

# The Chancer

## By Lloyd Nelson

### One

Tommy Smith – Parsons is looking across the dusty Murchison Road out from the Court House. He's the Clerk of Courts, Mining Registrar, Registrar of Births and Deaths and he's the Returning Officer for the State Parliamentary seat of Murchison. Where he is, is only a whistle stop. No one much lives here, but it's the administrative centre of quite a big chunk of Western Australia.



Tommy's here on a three month fill in while the cranky old incumbent is away in the Eastern States on long service leave. He tells Tommy before he leaves that nomination day for the State Elections will come up during this time and that Tommy should not get anxious if the sitting Country Party Member, Claude Schwenke cuts it fine to nominate. He's been there for years, lives in Nedlands, doesn't often visit the electorate, and is never opposed. This is back in the late 60's when wool was bringing good prices and people were thus politically inactive, if just not aware.

Tommy looks at his watch, it's ten to four. Four is the witching hour, he can close the main door at four pm and that's it for the day. It's nomination day. He looks hard, there's not even a smidgeon of dust from a travelling car to be seen. He has a premonition, rushes into the Court House, fills out and signs a nomination form and attaches the requisite deposit in cash, which the act says is okay. At 4pm, with baited breath he stamps the nomination, makes it all legal and slams the court house door. Nothing happens, no one at all appears.

He walks home to his temporary digs. He is boarding with a sprightly widow a short walk away. He expects a huge bubble any minute, but nothing, nothing at all happens and it seems that he is now by default the legal new Member of Parliament for Murchison. He envisages his signature - Thomas Bertram Smith-Parsons, Member of the Legislative Assembly, Member for Murchison. There's a thousand time more sheep than people in his new electorate but he doesn't expect either will be unduly excited at this unexpected development.

### Two

Tommy is nobody's fool. He's a qualified lawyer, nearly and is on the tail end of his articles with Durack and Harman, a friendly law firm in Howard Street. He's a bachelor and has just had a break-up argument with his long standing girlfriend who tells him he's out, as it's obvious he will never amount to anything (in her opinion). They've been together for seven years since high school. She

is shut off with Tom for going to Murchison for three months. She doesn't take into account that this undemanding job will give Tommy plenty of time to swat for his final year law exams, which are starting to loom.

The next day is Saturday. No one gets in touch over the weekend. They can't in any case, as he and the sprightly widow go out to a spot they've used before. It's a stone, open-topped water tank and windmill out on an out-station. The tank is big enough to swim in and it's got a bit of grass around, natural bush couch and all in all it's not a bad camping spot. They hike, barbeque, swim and do all of the expected things that can be embraced in a light hearted young people weekend.

### Three

Back at the Court House Monday, the phone is ringing when Tom gets in. It's the Electoral Department chasing up nomination details. The caller is low echelon and just records what Tommy has to tell him without comment. Next, the Country Party ring, Aub Brendish's helper at Country Party House in Havelock Street is also chasing details. He's totally gob smacked to hear that Murchison has a new member and asks where the hell was or is Schwenke.

"Search me," the new member says, "I was warned he cuts it fine, but this is ridiculous."

The Geraldton cops come in next. There's a missing persons out on old Claude. He's not found until Wednesday, dead as a doornail in an overturned car on a station back road, sometimes used as a short cut between the main road and the Murchison Road. It's rather horrific. The car window is down and the dingos make the most of their opportunity. The young cop reporting it is blasé.

"Bet he was tough chewing," he says with a grin.

Tommy has a number of phone calls - sort of please explain calls, some that say you can't do that, some that say its an abuse of privilege, and some that say you will never get confirmed. There's also a nasty call from the Premier Clarrie Firth, a very hard nosed character.

"I'll pass a new law and out you go you rotten chancer!"

Tommy knows his law and deems it best to not react to these provocative calls. He plays things as bland as bland. The West Australian and National Press send up journo's and run with this extraordinary story. Tommy sits pat at the courthouse and the journo's, plus an endless stream of people turn up to talk at him. He keeps a straight face and centres his replies on what a sad loss of such an able parliamentarian (albeit a back, back, back bencher) as old Claude. In real life of course, no one seems to love old Claude, even his long suffering wife. Tommy takes a bit of leave, drives his Holden car into Geraldton, flies down to Claude's funeral and such is the interest taken in him that Claude hardly



rates a mention. It's all quite frenetic and absorbing. Tommy next puts out a statement that he will be giving his electorate and the people of the state close attention in carrying out his Parliamentary duties.

