

WEEK 5

“It isn’t about me”

Morag Fraser

The stobie poles lining Portrush Road, the artery that joins South Australia’s hill towns to the Adelaide suburbs, tell the story. They sport a long cavalcade of election posters, all beaming faces and party logos, plastered to the flat sides of Adelaide’s concrete-and-steel poles.

Adelaide loves its poles, invented in 1924 by James Stobie because the driest state on the driest continent did not have enough tall timber to hold up the power lines. With their concrete centres sandwiched between two metal railway tracks, they look like industrial choc wedges. Ugly and functional, like that other South Australian icon, the stump-jump plough, they confound the white ants that plague the city. And in this unusually well-watered spring, many of them are ringed with colonising pelargoniums that scramble up the concrete and rust in vernal exuberance. Switzerland couldn’t look more prosperous, or more street proud.

The posters, many of which display the amiable face of Family First leader, Andrea Mason, are about the only loud political proclamation in South Australia. It is week five of the six-week federal election campaign, but politics have been completely overshadowed by Port Power’s historic victory in the AFL Grand Final. The last siren has sounded on the Melbourne Cricket Ground but in Adelaide the celebration goes on all week and is documented, obsessively, in the Murdoch-dominated print media. On Sunday

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and Monday the Coalition’s campaign launch is noted, but it took place in Brisbane, and Brisbane is the football losers’ town. Too far away. Adelaide, like Brisbane, has its share of marginal seats, but even the intermittent descent into town of the electoral caravans can’t deflect attention from the historic sporting business in hand. By Thursday, the Labor campaign launch, also in Brisbane, has to share front-page space in the *Advertiser* with the FREE PREMIERSHIP BUMPER STICKER (WITH TOKEN ON PAGE TWO) and a large colour pic of the off-duty nurse (blonde, Aussie-swimmer pretty) who “saved a Port Adelaide fan bashed after Saturday’s Grand Final.”

Even the newly launched, consortium-owned broadsheet, the *Independent Weekly* (“A Different View for Adelaide”), gives over two-thirds of its Sunday front page to Port Power’s hyperkinetic coach, Mark Williams, embracing “ecstatic” captain, Warren Tredrea. The *Independent* obeys its “issues-based” credo by running a page-two story on the sociology of the victory, and why Adelaide still loves to hate the once-were-working-class Port players. But across the back page, like a knowing Puck, Norm Smith medallist Byron Pickett dances his fleet-footed victory.

Late in the week, evening television broadcasts, ABC included, are still running clips of the game. One finishes in slow motion, with ripple-armed men reaching for impossible marks as the *Man of La Mancha*’s theme builds: “With his last ounce of courage...” The song is ludicrously large for one footie game, just as the tune of the Marseillaise is too historically freighted to shrink to a sports anthem. But you don’t say any of that in Adelaide in the last week of September.

Brian Deegan is an avid football fan. The former Adelaide magistrate is also a political aspirant, standing as an independent in the Hills seat of Mayo. “A battle of the brave,” one Adelaide political insider remarks. Dream the impossible dream. But Deegan has a powerful spur for his political leap. His eldest son Joshua, on a

post-season trip, was killed in the 2002 Bali bombing. Deegan's subsequent dealings with the Howard government, with the foreign affairs and immigration departments in particular, politicised a man who freely owns to having been a political bystander before. "Such a lay person," he says of himself. "But if I can see this, why can't everyone else?"

What Deegan "sees" is government and bureaucratic insensitivity to the families of those killed or injured in Bali, delays in aid, arguments over compensation, and an ongoing controversy about pre-12 October intelligence reports. Was Bali a potential terrorist target and if so, who knew? Deegan's questions have not been answered by the *Blick* investigation (conducted with few staff and limited terms of reference) set up by the Howard government. Deegan still demands a Royal Commission. His reasons – and his anger as both father and lawyer – are detailed in a recently published book, *Remembering Josh*. Subtitled "Bali, a father's story" the book is a frank account of personal anguish and loss, sometimes more revealing than is perhaps prudent for an aspiring MP. But it is also a lawyer's campaign prospectus, a 230-page rationale for Deegan's stand against the Howard government, against Foreign Minister Alexander Downer specifically, and his quest for "justice in politics." Vote one Brian Deegan for "Honesty, Openness, Trust." His election T-shirts carry those words on the front and www.briandeegan.com.au on the back. His catch-cry: "I want my country back."

