



I THINK THAT JOHN HAS CARRIED AN UNREASONABLE PERSONAL BURDEN FOR WHAT HAPPENED

Flinders University which immersed him in SA's transition from a colony to a state, in particular the government of Charles Kingston and other founders of the constitution, including Sir John. In a purely serendipitous coincidence, in 1999 Bannon was appointed master of St Mark's College, which was the very house in which Sir John and his family once lived. Bannon worked in Sir John's old study writing the book, as close to history as he could get. He leaves next month for a three-month sabbatical term at Edinburgh University, studying the devolution of the Scottish Parliament as a form of federation in reverse.

The emergence of Dr John Bannon, academic, historian and President of the History Council of Australia, flowed naturally from Bannon's move away from the public life. This withdrawal was not quite an act of penance but something he felt was required of him. He did not feel it was right or proper to hold positions on government boards or agencies, or to comment on public affairs. No state appointments were ever offered, he says, but nor would he have accepted any. "That was appropriate," he says. "Because immediately you try and either pontificate on events of the day, or tell your successors what should be done, quite rightly people say – what right have you to do that? It's just not appropriate and you end up becoming self-serving and defensive and you certainly don't want to be in that position."

The tracing of lines of blame and examination of what should or should not have been done is not up for discussion today, nor will it ever be. He will not analyse his own political legacy and feels genuinely unable to. Bannon says only that he gave his all and accepts that it fell short. "I just know I did the best I could as honestly and as competently as I could," he says. "It wasn't good enough and others can judge how and why that occurred."

Chris Sumner, who was attorney-general in

Bannon's Cabinet and a friend of Bannon's since their days at the University of Adelaide, says Bannon was obviously deeply affected by what happened. "I think that was a sensible decision," Sumner says of Bannon's public withdrawal. "There wasn't great scope for looking back on the Bannon Government and what it did because of the State Bank."

Bannon's integrity was never at issue but his reputation as an economic manager was blasted into oblivion in a few terrible months. The problem was not directly of his making but he accepts that he believed what others wanted him to hear. "Obviously, when I take responsibility I am not saying I did nothing," he says. "It is for others to say who should have done what but there is no question I should have done some things."

It was painful, of course, he says, because it came towards the natural end of an otherwise successful political career that began 30 years earlier when Bannon, a young law student fresh out of St Peter's College where his father, Charles Bannon, taught art, spent a year as full-time president of the Australian Union of Students. He discovered Labor politics and in November, 1982, the Bannon decade began with a series of major projects that included the establishment of the Olympic Dam copper and uranium mine, the submarine project, the defence industry, conversion of part of the Adelaide Railway Station into the Convention Centre, Hyatt and Adelaide Casino complex, and the staging of the Formula One Grand Prix. Bannon, who is still the longest-serving SA premier after Tom Playford, saw this careful record demolished and only those closest to him know how deeply those wounds ran.

"Obviously all of those things were almost obliterated by the scale of what happened," he says. "It came at the end, and ironically, even as late as 1990 when there were other financial failures occurring both here and internationally, we were feeling pretty good."

Sumner, who says Bannon was let down during a recession by regulators, including the Reserve Bank, the State Bank Board and State Government officials, believes a time will come when Bannon's legacy as head of a social democratic government will be reassessed. "From a personal perspective, we were all badly let down by a whole lot of mechanisms and people who should have been doing their jobs and weren't," Sumner says. "I think, personally, that John has carried an unreasonable personal burden for what happened."

Instead of a sense of achievement, Bannon left politics knowing his legacy had been tarnished, if not destroyed. "It was a messy end to what had up until then been quite a successful and satisfying political career," he says. "One of the difficult things was seeing rather than a heritage being left, a lot of things being dismembered."

Bannon stayed long enough to manage the immediate aftermath before resigning from the seat of Ross Smith and declaring his public life was over. He moved from Prospect to the inner city with his second wife Angela, mother of musician and television personality Dylan Lewis, and refused advice from some quarters that he should move away and start afresh. Bannon may have failed as premier on a grand scale but he would not be run out of town.

"I at no time felt that I must or need abandon South Australia and what it stands for," says Bannon, who has a daughter, Victoria, with his first wife, Supreme Court Justice Robyn Layton. "To the best of my ability post-politics, I have tried to be an active and engaged citizen, although obviously not a public figure because

Top: Bannon with Prince Charles, Princess Diana, and Opposition leader John Olsen and his wife Julie in 1983.

Centre: with the Queen and Prince Phillip in 1986.

Left: with rock singer David Bowie in 1983.