

Welcome and introduction
by the Head of St Mark's College, Professor Don Markwell,
to the 2021 J C Bannon Oration
to be given by Professor John Williams,
Tuesday 31 August 2021

Angela Bannon, Victoria Bannon, Professor John Williams and Dr Wendy Riemens, Chair of the St Mark's College Board Linda Matthews, other distinguished guests in our small in-person audience here at Downer House and our much larger online audience, including – online – senior figures in the College, legal, academic, political, and other communities; ladies and gentlemen –

Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which St Mark's College is situated, the Kurna people, and pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs, and relationship with the land, and we acknowledge that these are of continuing importance to the Kurna people living today.

What a privilege it is for me as Head of St Mark's College, Adelaide, to welcome you to the 2021 J C Bannon Oration, to be given by Professor John Williams on the topic "South Australia and the Constitution: A mere provincial contribution?" – a title that ends with a question mark, and no doubt by the end of Professor Williams's Oration we will know if the question mark really applies.

The J C Bannon Oration is one of the most significant events in the annual calendar of St Mark's College. It is given – this year, online given COVID uncertainties – in memory of Dr the Hon John Bannon AO, the seventh Master of the College, from 2000 to 2007, and before that, Premier of South Australia from 1982 to 1992 – the second member of this College, after Don Dunstan, to be Premier of this State, and the second-longest serving Premier of South Australia.

John Bannon is remembered here at St Mark's with deep affection, respect, and gratitude – not least for his intellect, integrity, warmth, and grace. He is remembered for his lifetime of service to the wider community – service is at the heart of the values of this College – and for his commitment to the benefits for students of collegiate education.

In November 1961, when the schoolboy John Bannon was applying for a place as a resident undergraduate at St Mark's College, his schoolmaster referee wrote to the Master of St Mark's a glowingly admiring reference for John. Referring to John's "imagination, initiative and enterprise", "drive", independent thinking, and "nerves ... of iron", the referee wrote: "He hopes to read Law and then enter politics, and my guess is that he has a pretty good chance of accomplishing this." Indeed, he did.

The referee went on to say of John: “It would do him a world of good to come to St. Mark’s and I hope greatly you can take him; I’m sure you wouldn’t regret it, as he would certainly be a lively and active member of your community.” As indeed he was.

Thirty-eight years later, in 1999, after a most distinguished and wide-ranging career of public service, John wrote to the Bursar of St Mark’s College to apply for the position of Head of the College. John wrote: “The College is an important and lively contributor to South Australia’s academic life and my contact with it both as an undergraduate and more recently makes me very keen to contribute to its development in the twentyfirst century.” As, again, indeed he did.

John’s reference in 1999 to his then-recent involvement with the College no doubt referred, at least in part, to the fact that – being a historian of the Australian constitution and of federation, including South Australia’s role in it – John Bannon was the principal organiser of the Federal Convention Centenary History Conference held in April 1997 at St Mark’s College. That conference marked precisely the centenary of the federal convention that met in Adelaide in March and April 1897 as part of the process leading to the federation in 1901 of the Australian colonies as the Commonwealth of Australia.

The 1897 Adelaide drafting committee for the Constitution of the new Commonwealth comprised Sir John Downer (twice Premier of South Australia), Sir Edmund Barton (who was to become the first Prime Minister of Australia), and Sir Richard O’Connor (who was to become one of the first Justices of the High Court of Australia). Sir John Downer lived in the house that in 1924 became the original building for St Mark’s College, and this Oration is being delivered in the ballroom of the Downer House.

During the 1897 federal convention, Sir Edmund Barton was staying in this house with the Downer family, and, while there is some uncertainty about the extent to which the drafting committee of Downer, Barton, and O’Connor did their drafting work here, there can be no doubt, I think, that some of the drafters’ discussions took place in this building.

Precisely a century later, in 1997, John Bannon arranged for Sir John Downer’s grandson, Alexander Downer, then Foreign Minister of Australia, to unveil a photograph of the drafting committee of 1897, and that photograph of Downer, Barton, and O’Connor hangs downstairs in the foyer of this Downer House.

That photograph also appears prominently in the biography of Sir John Downer – *Supreme Federalist: The Political Life of Sir John Downer* – which John Bannon wrote, and which was published in 2009. As Master of St Mark’s College, John Bannon had, of course, for eight years had his office (as I do today) in this, the former home of Sir John Downer.

In the preface to *Supreme Federalist*, John Bannon particularly thanked – and I quote – “Professor John Williams of Adelaide University, always a generous provider of references and inspiration”. Unquote.

John Williams is widely known as a most distinguished constitutional scholar. No one is better equipped than John Williams to answer the question posed in the title of this Oration.

His 1288-page volume, *The Australian Constitution: A Documentary History*, was published in 2005, and is an utterly central reference point for any research on the process by which

the Australian Constitution came into being. The acknowledgements in that grand volume include thanks to John Bannon, amongst others, for reading and commenting on parts of it with – quote – “good humour and keen eyes”.

Amongst many other distinctions, John Williams is also the Dame Roma Mitchell Professor of Law, Executive Dean of the Faculty of The Professions, and Acting Provost of the University of Adelaide, with which University this College has been affiliated since 1924.

In honouring the memory of John Bannon, there could be no more fitting topic than “South Australia and the Constitution”, there could be no more fitting Bannon Orator than his friend and fellow constitutional scholar John Williams, and there could be no more fitting place from which to give this Oration than Downer House.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Professor John Williams.