## Four

He immediately gets out a well thought out circular by mail to his constituents, seeking their views on what is needed to improve the electorate. In response to the never ending queries as to whom he will sit with i.e. Labour or the Conservatives, or whether he will follow Schwenke's political leanings and sit with the Country Party; Tommy sticks to a standard reply. He will wait on the election results. With the election now to hand, the spotlight comes off him as the other Pollies scramble for their political lives. He's in a funny position, without precedent almost, being a new member of Parliament, but totally unknown to his electorate apart from about a dozen locals who have appeared before Justices of the Peace in his courtroom.

When the tumult and the shouting dies and several recounts are in progress, the election looks like coming up a tie, even Stevens, excluding his unknown vote. It seems likely he can put either party in power. Boy, do the offers come in to bring this about.

Tommy is back in Perth now and the Premier comes in the law firm door seeking a meeting. You can imagine the mental turmoil of this once all powerful Premier when Tommy declines to see him. 'Too busy' is the message he sends out to reception. Tommy is out at Jarrah Road trying to get some action out of the APB, an arm of the Department of Agriculture. The crusty old Director, who also has a double banger name, is at loggerheads with his Country Party Minister and is not disposed to help anybody at this time. Tommy says, looking him in the eye,

"Mr Hyphen, we are at crunch point. I need two doggers working in Murchison with a fortnight. I want them there until further notice; I can't make myself any plainer."

"You should approach the Minister," he says.

"Mr Hyphen," Tommy says, "I would doubt the Minister would know if his rear end was on fire. You personally can fix this today and I suggest you do."

"Or what?" the Director barks.

"Just do it," Tommy says, "If I see two doggers working my electorate within fourteen days, your working life will continue here. If not?....." he lets it trail off.

"And you want an answer now?" the crusty old type says. Tom is calm.

"Not at all," he says, "I need no answers from you, but I want and expect action. You cannot be unaware of what the wild dogs did to Old Claude. You cannot be unaware of the political situation also. Why, I could be your new Minister next week, perhaps."



The Director pushes his luck.

"You're a nobody," he says. Then he softens this. "Or you were." he says.

"Today, Mr Hyphen, I'm a somebody and believe me, if provoked I could be a distinctively vindictive somebody.'

Tommy goes. Seven days later the doggers arrive and start their work. His next stop is Pot Hole Palace, the home of the Main Roads Department. They contract out all the work in Murchison. He lays out the plan to the Director who has readily agreed to meet with him.

"This is what it seems needs to be done in Murchison," he says and hands over a list of low level bridge work, road upgrading, river approach sealing. It's a fairly long list, but the work is straightforward and he attached a well respected earth works contractors cost estimates.

"Farm it out," says Tommy, "quicker and cheaper."

"You really need to go to the Minister for this," the Director says.

"No,' says Tom, "this is within your power and the costing's reflect that it's within your spending discretion area. These are my constituents' roads and their needs and your future are perhaps intrinsically linked. It's a very unusual situation. A political one."

The Director grins. It's a one on one meeting, Tommy won't have any other.

"There's an old hymn," the Director says, "We sung it yesterday at St Joseph Pignatelli. It goes, 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom'."

"Prompt action," says Tommy, "Will place you indelibly in my mind, quick action could conceivably lead to an OA."

The Director grins. "Oh," he says "what a conversation."

Tommy laughs. "It stands for 'Onerable' Action," he says.

"Okay," says the Director.

Tommy blitzes other civil servants around town and gets this and that for his constituents. After the inactivity of Old Claude's reign, the Murchison people are in for a pleasant surprise. While the counts and recounts are proceeding at the Electoral Department, Tommy with some deep research help from the Howard Street Law Firm, is digging here and there for further funds to help the electorate. He's into the emergency flying doctor air strip fund, the additional teachers for remote community's fund, funding for near-graduate doctors to visit far-flung spots and so on. Also, the visiting police funding. There's a lot of money here and there largely untouched. It was obviously just too much trouble for the late Member to even bother with.

