

An interview with Brian Deegan:

# “I wanted to voice my concerns over the Australian government’s illegal foreign policy”

James Cogan  
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*Brian Deegan, an outspoken opponent of the Australian government’s intervention into East Timor and its participation in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, stood as an independent in the South Australian seat of Mayo to challenge the foreign affairs minister, Alexander Downer.*

*Deegan began speaking out against the government’s foreign policy following the murder of his eldest son, 22-year-old Joshua, in the October 12, 2002 terrorist bombings on the Indonesian island of Bali. In December 2002, he publicly denounced the Howard government’s suppression of intelligence warnings—made just days before the bombing—of a possible attack on tourists in Bali.*

*He has since accused the government of making Australians a target for terrorism through its support for the Bush administration. In July 2003 he wrote that the terrorists responsible for the Bali atrocity “viewed the group of tourists at the Sari Club on that October night as representatives of a Western collective of terror whose leaders had bombed Muslim states such as Afghanistan and Iraq.... Surely, I am not the only person to view this as an inevitable link in an unbroken chain in Australia’s foreign policy.”*

*Deegan was a prominent speaker at antiwar protests before the invasion of Iraq, denouncing the claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction as false and the war plans as illegal.*

*His campaign in Mayo was one of the few in the course of the Australian elections that sought to focus on the criminality and lies of the Howard government and the colonial character of the so-called “war on terrorism”. He spoke at length with the World Socialist Web Site about his reasons for standing, his experiences, his assessment of the election result and his views on the political situation in Australia.*

**James Cogan:** You’ve been through a great deal in the last two years. What led you to the decision to stand in the election and against Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in particular?

**Brian Deegan:** I wanted to stand against the foreign minister to voice my concerns over the Australian government’s illegal foreign policy. I’ve had one child slaughtered as a result and I have no intention of having another. If the foreign affairs portfolio had been held by somebody in one of the eastern states, then I may have moved to that eastern state and fought it there.

**JC:** You have stressed your campaign wasn’t an individual issue over the death of your son but against the Howard government. You have described the government’s foreign policies as “illegal and immoral”. Could you elaborate?

**BD:** It is immoral to commit an act of any kind and claim those actions are based on altruistic motives, when in reality they are based on greed and deception.

**JC:** Are you speaking about Iraq?

**BD:** I am speaking about East Timor and I am speaking about Iraq.

We ostensibly went into East Timor to liberate the East Timorese from oppression. They are now crying for liberation from us.

I don’t believe the East Timor intervention should be regarded as humanitarian. It is easy to gauge what it is all about by actions, not words. The action immediately after the East Timorese were given independence but before their constitution was formed was that the Australian government did a deal with the United Nations for control of their oil and gas reserves, which was, is and remains in total dispute.

**JC:** What do you think of the continuing claims of the Howard government that its motives were assisting the East Timorese?

**BD:** Well they are plainly deceptive. Again, actions speak louder than words. The East Timorese are begging for arbitration over the oil and gas. The Australian government is only prepared to accept negotiations which it is always destined to win.

In regards to Iraq, it is illegal for a country to invade another sovereign country unless there is the strongest evidence possible that that country is about to launch a preemptive strike. One can act in self-defense. But I know that Australia was never acting on good intelligence about Iraq, or the best intelligence, or truthful intelligence.

Moreover, I know that the government did not believe what they were allegedly being told by intelligence. And I use the word “allegedly” because I don’t know precisely what they were being told. We know that different agencies, including ASIO and the Federal Police, were advising that involvement in Iraq was a dangerous exercise.

When agencies such as that come out quite strongly, it is a guarded message that we are doing the wrong thing. I think you can quite clearly read between the lines: that Iraq is not a threat, it won’t be in the foreseeable future, there are no weapons of mass destruction, and the whole thing is an illegal exercise.

**JC:** What do you believe were the motives of the Iraq war?

**BD:** I’m quite clear now. I used to try and steer people away from saying it, because it sounded almost corny, but, unfortunately, there is absolutely no other motive but oil. What was happening was the US was fearful that Iraq was going to try and lift the price of oil, so Hussein had to be removed. He was not removed because of what he was doing to the Iraqi people, but because of what he was about to do to the American economy. You can’t go to war for those reasons.

**JC:** What do think of the consequences?

**BD:** It is exactly as I predicted. I spoke at one of the rallies in February 2003 and I made quite clear then that far from destroying terrorism, invading Iraq would increase the prospects of terrorism. Far from making

any inroads against Al Qaeda, they [the coalition forces] would combine various terrorist organisations to fight the common enemy—and that is a wayward western coalition. Prior to the invasion, Al Qaeda was not present to any great extent in Iraq. Now it is becoming rife, and people there are turning to it as an organisation to assist them in removing what they consider to be invaders.

