

# John Bannon likes to talk about history – but has been loath to discuss his own. Now, for the first time, the former premier looks back.

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**A**FTER 15 YEARS of silence, John Bannon looks a little wary. Not nervous exactly, but braced for unpleasantness as he prepares to manage the inevitable question of his political legacy. We are here to talk about his new book, a biography of one of the founders of Federation who happens to be the grandfather of former Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer. Bannon, a Federation history expert, has not subjected himself to an interview since leaving politics in December 1993, two years after the near failure of the State Bank brought South Australia to the brink of bankruptcy. The man who was premier at the time is not here to talk about the past but accepts that at some point the elephant in the room will have to be acknowledged.

We are sitting in the old-fashioned comfort of St Mark's College's upstairs senior common room, a clubby chamber with leather chairs and college memorabilia lining the walls. Bannon was master of St Mark's, in North Adelaide, for eight years and feels at home inside the protective embrace of academia.

At 65, Bannon is older and greyer but retains something of the young, blond marathon runner whose physical fitness was always the best in the room. He is dressed in college wear; grey trousers and a navy blazer, and takes me first on a quick tour of the landmark Pennington Terrace residence, a study in faded grandeur that was bought by the University of Adelaide almost a century ago. He is businesslike but with an air of trepidation and his manner indicates a man who would rather be elsewhere. Bannon's dilemma is wanting to talk about one thing, his book, but knowing that to do so he will also be asked about the bleak episode that saddled SA with a \$3 billion debt and destroyed the Labor Party's standing to the point where any association with the Bannon Government was a political liability.

Bannon knew back in 1991 that he was in too deep to dig his way out. His policy of prudent budgetary management offset by expansionary, large-scale projects collapsed like a house of cards when the folly of lending decisions made by the State Bank's board and managing director Tim Marcus Clark was



Just over a year later he left politics forever. It was an ignominious close to what had been a brilliant career and it was not something Bannon has wanted to revisit. The various inquiries and court processes sheeted home the liability and Bannon felt nothing would be gained by looking back. Personal dignity demanded there will be no memoir and his legacy will remain a matter for others. He is hyper-sensitive to sounding like a man trying to defend the indefensible, or, even worse, coming across as an object of pity. Better to say nothing. "I wasn't interested in writing memoirs or tedious explanations or defences of my record," he says. "I don't think that's the place of someone who has been in public life. Many see it as their duty but the end result is unfortunately often self-serving, defensive and not terribly enlightening. Better for others to comment and probe."

Ironically, it took a conservative politician from one of Adelaide's establishment families to flush Bannon out. His book, to be published by Wakefield Press, is about the history of the founding of the Australian constitution and reflects Bannon's status as a serious Federation historian. It will be launched at St Mark's College by Alexander Downer on March 5.

*Supreme Federalist*, which Bannon asks that I read before speaking to him, is a very readable account of the political life of a significant South Australian who helped shepherd the idea of a federal Australia through two decades of political and legal process. Sir John Downer, QC, the founder of a political dynasty in the age before political parties, was at various times a member of the Legislative Assembly, premier, and senator, as well as a passionate federalist who believed the separate colonies should come together and surrender certain powers – control of the Murray-Darling River system being one – but retain others. Bannon argues that of all of the constitutional founding fathers, including Edmund Barton and Charles Kingston, Downer fought for federalism most consistently over almost two decades. "I am not saying he is the most important, or the only, I am saying that in terms of his position and his promotion of it, he has a consistency," Bannon says.

Bannon's pursuit of an academic career has put a lot of distance between him and his political past. He gained a PhD in South Australian political history at

**Main picture:** John Bannon in front of his portrait at St Mark's College. The picture, by Robert Hannaford, was commissioned by the college when Bannon retired as Master and includes a portrait of Bannon as a child, painted by his father, Charles.

**Above:** with his wife Angela on his way to be sworn in as Premier in November 1982.