

Welcome and Introduction
by the Head of St Mark's College, Professor Don Markwell AM,
to the 2023 J C Bannon Oration
to be given by Professor Frank Bongiorno AM,
Monday 20 November 2023

Angela and Victoria Bannon, Board Chair Linda Matthews, Professor Frank Bongiorno, so many distinguished guests, friends all –

As Head of St Mark's College, it gives me very great pleasure to welcome you to the 2023 J C Bannon Oration, whether you are here in Downer House or viewing online.

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 and present.

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.

The 2023 Bannon Oration is to be given by Professor Frank Bongiorno AM on the topic "How robust is Australian democracy? Reflections on times of turbulence and transformation".

As you probably know, the Bannon Oration is given annually at St Mark's College in memory of Dr John Bannon AO. This is the fourth J C Bannon Oration, and it is a pleasure to welcome back Professor John Williams AM whose Bannon Oration two years ago was a splendid discussion of *South Australia and the Constitution*, a topic close to John Bannon's heart. Copies of that published Oration are available here later this evening.

John Bannon was the second former student of this College, after Don Dunstan, to become Premier of South Australia, and he became the second-longest serving Premier of South Australia, from 1982 to 1992 – second only to Sir Thomas Playford. It is a pleasure to welcome another former Premier of South Australia, the Hon Steven Marshall MP, to this Oration today.

Some years after leaving Parliament, John Bannon became the first alumnus of this College to serve as Master or Head of this College, which he did with distinction from 2000 to 2007, so wonderfully supported by Angela.

John Bannon was the second head of this College to have served or to serve in Parliament. The founding Master, Sir Archibald Grenfell Price, served for a time in federal Parliament; and he was not the only founder of this College to do so.

I mention this simply to make the point that members of this College have, since its foundation nearly 100 years ago, taken an active interest and indeed leadership roles in Australia's democratic institutions. Four members of this College currently serve in the State Parliament, including the Speaker and the Attorney-General.

It is interesting that when John Bannon was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2007, the citation referred not only to his “service to politics and to the South Australian Parliament” and service “to the community through sporting, cultural and welfare organisations”, but also to service “to history, particularly through researching and publishing in the subject area of Australian Federation”.

Over many years, John Bannon wrote and spoke extensively on aspects of the making of the Australian Constitution and our federation, and its subsequent operation, including in his doctoral research on Charles Cameron Kingston and his study of the political life of Sir John Downer. I suspect that our Bannon Orator may have more to say about this.

The room in which this Oration is being given is the old Ballroom of Downer House – the former Downer family home in which the 1897 drafting committee of the Australasian Federal Convention did some of their work in drafting what became the Australian Constitution. A 19th century table on which it is believed that some of that work took place is in the room behind you.

The democratic ethos of that Constitution was in a sense summed up by Sir John Downer in a speech in 1897 quoted in John Bannon’s study of him. Interestingly, Sir John Downer was advocating direct election of a strong Senate, but opposing referendums. He said:

“All I say is: you trust the people, give them the freest institutions, let their voices be heard, and you will be safe.”

The question of just how safe or robust Australia’s democracy is today is, of course, the subject of this evening’s Oration, given at a time when democracy is in retreat or under threat in many countries around the world.

To deliver this Oration, we are delighted to welcome Professor Frank Bongiorno, who has been Professor of History at the Australian National University since 2017.

Frank is currently serving also as President of the Australian Historical Association and of the Council of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

A graduate first of the University of Melbourne and then of the Australian National University, his doctoral thesis was on “Labour and Politics in Victoria, 1885-1914”, which laid the basis for his first book.

His subsequent books have included *A Little History of the Australian Labor Party*, *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History*, *The Eighties: The Decade that Transformed Australia*, and *Dreamers and Schemers: A Political History of Australia*. Just this year he has updated Mungo MacCallum’s study of Australian Prime Ministers – *The Good, the Bad and the Unlikely: Australia’s Prime Ministers: From Barton to Albanese*.

Frank has written also on a range of other topics in Australian history and politics – Australia’s High Commissioners to London, key elections, the Anzac tradition, Australia Day, Australia before Whitlam, many significant figures in Labor and in non-Labor politics and in

the evolution of Australian political thought since the late 19th century, Australian historiography, and more.

A Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities and the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, in 2019 Frank was made a Member of the Order of Australia for – I quote – “significant service to tertiary education in the field of history”. In responding to that award, he said “I ...think that history matters in democracies, so I ... see the award – as well as the awards received by other historians - as a recognition of its importance”.

There is no doubt that John Bannon also saw history as mattering in a democracy. To deliver the 2023 J C Bannon Oration it is a great pleasure to call on Professor Frank Bongiorno.