JC: You won over 12,000 votes in Mayo—over 15 percent of the vote. What were some of the memorable or encouraging experiences in the course of your campaign?

BD: It was just good to feel that there is a sizeable proportion of people that felt very, very strongly about the issues I was raising. I had the support of totally disaffected Liberal people, Labor voters, people who might have thought of voting Green and people who may have once voted Democrat.

I got mixed advice as to what I should be campaigning on. There were people in my camp saying “don’t mention Bali, don’t mention Iraq, don’t mention your son, don’t do this, don’t do that”. But none of them would then attend my forums where these were the predominant questions I was being asked. So I started asking at the forums: “What do you people think I should be doing?”

Universally, it was “go on foreign policy”. On domestic policy, the government has already been caught short on a whole number of its promises—as was predictable. It really wouldn’t matter which of the major parties got in. Our economy is inextricably linked to the US, to Japan, and the rest of the world. Interest rates will go up when theirs go up, and come down when theirs go down.

So people were saying: “Look, go for truth, go for honesty, go for openness.” It justified why I was running.

We had some memorable moments. It occurred to me that I was offering myself up for election and campaigning in an electorate where I had been the presiding magistrate. From time to time I wondered: am I going to meet people who are hostile to me because of that?

Quite the contrary was the case. That gave me satisfaction that I had done my job well. I did have a number of people come up to me and say I had presided over their case. One bloke said “You gave me three months in prison”. I immediately thought “Oh God, where’s the swing coming from”? But he said, “I’m voting for you. You were fair”.

I felt that people didn’t require any convincing that I was speaking the truth about the broader issues.

JC: In an interview following the election you were critical of the Labor Party’s campaign. You said: “Labor absolutely fell into Howard’s trap. Don’t mention the war.”

BD: Absolutely. I thought if all they are going to do is run on domestic lines and just go head for head with the government, they are not going to get anywhere. I would challenge anybody to answer now: who promised what in respect to education, or health? They would have no idea. It was just Howard and Latham increasing the ante.

In the end, the only choice was which one of them people assumed would be better managers of the economy. On that score, the Liberals did an absolute number on Labor over interest rates, and quite a good one. And Labor never returned fire!

JC: Did you get a particular response over the illegality of the Howard government’s actions?

BD: Absolutely! Even strong-minded Liberals agreed with that, except they kept saying “I agree with you, I agree with you, but we cannot have Latham and Labor at the helm.” That was the biggest problem.

JC: What do you think lay behind Labor’s silence on the war and other issues, like mandatory detention, that many people entered the election feeling deeply about?

BD: I think they got bad advice. And I know where they got it from—their media people, who were getting advice from the people within the media. That’s what we were getting as well. Off-the-cuff remarks like:

“Don’t worry about Iraq, people are sick and tired of it, they don’t want to hear about it.”

JC: Latham had numerous opportunities to address the war and the lies over weapons of mass destruction, particularly during the debate. He stressed his commitment to the US alliance. In the only debate, he referred to Iraq as a “mistake” and moved on.

BD: I thought that was a totally poor performance on his part. But I know where it came from. There are factions in the Labor Party that agreed with the Iraq war. Beazley, I think, was one of them, and he is a powerbroker. Some of the individuals within the Labor camp are themselves inextricably tied to American policies.

To a degree, I think Latham was hamstrung by his own party. But, still, he did not go for Howard over his lies. There is a web site called *Howard’s Lies*. All he had to do was quote from it. He could have stopped the debate and said, “Right, let’s have a look at how you’ve deceived the Australian people over the past eight years,” and just listed them off. Howard would have had no comeback.

Howard got away with the line “let the past be in the past, let’s look to the future.” In other words, he was admitting his own lies, and he won! I just can’t believe it....

I was interviewed by Dutch, French and British media, and by Reuters. I warned them I didn’t think the election was going to be a referendum on Iraq because the Labor Party fell into line with the Liberals’ campaign. To my way of thinking, that was the biggest and most catastrophic mistake ever. Labor is paying the price.

JC: In the course of the election, you made critical comments about the Australian media’s treatment of the Iraq war and other issues.

BD: The media played an enormous role in this election. They seldom mentioned anything to do with Iraq. They certainly withheld on the incidents of inappropriate behaviour by western soldiers in Iraq and the deaths in Iraq as a result of the fighting. They withheld any real comment on the legality of the war. Instead, very conservative writers continued to talk up the “legality” and the benefits of attacking Iraq.