## Five

Emissaries from Premier Firth and opposition leader Johnston, haunt his office. He tells them to go away until the polls are declared. They are - four days later. There are thirty-six members for each side, with Tommy holding the balance. Tommy's not around when they charge his door. He's in Money Town, Canberra, chasing up some available, but not spoken for, Federal money for this and that, which his Murchison Electorate can only benefit from in a big way.

They seek him here, they seek him there. The law office lets out on Friday (by arrangement with Tom) what Tommy is doing and when his plane touches down at Guilford, midday Saturday a mini crowd is there to greet him. He is bland and says for media consumption that he is now in a position to look closely into the matter. An emissary from Government House is in the crowd too. Will he visit the Governor, preferably today? Tom says he has pressing matters to attend to first, but can make it about 8pm. He's well aware from the vice regal notices in the West, that this will throw a big spike into the Governors hosting of a very VIP dinner that night. It will, he thinks, test the Governors metal at least.

Tom plays a pleasant round of golf at Royal Perth and fronts up at Government House at 8pm as arranged. There's a slight delay and the Governor turns up in full fig with medals and sashes. He is quite courteous and unhurried.

"Well, your Excellency," Tommy says, "perhaps I have taken you away from something dead boring."

The Governor laughs, "You may say that," he says, "but I can't even think it." They laugh together. There is a silence. The Governor is taking stock of Tommy and looking at this phenomenon. Tom speaks first.

"You are not, I hope Sir, about to ask me to form a new Government?"

"Oh no, not at all," the Governor says.

"But to be honest, it seems no one can do so unless you are agreeable to it." Tommy says. "Premier Firth has ridden rough shod over so many people in doing things the 'Firth Way', that I'm not averse to making the beggar sweat a bit."

"He may call another election," the Governor says, "if you push him too hard."

Tom knows his law. "He can't do it for seven days Sir. Let's have another conference in six days time."

The Governor looks sternly at him. "Is the matter in fact resolvable?" he asks.

"Certainly," says Tom, "it's easy peasy."

"And you are not inclined to give me an inkling now?" he asks.

"No Sir," Tom says, "no doubt you have read of the fabled King who told his darkest secrets down a well and thus lived and prospered to a ripe old age."

The Governor pulls his diary over.

"Well, shall we say six days time and what o'clock?"

"Eight pm will do", says Tom, "Why don't you have the main players along too and park them here in separate rooms at the same time."

The audience over, they part.

Tom goes around to the WA Club for a relaxing brandy and then heads home. The phone is ringing as he comes in the door. It's his long standing girlfriend who quite recently and vitriolically has given him the shunt, ('You'll never amount to anything!' she shouted as they parted).

"Hi Tommy," she says, "what about coming around for a drink?"

"When?", Tommy asks.

"Well, now" she says, "I'm lonely." She goes on, "Oh Tommy, I do sooooo miss you."

Tom laughs and hangs up. He's seen her dark side: once is enough.

Friday night rolls around. Tommy has spoken to the press and they are waiting for him on the footpath when he walks down to Government House. He speaks to the butler and suggests that they be parked somewhere handy until called for and given a drink. The butler bows and takes them off. The Governor is clearly nervous.



Government House - Perth Western Australia

“Old Firthy doesn’t like it,” he says, “he’s very restless.” Tommy laughs.

“Lets get down to it Governor, why don’t you call the untrustworthy pair in and I’ll call the press. There’s plenty of room in here. Here’s what we will do.”

He listens and says, “I don’t think I can do that, I’m the Queen’s representative.”

“Bollocks,” Tommy says, “ring the Governor General. He never goes anywhere at night.”

So he does and in the best Aussie tradition they go ahead with Tommy’s unusual scheme. This all takes a great deal of time. It is now about 9.40pm, so Tom says,

“Lets have a scotch or two. I wouldn’t like to proceed before 10pm.”

The governor roars with laughter.

“You know,” he says “this will make my memoirs, when written, a sure fire seller.”

At 10pm the Governor admits the two leaders to his office. He keeps the press out for the moment, but allows the chaps coming in, to be photo shot. He is all formality.

## Six

The Governor says, “Mr Premier, Mr Leader of the Opposition, this is all most unusual, but Mr Smith-Parsons has the call and the Governor General has gone along with the idea. It’s not very usual, but it does seem to fit within the electoral act. We first of all need a gentlemen’s agreement before I can proceed. If you both indicate that you are willing to form a Government if called on to do so, I will toss a coin. The winner forms the new Government and the loser agrees to pair one of his Parliamentary Members with Mr Smith-Parsons, both of whom must agree to abstain from voting in the house for the life of the new Government.”