"Everyone has a moment when their life changes," Deegan says. His came on 12 October 2002. But the transformation from grieving parent to political actor took over eighteen months. Deegan had become a public and vehement critic of the Howard government long before he resigned from the bench and formally announced, in July 2004, that he would contest Mayo. Too long, his critics say. The ABC reported that South Australia's Chief Justice told Deegan he should resign from the bench if he wanted to continue engaging in political debate.

He did resign, and launched his book in the idyllic Hills town of Stirling (where the graffiti in the park's public toilets has its spelling corrected). The sell-out launch took place in Matilda Bookshop, a local institution that has seen the birth of many books from all sides of politics. Deegan subsequently published his policy platform, with a vow to work for honesty, openness, justice and national security, but also for the River Murray, education, law and order, the environment, the ageing, infrastructure and employment. (The Hills are not evenly prosperous. Areas like Mt Barker have expanded ahead of job opportunities and services.) Deegan also launched attacks on Alexander Downer and Senator Robert Hill. Neither man had served in Vietnam, he argued. They had avoided service and yet could now send young Australians to Iraq. In the local paper, the *Courier* ("newspaper of the Adelaide Hills since 1880"), Deegan is described as a pacifist. On the *Courier's* letters page Mick Teiffel of Mt Barker refers to the Greens' "radical and frightening socialistic agenda." But the paper also prints Oliver Corfe, as follows: "Sir, Last Sunday I was at the Stirling market and asked at the Liberal Party stand whether they had any literature on foreign policy. 'No', I was told, they 'only wanted to discuss local issues.' Mr Downer was standing nearby and I waited to speak with him, hoping to ask about progress in Iraq. He saw me and moved away..."

Mayo in 2004 is a very safe Liberal seat. Two elections back the incumbent Alexander Downer got a fright when Redgum lead singer John Schumann, standing as a Democrat, shaved him close by gaining 22.43 per cent of the primary vote and coming home well (48.26 per cent) on Labor and One Nation preferences. Schumann surged on his national fame, local popularity and the lingering resonance of Redgum's Vietnam War anthem, "I Was Only Nineteen."

In the eighties, the singer had learned some of his politics from Flinders University's radical philosopher, Brian Medlin. Another of Schumann's teachers, South Australian academic Brian Matthews,

remembers "great nights... at the Bridgewater pub where the early Redgum played to packed, carousing and very noisy audiences." But that was another time and another place, "where 'Beaumont Rag', 'Servin' USA' and other legendary Redgum songs all hit the summer night air of the Adelaide hills like a call to revolution."

It is not easy to believe in calls to revolution in 21st-century Australia. Young Mayo residents voting for the first time in 2004 would have been newborn when Redgum's songs were first aired. And their parents would themselves have been young when Brian Medlin's politics first galvanised a generation of university students. In Stirling, where the offices of the Member for Mayo are located, one does meet students who are vocal in their support for Deegan. But more typical is the gentleman at the pavement cafe who remarks, "Deegan? Yes, he's that fellow who lost his son isn't he? I think he's got a bit of an agenda. A pity, because you have to feel sorry for him. But this is Alexander Downer's seat."

Alexander Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs in the Howard government since its election in 1996, has been a fixture in Mayo since the seat was first proclaimed in 1984. His family has been a fixture in Adelaide society, and Australian politics, for generations. His father, Sir Alexander ("Alec") Downer, was a minister in the Menzies government, his grandfather, Sir John Downer, a senator in the first federal parliament in 1901 and his mother, Mary (nee Gosse), belongs to that select group that South Australians call OAFs (Old Adelaide Families). In the most recent redistribution, Mayo quadrupled in area, losing some suburban areas but gaining the northern Adelaide Hills, the resort and retirement town of Victor Harbour, Goolwa and nearby rural areas on the Fleurieu Peninsula, and Kangaroo Island. The Liberal margin of safety increased to 14.3 per cent. In 2001, all 79 booths in the electorate returned a Liberal majority. Brave indeed the political hopeful who would take Downer on.

But South Australian politics are perennially surprising. In the sixties, eastern states observers (even locals) gasped when the

Liberal and Country League premier, Steele Hall, broke the power of the upper house, against his own electoral interests. Must be something in the water, people said. Adelaide's water, scarce and textured, is a reliable catch-all. It can be invoked to explain anything, from the conservative "socialism" of long-time premier Tom Playford to Don Dunstan's elite Labor brand of radical reform. But with the mouth of the mighty Murray silting over, water has now become a pressing electoral issue. Demythologised and drying up, it may no longer explain the curiously thoughtful patterns of South Australian politics. If the electors of the "leafy" seat of Adelaide decide against their hard-working and popular local member, Trish Worth, this time around, pundits will have to reach for something else, the "doctors' wives" phenomenon perhaps, to explain why. But they might also remember that South Australia, founded by political idealists, was the state that first gave women the vote and first admitted them to university study – more than half a century ahead of Cambridge. They might also ponder South Australia's pride in its convict-free establishment, its cultural depth (the first festival town, etc.) and its social coherence.

