our voices

Possibly because 'God defend New Zealand' is a relatively recent official anthem, many people do not know the words – either in English or Māori. One of the most notable occasions on which the national anthem is sung is prior to rugby test matches. People have observed that often the All Blacks cannot or will not sing along with 'God defend New Zealand' – in some cases apparently because they do not know the words.

Criticism of 'God defend New Zealand'

Critics of 'God defend New Zealand', on the other hand, claimed among other things that the words were sentimental, hackneyed, jingoistic, embarrassing and ambiguous. Some argued that in the 21st century its lyrics were outdated. The underlying structure of the piece is a prayer to God, with the refrain 'God defend New Zealand'. This assumes religious faith, although many New Zealanders are not religious. Many of the words and concepts are old-fashioned or obscure – 'thy', 'thee', 'ramparts', 'assail', and 'nation's van'.

In addition, the tune has been described as a boring dirge which is difficult for most people to sing comfortably.

Alternative anthems

Despite criticisms and alternative suggestions, no widely acceptable replacement for 'God defend New Zealand' has been found. One argument in the song's favour is that it now has significant historical associations. Another is that the tune is instantly recognised by nearly all New Zealanders.

Changing the words

The tunes of national anthems worldwide generally stay the same, but sometimes the words have been changed to reflect changing social attitudes. In theory, New Zealand could officially alter, drop or replace verses of 'God defend New Zealand'. Some New Zealanders have suggested alternative words for the national anthem. However, reaching agreement on any change would probably be difficult.

Revival of the anthem

In 1999, Ngāti Kahungunu singer Hinewehi Mohi was asked to perform the anthem before the All Blacks played England in the Rugby World Cup. Controversially, she sang the first verse in Māori only. Following intense public debate, support grew for singing the first verse of the anthem in both Māori and English. This bicultural approach has given the anthem a boost in popularity by emphasising its uniqueness to New Zealand.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted in Ashley Heenan, *God defend New Zealand: a history of the national anthem*. Christchurch: School of Music, University of Canterbury, 2004, pp. 112–113.

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