Flower Power
By Richard Mawrey

The soft energy of plants can be turned into a potent symbol of political authority.

Addressing the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom the other day, I was struck by the magnificence of the surroundings. The court sits in a somewhat undistinguished building of 1913 glowing at the Houses of Parliament across Parliament Square, and I had remembered it as a lacklustre criminal court and, before that, as the headquarters of Middlesex County Council. When the Supreme Court was created in 2009 to replace the House of Lords as the UK’s highest court, the building was refitted, at vast expense, to be its new home.

What particularly impressed me (other than the now world-famous insect brooches worn by Lady Hale, the Court’s President) was the Court’s logo. It appears, hugely, engraved on the wall over the judge’s bench and is also woven into the magnificent double-room-height curtains and into the carpet.

The logo itself is a novelty. Traditionally courts in the UK carry on their business under the Royal Coat of Arms, but when the Supreme Court was created, it was felt that it should have its own symbol. How to devise it?

Because Scotland (as well as having an entirely different legal system from England) still boasts a court of heraldry, it should have its own symbol. How to devise it?

Northern Ireland’s emblem is, quite frankly, a fudge. The ancient Irish symbol is the shamrock (Treflium doubrume), but that was firmly appropriated by the Republic of Ireland when it became independent in 1922. The best that could be devised is the flower of the linen plant (flax – Linum usitatissimum) which refers to the fact that Belfast was for a long time the centre of the linen industry, and so flax is the fourth symbol on the Supreme Court logo.

Working this out led me to consider how plants had been chosen as other countries’ symbols – and almost every nation has one. Indeed, in the USA and Australia, every individual state has its flower. Why do countries find it necessary, even important, to adopt some vegetable emblem which duly appears on the national flag? In some cases, the reason is obvious.

When Lebanon became an independent country in 1943, the choice of a national symbol was uncontroversial. The cedar of Lebanon (Cedrus libani) is the centrepiece of the Lebanese flag.

The Canadian Maple Leaf represents not only a statement of national identity but a fusion of the British and French strains of Canadian history. It started life as an emblem of the French settlers in Quebec in the 18th century and by the mid-19th century had been incorporated into the coats-of-arms of both Quebec and Ontario. It began to appear on coins and soldiers’ badges, and in patriotic songs.

Eventually the Canadian Parliament adopted it as the national flag in 1965 and it remains an instantly recognisable symbol of Canada today. The maple selected is, deliberately, of no individual species but a generic, all-purpose, maple leaf.

Japan goes a different route. The chrysanthemum is not only the national flower but the name of the imperial throne and the Chrysanthemum Throne has, in its turn become the metaphor for the Japanese monarchy itself.

Though most national symbols are fairly obvious, even banal, others have a history which is more nuanced. Insofar as France has a national flower it is the lily, the fleur-de-lys. This is, patently, a stylised version of a flower and it is disputed whether the original flower was really a lily at all or was a species of iris, possibly Iris pseudacorus. But the name lily is now firmly established.

Its use in France is very ancient: in the middle ages, there was a legend that a lily had been delivered by an angel to Clovis (c. 446-511), the first King of France (at that time King of the Franks) who united the Frankish peoples and converted both himself and his subjects to Christianity (hence the angel). The fleur-de-lys, with its triple flower, has been variously interpreted as representing either the Holy Trinity or the three Estates of the Realm: the clergy, nobility and commons.

The fleur-de-lys, however, was essentially an attribute of French royalty. It formed part of the royal coats of arms and the flag of the King’s armies. When England’s Edward III mounted a claim to the French throne at the beginning of what became the Hundred Years War, he incorporated the fleur-de-lys into the English royal arms where it remained until 1802 when, under the Treaty of Amiens, the United Kingdom agreed to drop the monarch’s claim to the French throne on the somewhat specious pretext that, as the French had abolished their monarchy, George III couldn’t very well be King of France.
Since the French Revolution, the association of the fleur-de-lis with monarchy has not sat well with the French and as a national emblem it is now rather downplayed. French teams take the field with the symbol of the French fighting cockerel. Being a devotee of the fleur-de-lys (it is the symbol of both my house at school and my Oxford college, Magdalen), I find this a pity. Sometimes, as with the UK’s ‘nations’ they are simply traditional. By contrast, if the flower or tree is going to be officially adopted or to appear on a flag, particularly a national flag, some legislative or executive act is required. 

Unless you were American, you would probably not guess that the rose is the national flower of the USA. Although roses are indigenous to North America – indeed the early settlers to Virginia sent back specimens of what became known as Rosa virginiana to England – one might have expected something a little more typically American: a Californian redwood perhaps or a virginiana what became known as the rose of America – indeed the early settlers to North America planted (in stone). The last half century has seen a plethora of flowers are by no means solely associated with national harmony. The last half century has seen a plethora of revolutions bearing floral names, usually but not inevitably the national flower of the country concerned. Even Reagan’s rose is not immune. The former Soviet republic of Georgia, which obtained its independence after the fall of communism in the late 1980s, had retained its Soviet-style political system under President (and former Soviet foreign minister) Eduard Shevardnadze. The Rose Revolution (Vardebis revolts’ in Georgian) was a peaceful movement which succeeded in ousting Shevardnadze and establishing a more democratic and pro-western state. The rose is not Georgia’s national flower but the revolution takes its name from the roses brandished by the protesters who stormed the Parliament in Tbilisi in November 2003. 

Some revolutions concentrate on the edible. In 2009 Moldavia’s Grape Revolution (Moldova is a wine-producing country), again against communist-style government, was a dismal flop, but Kyrgyzstan’s Melon Revolution of 2010 managed to oust another dictatorial president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, though the reason for the melons is obscure. The charmingly named Coconut Revolution of 1998 saw the island of Bougainville obtain a measure of autonomy from the government of Papua New Guinea. 

Revolutions named for national flowers include Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution of 2011, which is important as the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring. The jasmine is Tunisia’s emblem, despite the fact that it is not native to Tunisia but was introduced by Andalusians who settled there in the 14th century following the expulsion of Muslims from Spain in the 1490s. Unlike much of the rest of the Arab Spring, the Jasmine Revolution not only ousted President Ben Ali but managed to install a measure of liberal democracy, albeit punctuated by appalling acts of Islamic terrorism. 

The national flower of Egypt since Pharaonic times has been the lotus (Nelumbo nucifera), but the Lotus Revolution of 2011, also part of the Arab Spring, did Egypt no favours: the overthrow of army rule under President Hosni Mubarak led to rule by the Islamic fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood which, in turn, led back to army rule under President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi. 

The only floral rebellion that can definitively be said to have ended happily is the Carnation Revolution, the oldest on the list. In April 1974, a military coup in Lisbon overthrew the dictatorship that had controlled Portugal since the 1920s: the military were soon joined by the civilian population and, within a remarkably short time, Portugal had established a democracy and liberated its colonial empire and, within 12 years, it was admitted into the European Union. As with Georgia’s roses, carnations were not the national flower (in Portugal it is lavendula (left) but they were the symbol of the demonstrators and of the soldiers who put carnations in their rifle barrels. 

National flowers and trees can be a vital part of a nation’s cultural heritage, part of folk memory and visual association, but they can also be chosen or imposed by new nations seeking a national identity or by revolutionaries needing a symbol round which to unite. Surely, however, the symbols chosen in recent times will, eventually become as embedded in the national consciousness as the English rose or the Welsh leek.