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Listening to talkback during election time one can hear the tug of war between integrity and self-interest that electoral politics imposes on its South Australian constituents. When the *Sunday Mail* publishes a three-page part-colour spread entitled "Downer, My Country, My Family, My Life" and subheaded "The Importance of Being Alexander," just six days before the election, some Hills voters hit the airwaves. It's not right, they exclaim. Where's the fairness? Where are the other candidates? One gentleman (very country, very decent) wants to make a distinction: Alexander has done a good job in Mayo, but this shouldn't happen.

Where *are* the other candidates? Out of sight and hardly in the race. Months out from the election a *Sunday Mail* poll shows Deegan as picking up 18 per cent of first preferences, and ahead

of Labor. "Undecided" polls ahead of all other candidates. Labor, with candidate James Murphy, and with an expectation of preferences to Deegan, hopes to nudge Downer out. Deegan, when interviewed in October, is enthusiastic, if a little bemused, in his acknowledgment of support from Labor, the Democrats, the Greens and other independents. Liberal John Valder has volunteered encouragement. Most of the parties have, Deegan says, asked him to stand for them. Even Family First, until they found it "a pity" that he would not oppose gay marriage. Labor stalwart and insider critic, the Falstaffian Bob Ellis, has been writing his speeches. Deegan is mentioned frequently in Ellis's *Night Thoughts in Time of War*. One wonders how helpful the notice will prove in Mayo. Instance: "I saw Deegan in Adelaide at Writers' Week. He may run, he thinks, for Mayo as an Independent, against Alexander Downer. We got very drunk one night and while I was up, near death from hangover, at nine, he slept through till 3 p.m. I read his completed book right through and found it, not without envy, a fucking masterpiece."

Ellis's intemperate praise, and his incorporation of Deegan into a culture of indignation, neatly illustrate one of the paradoxes of current Australian politics. Both men have legitimate, serious and well-documented complaints against the Howard government. They excoriate its handling of the Iraq war, its opportunistic and inhumane dealings with asylum seekers, its human rights record, its international reputation and its probity in office. A large number of Australians have similar concerns. But the concerns do not translate into electoral heft. They are too easily deflected, in both style and substance, by a determined government convinced of its own righteousness, intolerant of dissent, skilled in wedge politics, astute about the fears of mortgaged Australians, and gifted with a huge budget surplus. Australia is not ready for "a fucking masterpiece." And in Mayo, where Doug Morton of Mt Barker declares in the *Courier* that he is "disgusted a candidate would presume to gain the confidence of

people by slandering the present government," voters may never be ready.

Yet Brian Deegan's book, without its vernacular accolade, sells very well in Stirling. So does Margo Kingston's *Not Happy, John!*, which was jointly launched with *Remembering Josh* and has since gone into further editions. Meanwhile, the Hills *Courier* carries a four-page "Downer Update" on Wednesday 29 September. Readers will have absorbed "Alexander Downer's Future Plans for Our Local Area" long before they decipher the small-print footer, "Authorised by Alexander Downer M.P. Printed by *The Courier Newspaper*." Brian Deegan's ad on page five has "Advertisement" printed in capitals on top.

Deegan's advertisement also occupies less than one-sixteenth of the space devoted to Downer's *Courier* centrefold newsletter. The mathematics underscore the benefits of incumbency and the ramshackle optimism of any minor-party or independent electoral challenge.

Brian Deegan's campaign centre is not a mini stone chateau like Alexander Downer's Mt Barker Road electoral office. It is the undercroft of his house and it shares space with all the downstairs detritus of any affluent Adelaide home: sports gear, pets, leftover furniture, piles of paper. A life-size plywood model of Alexander Downer, complete with the mandatory fishnet stockings, teeters against a wall – a relic of the book launch. A table holds some of the books that distracted Deegan during his grieving and aided his rapid political education: *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963*, Rohan Gunaratna's *Inside Al Qaeda*, Marr and Wilkinson's *Dark Victory* and Dewi Anggraeni's *Who Did This to Our Bali?*. There is also that politician's and speechmaker's tool, a dictionary of quotations. When the phone rings one of several young women answer. No, they are not staff, they are family, or friends. Deegan's wife Virginia introduces herself and offers coffee

(his first wife, Angela, is the mother of Joshua). You have a half-hour, Virginia tells me, and then television is coming before Brian has to drive down to the Strathalbyn Show. The BBC, Dutch television and other European media have been interested in the foreign policy dimension of Deegan's campaign, often more interested than local media.

