



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/LPMJ3817>

‘Amanda Dunn (Editor), How Australian Democracy Works: And why we need it more than ever’

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To cite this book review: Jatinder Mann, ‘Amanda Dunn (Editor), How Australian Democracy Works: And why we need it more than ever’, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 5 (September 2025): 157-158, <https://doi.org/10.52230/UBHW2300>

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Amanda Dunn (Editor), *How Australian Democracy Works: And why we need it more than ever* (Thames and Hudson Australia, 2025), 336pp. Paperback. A\$34.99. ISBN: 978-1-7607-6364-0.

This is a fascinating and very topical and significant book. In thirty (including the introduction) nearly entirely succinct chapters this edited collection by Amanda Dunn explores the origins of Australian democracy, how it functions, and challenges it faces. The contributors to the collection have experience of writing opinion pieces for *The Conversation*, of which Dunn is the editor of in Australia. Specifically, the book is structured around several themes: 'How Parliament Works', 'The Constitution', 'How Government Works', 'Shaping Australian Life', 'Democracy and Accountability', 'Key Challenges Facing our Democracy', and 'The Politics of the Present'. Due to the interests of space, I will focus on one chapter from each of the above first six substantive sections.

James Walter's, 'The best of both worlds? Australia's unique democracy' explores the origins of Australian democracy, namely its adoption of a Westminster style system in its lower house: the House of Representatives, but an adaptation of federalism (influenced by the United States of America – USA) in its upper: the Senate. The former operating based on population and the latter affording equal representation to all the states and territories regardless of their respective populations. This unique system, especially amongst former British settler societies according to Walter has worked remarkably well since its inception and led to many groundbreaking firsts in Australia compared to other parts of the British Empire at the time, including the introduction of the popular vote for men and the right of women to vote in elections.

'Law of the land: Australia's Constitution' by Paul Kildea focuses on the Australian constitution, which unlike its British, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand counterparts is a written one, like the USA. However, it does not hold the same place in the Australian public imagination as the latter does for the American people. Part of the explanation for this Kildea maintains is that the Australian constitution is quite a dry document, outlining the practical ways in which Australian democracy should function. However, just because it is not the most riveting read does not mean it is not important, and Kildea bemoans the lack of knowledge most Australians have about their own constitution. A significant improvement in civic education is one important way in which Kildea suggests that this ignorance could be tackled.

Anne Tiernan's 'Federal, state, local: how the three tiers of government work' outlines the way in which governments (and the plural should be emphasised here) work in Australia. Tiernan rightly points out that the Australian constitution delineates the separate powers of the federal and state governments in the Australian federation. However, this has not remained static since then. The Commonwealth government has secured more powers for itself, namely the right to raise taxes from Australians, which took a main source of income away from states who contrarily have seen them being responsible for high expenditure areas such as health. This has resulted in the Commonwealth government becoming much more powerful vis-à-vis the states. Tiernan also mentions the role of local governments (an often-neglected aspect of governance in Australia) and their continuing battle to secure direct funding from the Commonwealth government rather than rely on often recalcitrant state governments.

'Taking the lead: the role of the prime minister in Australia' by Michelle Grattan surveys four major Australian prime ministers: Robert Menzies, Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, and John Howard. Grattan, Australia's leading expert on Australian prime ministers, adroitly highlights the various ways in which these four key figures changed Australian democracy during their respective premierships, be it economically, socially, culturally, or politically. For better or worse each of them had long-lasting consequences for Australian democracy. Through this Grattan highlights the impact of the personality of the four prime ministers on their respective parties and the country more broadly. And she makes the wider point that although Australia is a Westminster style democracy with collective cabinet responsibility, very often government policies are viewed by many Australians as the personal policies of the respective prime minister in power at the time. This of course can be both positive (popular policies) or negative (controversial policies).

Mark Kenny's 'Enemies with benefits? Governing, politicking and the parliamentary press gallery' explores the quite symbiotic relationship between the parliamentary press gallery and Australian politicians. Despite the former trying to hold the latter to account, the reality is that often they must work together to produce news stories. The most infamous example of this is Australian politicians 'dropping' stories with certain (often more friendly) journalists of the press gallery with often embargoes attached, i.e. they cannot be published until after midnight. Kenny, with his own former journalistic background, also charts the major changes that have taken place, especially in print media, regarding the press gallery, i.e. declining numbers of dedicated journalists and a reduction in access to politicians. Kenny also emphasises the new '24-hour news cycles' as changing the whole dynamic of reporting on Australians politicians, as the latter and the former for that matter are constantly 'on the go'.

'Ongoing business: First Nations people's rights in Australian democracy' by Heidi Norman was probably my favourite chapter in the book. Norman highlights the continuing challenges that First Nations in Australia face to take up their duly deserved position in Australian democracy. The defeat of the *Voice* referendum in 2023 was only just the most recent example of even limited expression of First Nations' voices in Australia democracy being rejected by the majority non-Indigenous population. Instead for most of Australian history First Nations have been subjected to at the best paternalistic approaches, and at the worst state sanctioned cultural and, in some cases, even physical genocide. But Norman does point out that state governments, especially in Victoria and South Australia have been making much more significant headway compared to their federal counterparts in providing mechanisms through which First Nations can actively participate in Australian democracy. The establishment of a First Nations' Assembly in Victoria is a prominent example of this.

I really enjoyed reading this edited book. It brings together an impressive collection of authors who have obviously honed their skills at writing succinct but incisive pieces for *The Conversation*. The book covers considerable ground and is a very timely source of information for Australians who will be voting in the upcoming federal election (at the time of writing) as well as those Australians who want to learn more about their democracy, warts and all. So, it should have pride of place on Australians' bookshelves in my opinion. I thoroughly recommend this book to readers, although it will appeal more to general readers, rather than specialist.

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