

## Book Reviews

### **Conversations with the Constitution: Not Just a Piece of paper.**

**Greg Craven**

**UNSW Press, 2004, pp 256, \$34.95**

I started to read this book in the airport. I read it in flight. I was still reading it on the tarmac in Melbourne once everyone else had left the plane. Craven puts flesh on to the constitutional skeleton, and creates a real page-turner in the process. A free copy of Craven's book should be placed in the hands of every law student before they are introduced to the Constitution itself. By providing a colourful overview of Australian's constitutional arrangements, *Conversations with the Constitution* allows students to approach Constitutional Law with enthusiasm, rather than foreboding. As the subtitle suggests, the book goes beyond the words of the *Constitution Act*. Craven argues convincingly for the Constitution's democratic pedigree, before launching into insightful exposes of Australian government. While most texts on the Australian Constitution deal with the DNA of the Commonwealth Government, Craven wrestles with the whole federal beast. His insightful chapters on Parliament, the Executive and the Judiciary, provide more social and behavioural commentary than anatomical insight. Craven also deals with many contemporary issues—'activist' v 'black-letter' judges, the pros and cons of a bill of rights and the possibility of an Australian republic. Although it is possible to detect Craven's own views on each subject, he nevertheless presents convincing arguments for both sides of any debate. It is this intellectual rigour which prevents the book from becoming lost in its often florrid prose. For example, opening the book randomly finds 'parliaments that at times resemble a rough pub on a day the favourite ran like a dog.' These frequent turns of phrase make the book engaging and humorous, but can become tiring. This is the kind of book that should be read once, then passed on to a friend. It is an episode of 'The Simpsons' rather than 'The Lord of the Rings'.

*Conversations with the Constitution* is not trying to match the density of Blackshield and Williams' text, or the shelf-life of Quick and Garran. While more serious works will always form the basis of lifelong devotion to Australian Constitutional law, this book provides the necessary love-at-first-sight spark. Greg Craven's *Conversations with the Constitution* itself is not just a paperback, but very worthy kindling for a passionate interest in Australian public law.