In person, Brian Deegan is direct and more modest than his reputation allows (Adelaide social and legal circles are close and caustic). "I just hope this isn't going to be a huge embarrassment for me," he says as we shake hands. He doesn't mean the interview. "But it isn't about me." Deegan explains that he had hoped Bali would be a catalyst for a reversal in Australia's foreign policy. When it proved not to be, he decided to stand for Mayo. "It's a very tricky electorate, but I have to make a statement to encourage other people."

Years on the bench have made Deegan fluent but unprepared for the demands of political campaigning and speeches three or four times a week. "I'm not a wordsmith," he confesses, but says he still tinkers with the speeches supplied by Ellis and others so that they become his own. He is a natural talker, ebullient, often unguarded: "I hate criticism – I am so thin-skinned." The "pacifist" label (attached because Deegan opposes Australia's involvement in Iraq) is, on the evidence, just silly. Deegan comes from fighting stock. He would defend his own. Punchy, tribal, very Adelaide. But the reactive personality is now somewhat subdued by what he has seen and learned since 12 October. He claims not to feel comfortable with praise and dislikes the mantle of advocate. But advocate, by default, is what he has become, and what he will remain, regardless of the electoral outcome: "I literally am travelling an unsignposted road, wherever it will take me." Thus far it has taken Brian Deegan into fraught political negotiation with Canberra, profound disillusionment and protest: "Howard was jockeying for a position centre stage and my son got killed."

The personal outrage will not go away, but experience has transmuted much of it into investigation and activism. Deegan is

not satisfied with Howard and Downer's slant on intelligence available before the Bali bombing. In *Remembering Josh* he writes: "It was now public knowledge that the terrorist group JI [Jemaah Islamiyah] had become heated and had planned attacks against western targets in and around Indonesia. As far back as November 2001, ASIO had alerted the government that Australia, and by implication Australians, were potential targets." He is particularly critical of the foreign affairs department: "The simple and undeniable fact was that Bali had been named as a potentially dangerous zone, which was quite incompatible with the eleven consecutive travel advisories issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs."

We talk for over an hour. Virginia comes twice to tell Deegan that he simply has to get ready for the television crew. "Don't worry, just keep going," he tells me. Finally, an urgent call – a radio interview – takes him away.

In Mayo, the foreign minister's genial face grins from electoral posters along the roads that join the towns. On the car radio, talkback callers report some tampering: Greens posters torn down. "That's illegal. Ring the Electoral Commission," advises the ABC program host. But trouble, it seems, strikes indiscriminately. Downer himself is photographed for the *Courier* looking disconsolate through a vandalised window in his Stirling office. During the week he is shirt-fronted by a protester in Melbourne making an attempt at a citizen's arrest. The *Advertiser* allows two photographs of the scuffle, fails to name the protester, but gives Mr Downer, who lays no charge, the last word: "I'm six foot one, pretty strong and very fit."

At the Strathalbyn Show most of the parties have set up booths. It's all local politics here. Bali? Iraq? Jemaah Islamiyah? The Red Angus judging is more compelling. There is a crowd around the "Residents for a Future Strathalbyn" tent. Development is a contentious issue in these historic Hill towns. So is agribusiness. I pick up a pamphlet on Alpacas ("Interested in Alpacas? Join the club") and wander past the revivalist tent. The

numbers there make me wonder why the eastern states have taken so little account of Family First. A few hours spent in metropolitan Adelaide should persuade anyone with eyes and ears that something significant is going on with the advent of Family First. The Revival Fellowship pamphlet offers healing, provision and protection. “Stay here and talk to me,” says the bloke at Deegan’s tent, “so we’ll look like a crowd.” The Democrats candidate, Kathy Brazher-De Laine, is personable, articulate and informed. We talk development versus rural conservation, apples, pears and fire blight. She farms locally. Her good sense and the depth of the party’s campaign literature disguise her party’s hapless state. I take an armful of information sheets on youth wages, tertiary fees, alternatives to detention and the role of the Senate. At Brian Deegan’s tent you can buy a “Fight the blight” badge and another that says “Let the Murray flow.”