Firth looks Tommy in the eye.

“What do you hope to gain from this you bastard,” he says.

“Manners, manners,” the Governor says, “Mr Smith-Parsons is not desirous of debating this with you, but he wants stable Government put in place and for my part I have now set the goal posts and am ready to bounce the ball, that is, if you want to play? You may leave the room if you want to confer with any other party.”

The leader of the opposition pulls out his short briar pipe - it already filled and tamped.

"If I may," he says. We all nod and he lights up with a taper from a box. He puffs and considers. "It's a fair proposition," he says, "perhaps indeed, in fact, a generous one. It's an even chance another election is a lot of time and trouble and inescapably a lot more money. Who knows what would come out of it. I favour the here and now, but I'd like to put a question to Mr Smith-Parsons."

"Sir?" the Governor says looking at Tommy, who nods in agreement.

"Fire away Mr Opposition Leader", he says.

"Who do you want to pair with?"

Tommy names his choice.

"But why he?" says the man asking the question.

"Well, he's a very good golfer and it will give us both something to do in the legislative doldrums." They all laugh.

"He's one of my best men", Johnston says.

"Yes," says Tom, "and he will remain one. He can carry out his duties in full, but can't vote. I expect we will both make our presence felt at question time."

"Who will you be questioning?" Firth asks.

"Well, whichever side is falling down on the job."

Firth says, "And you won't put any of this in legalese?"

"Mr Firth," the Governor says, "you are trying my patience. I have told you plainly that this can only proceed by gentlemen's agreement."

"Hrumph," says Firth, "then, let's proceed."

The Governor calls the press in to witness and photo this unusual, indeed historic occasion. Firth, of course, wins the toss. He has the luck of the devil.

"I'll await your call, your Excellency," he says, "Good night to you all." And he stalks out. Johnston is better mannered.

"It's probably the closest I'll ever get to being Premier," he says, "but thank you for the sporting chance. You know you could have had any spot in any Government I formed."

"I know," says Tom, "but to be objective, the result we have just arrived at may sit better with my electors. None of whom did anything to put me here."

Time ticks by. Tommy is living well in Cottesloe. He swims before and after work every day of the year, he's living with his sprightly widow; she's a station girl educated at Iona. She is also his electorate secretary and spends a fair bit of time doing the donkey work in Murchison. This electorate has ridden the bonanza of unusual circumstances.

His law studies over, Tom is jogging along steadily. He takes a close interest in what is going on in Harvest Terrace and makes his points; often very barbed points at question time. He delivers questions to both sides of the house, and do the press love him! Although to be fair, question time apart, he and his pair can be seen golfing away at various golf courses.

## Seven

In spring the Prime Minister rings. It's late evening.

"Mr Smith-Parsons," he says, "I have an interesting proposition for you. You know of course, of the Senate vacancy caused by the passing of Senator Stagbouer of Southern Cross?"

"Certainly Sir," Tom says.

"Well, there's a senate vacancy of course and while you seem apolitical on the surface, it's entirely due to you that Clarrie Firth, Liberal from way back, is the Premier of your State. This is a double-edged thing. Firstly we can offer you the senate vacancy and secondly, with all of these migrant problems, the illegal's that is, I wouldn't mind moving the Attorney General portfolio to the Senate, to make it less of an Aunt Sally target. If you want it, being a lawyer, you can have it. It's also, as you know I expect, an inner cabinet spot."

Tommy sucks his teeth.

"Well?" the PM says.

"It's a very fine offer," Tom says, "but I have a gentlemen's agreement on Government over here. I can't accept for the moment."

"Rubbish," says the PM, "I've done my homework. Firth and Johnston say that your electorate secretary is a shoe-in for the seat, if you take me up on my offer. I'm sure if you tell her to, she will continue your arrangements that seem to suit everybody."

"Fine," Tommy says, "done deal, and thankyou Prime Minister."

"Jesus Tommy," the girl says, "with a cast iron senate seat and your easy ability to crush people at question time, I'll probably only see you at Christmas and Easter."

"What the hell," Tommy says, "we'll get a house with a view of Black Mountain and go out to the ski slopes when you're visiting."