The written media here tended to ignore my campaign. There is no prize for guessing why.

The media quite clearly assisted the government in every way it could.

JC: What do you think the silence from the opposition and from the media says about the state of democracy in Australia?

BD: By remaining silent on issues such as Iraq, the Labor Party aligned itself with the Liberal government and has not shown itself to be a true opposition.

As for the media and its intervention into the elections, it quite clearly shows that ownership and control by a very small number of persons can be a very, very dangerous thing.

Over the centuries, people have fought and died to have a vote and to have freedom of the press. A free press, if it is truly free, is a great attribute of democracy. One of the first things to occur in a country that is being run by any form of dictator, or one party, is that the press is controlled and watched by the government.

We in the west say that is wrong; that you need freedom of the press to express different points of view and to expose the truth. Well, when we have what is quite clearly an alliance between the government and the press, and information is wilfully suppressed, then we are no better off than a country under a dictatorship. People are not getting the information they need to make an informed decision.

JC: Following on from that: you are a lawyer and, until the election, a magistrate. Do you have concerns about the legislation that has been introduced in this country in the name of the “war on terrorism”, such as the increased powers for ASIO?

BD: Yes. I think the situation is outrageous. We still pride ourselves on being an open, democratic society, but all these laws go in the opposite direction and one must be very guarded. Who is more important? The

individual or the state? We have to make decisions. My way of thinking is that it must always be the individual. If you take away the rights of individuals and place them in the control of the state, then it is very open to abuse.

Innocent people can quite easily be victims of what they would see as state terror. Do we want this? Who watches the watchers?

These issues fall back on all of us. This is what really kills me. The last few years have seen the biggest catastrophe in Australia's history. We have redefined Australia's position in the world and it is not good. It will never be good. We have opened ourselves up to terror and then we have brought in measures to combat the terror that we've brought upon ourselves.

Along the way, I can see a lot of innocent people being harmed. We had the incident which only got page 17 of the *Sunday Mail* here in Adelaide. A couple was raided by the police just after the September 11 attacks. It turned out they were innocent. The woman was pregnant though, and she had a miscarriage because of the methods used in the raid. Now, they may be eligible for compensation, but how do you compensate for the loss of your child? You can't.

*JC:* The government has attempted to promote a climate of hysteria and paranoia. Tragedies such as the Bali bombing have been manipulated.

*BD:* There was manipulation after Bali. I was disgusted and outraged by it. Innocent people were being harmed because of the hysteria that was pumped up by the government for its own political purposes. It is easy to whip up hysteria—far easier than trying to calm it down. Once you have fear, people are ready to give up so much freedom. That is so frightening.

*JC:* Are you following the US election?

*BD:* I am and I'm not. I want to, but I am so scared. When Bush was elected in 2000 I said to my mother "There's going to be trouble." There was something wrong about the way he was brought into power. I didn't know all the facts then. Now I know it was by disenfranchising a lot of black voters. The way they went about doing it was an absolute outrage. Democracy just blew up on that day.

*JC:* Bush was installed by a five-to-four vote in the Supreme Court.

*BD:* I know and doesn't that just say a lot. We're in very frightening times.

*JC:* How would you describe what you have learnt over the past two years?

*BD:* I think we've reached a very important crossroads in Australia. More and more people should be attempting to learn more about what direction the government plans to take this country. It is my opinion that if we go too far down that road we can never retreat from it.

Too many Australians have become insular and concerned about their own well-being to the extent that they do not care about anyone else's well-being. Far too more of us are living under a cloud of fear and uncertainty.

All of these things, when mixed together, are changing Australia forever. My view is that too many Australians have already been changed, and it is going to take some time and considerable hard work to draw it back. This is not the Australia that I was brought up in—and that was very much a caring Australia, where people's rights were to the fore. That's gone.

You keep people in a state where they have no self-belief and constantly living in fear and they'll think anything is good. They will accept the scrapings off the plate. That is what this is all about.

*JC:* What do you advise people to do?

*BD:* Stand up and fight for your rights. Too many people say one person can't make a difference. One person can, and when one person joins with another one person, they can make a bigger difference and then multiply it out again.

The one shining light over the last couple of years was when so many Australians got out of their homes on a summer day in February 2003 and

marched against the invasion of Iraq. That was a very bright shining light. They said enough was enough.

The problem is that this government just totally ignored it and cast the people aside, realising that the election was some time away. People then retreated back and said we can't make a difference. But they can.

People should start to become much more politically active. Unless people do, rather than leave it up to somebody else, then the job doesn't get done.

*JC:* What are your own political plans?

*BD:* I'm still on a road, an unchartered road.



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