The politician in the box seat to influence policy on the Murray is Alexander Downer. In his newsletter he promises to “ensure the River Murray remains a priority.” But first mention goes to managing the economy and maintaining interest rates: “It is important to recognise a small rise in interest rates will strip away the value of any election bribes.” A cynic might hope that words once expressed will come back to bite...

At the Liberal tent (“Our local for Mayo”) two pearly young people with artless South Australian manners and immaculate white-with-blue-logo T-shirts tell me that Mr Downer is due to make a speech any minute, over near the grandstand. By the time I make it past the Red Angus arena, Ron Wade’s Country Music has commandeered the mike. I ask at the kiosk if anyone has seen Alexander Downer. “Conspicuous by his absence,” quips the woman who serves me a styrofoam cup of tea. But Downer is indeed present, with his wife Nicky, inside the Strathalbyn Football Club rooms, eating sandwiches and fruit salad at a table with locals who seem very pleased to be there. Men in hats and shirtsleeves come up and shake Downer’s hand. Some argue in a backslapping

way. Downer checks his mobile briefly while Nicky Downer talks to everyone. When they leave to amble back to the Liberal booth she stops every minute or so to greet and chat, with an easy vivacity. Nicky Downer is popular across party lines in Adelaide arts and culture circles. One can see why. Downer’s minders, a discreet distance behind and casually dressed, caps tipped onto their noses, seem as relaxed as their boss. In such sunshine, abundance and apparent security, with children playing, horses trotting, fairy floss being spun and a senior politician strolling from stall to stall like any ordinary mortal, it is difficult to conjure a war in Iraq or the desolation of the Baxter detention centre, or Bali’s incinerated Sari Club.

Back down in Adelaide, there are many South Australians who share Brian Deegan’s concerns about Iraq, refugees, truth in government and a host of other issues. But they do so without uncritically endorsing Deegan’s personal stance or his tactics. They might applaud his efforts in uniting the children from Bali, Sara and Sabda Sammaki, with their Iranian father Mohamad Ebrahim and helping secure the father’s permanent resident visa. (Sara and Sabda, whose mother was killed in the bombing, were the children with whom Mr Howard inadvertently had himself photographed at the first anniversary commemorations in Bali.) They might also share his elation at Howard’s miscalculation and at the realpolitik that followed. Deegan: “I will confess to releasing the images to sections of the media. Strike one for Josh! Within days the prime minister was advising parliament that he was referring the children’s case to Senator Vanstone, for review.” But their sympathies don’t necessarily translate into electoral support or even a concerted social movement. Many of them choose to fight the fight their own way.

Greg O’Kelly is principal of St Ignatius Athelstone. His Catholic coeducational college lay within the electorate prior to the redistribution, so the Jesuit headmaster has had dealings with the Member for Mayo. (Downer, incidentally, is known by irreverent Adelaide as “The Head Prefect.”) But there has been more

positive contact since the Schumann scare in 1998. John Schumann is now an Athelstone parent. O’Kelly is a shrewd political operator with an unapologetic social justice agenda. For some time he has been negotiating the care and education of a small number of refugee children at Athelstone. He has needed, and got, support from Liberals – Chris Pyne, Trish Worth and Brendan Nelson among them. He notes, with wry pride, that Athelstone is now an “authorised detention zone” and that he is himself a “delegated detention officer.” Mayo might be listed as having the lowest proportion of Catholics of any electorate in Australia but Alexander Downer nonetheless wrote letters of support for O’Kelly’s initiative and he is welcomed at the school.

Jeremy Moore, the Adelaide lawyer who has been most vocal and active in support of asylum seekers detained – and released – in South Australia, has been one of O’Kelly’s advisers throughout the school’s dealings with immigration authorities. In their views on justice and human rights, both men might intersect with Brian Deegan. But their styles and strategies are all different, and it would be a mistake automatically to align the three. If anything unites them, it is a resolve to work with an eye to the long term, to tend to others around them, and not to flinch or turn back in the face of difficulty, loss or the unknown.

Twenty-first-century Australian politicians in election mode like the known and the predictable. They look for simple dichotomies, rhyming slogans and messages that “cut through.” Journalists and media proprietors collaborate, even as they protest. But up on the peak of Mount Lofty politics seem so tawdry, so approximate. Mayo is a slice of complex, troubled, comfortable, beautiful, teetering Australian town and country life. No election result will tell its full story, or do it justice.

On election night Brian Deegan won 15.15 per cent of the primary vote; although Alexander Downer’s primary vote was virtually unchanged his two-party-preferred vote fell by 0.74 percentage points.