

## The National Party Candidate. By Lloyd Nelson

Bruce Shiplett is driving his hire car on the incline coming out of the Goulburn Valley when his mobile rings, he's on the highway and there's a deal of truck traffic around him, he slows, runs into the front parking area of a nice old pub, nicely set back from the road and punches his cell phone button.

As he listens he notes with interest a very fine house right across the road, what catches his attention is a burst of sweet peas on a lattice upstand the first of the season that he has seen flowering. The sun catches them nicely. He also notes on the side street a 'For Sale' sign. Late August sunshine reflects into the hire car.

In the blink of an eye Bruce's life is about to undergo a huge tree change. The cell phone call relates to an offer, a very, very good offer that he has been sitting on for his oil fields consulting company (for consulting read trouble shooting and replacement work). He has been ambivalent about this good offer and has been turning it over in his mind during this visit to Australia to consult on the work in the Pilbara and Bass Strait.

He enjoys the sunshine, nearly spring sunshine, much different to the blowing sleet of recent North Sea work he has been doing. He surprises himself and perhaps the continuing hopeful buyer by saying O.K.

"That's fine, Bill Hopkins at Slater Gartrill will handle settlement details". He taps the number of the agents mobile into his phone, gets a response.

"I'm opposite the house you have for sale near the pub, how much and have you got a key handy to walk me through it?"

15 minutes later he's inspected the house, a beauty by the way, built about 1912 and being on a busy road quite cheap. The agent points out the pitfalls and the plus factors. To Bruce the busy road says interest and activity, it's just a matter of crossing the road to a good looking old colonial pub, a drive in food place down a bit and an easy walk into the towns business heart. Lots of plus factors to a man without a family.

He writes a few conditions as to zoning compliance, signs off an offer and gives the chap a cheque. He looks at his watch,

"You've got 60 minutes to come back with a signed acceptance, otherwise I'm out of here" he says

"No worries squire" says the agent and he completes this in just half an hour. The solicitor is down a bit but in his office and Bruce goes there with the agent, gives the solicitor a cheque for his trust account, signs this and that and tells him to complete the deal post haste.

He then drives off to Melbourne to chopper out to his job in hand in Bass Strait.

Bruce is ready for a tree change, he's been through a harrowing time in a number of ways. On a pleasant autumn afternoon Bruce is sitting on a gravestone slab edge in the churchyard of famous Stoke Poges Church about 5 miles up from Windsor. He's here early to get a vantage point for this afternoon's reading of Grey's Elegy written in this country church yard. The reader is

Professor Tolliver from Oxford University. It's one of the small and interesting literary vignettes that bob up in England from time to time and often after tourist season. There's a good crowd streaming in nevertheless. Bruce has done this sort of thing before and has carried in from his car one of those tartan car rugs backed with waterproof sheeting to keep the damp out.

A handsome 35ish woman, on her own, comes down the church path. She's looking for a perch too. Bruce stands up points to the rug

"Be my guest" he says

"Thanks" she says and sits beside him

"You're more organized than me. Do you follow Tolliver's marvellous one man reading?" he asks

"Never miss them; he was my English Lit lecturer at Merton"

"Don't I know you" she asks

"Well I've followed you over many fences at the Cottismore" he says "but unlike you never in the first flight",

"Of course" she says, "you always ride a dun horse, quite rare".

"Still got him" he says "hope to get back into it soon".

"Of course, you are one of those rare hunt followers, quite unobtrusive. He laughs "too busy hanging on I expect"

She laughs with him, stops and her face of clouds.

"Yes of course it was your wife, killed by Parkers Brook where some fiend strung a taut length of Number 8 wire across the recognized gap in the hedge", she pauses,

"The same gap where months later they found the alleged perpetrator dead as a door nail jammed into the same hedge. The police looked for you but couldn't find you. The papers were full of it."

"In Russia" he says "doing a long and complex job for Trans Siberian Oil, perhaps just as well. It was a very excellent idea mind you".

The girl says "I feel bad at awaking such sad memories here on such a lovely afternoon".

Bruce smiles, "oh, you can make it up by holding the fort while I grab us an orange juice and champagne from the stand near the church door".

"Tolliver does his speaking role well, they are glad they came. It's been a pleasant shared afternoon. Can I coerce you perhaps into a bite of dinner somewhere?" he tentatively suggests.

"Nice thought" she ripostes "but I don't want to be driving back after dark",

"London's fine" he says "name your pie stall".

Later they meet up at the Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street, English and interesting as all get out. They enjoy a casual tea, he doesn't push his points.

"Perhaps next weekend" he suggests

"Fancy weekend in Paris?" she laughs "give me your cell phone number" she says "I'll consider your perhaps indecent proposal".

They stay in a very good pension just around the corner from Sacre Couer. They can see the towering Basilica from their window.

“MMN” she says “you’re a vigorous man, what do you do for a woman between your many overseas jobs”.

Bruce laughs. “You’ll never believe this” he says “but it’s true. The good London Hotels have many casual country girls looking for the same. Old Basil, the chap who really runs Browns Hotel can spot them from a mile and if I’m in town he does on occasion give me a quick ring. Seems to work like a charm”.

“Married or unmarried” she asks

“Oh about 50/50” Bruce says.

“MMN” she says “perhaps you won’t have to go to Browns for a while”

“Depends on you” he says. “I’m out of the country a bit. “Oh perhaps that will have to stop or at least slow” she says

He warms to the interest she is taking in him. It’s a nice feeling. Back in his new home town abode Bruce gets the painters in to make over the Edwardian colour scheme, which although well done and fitting within the era of the house is just too dark for his taste. He paints it all one colour, creamy or white, antique white it says on the tin. The floor boards are very solid and beautifully polished. He next gets in the block splitter man and stocks up one of the sheds with next winters supply for the tile fires. The outside of the house being beautiful old brick work doesn’t require any paint other than a touch up of the Brunswick green gutters and shutters. He strews a few good limestone and terracotta pots around with Cumquat trees inside them prunes the roses and has the lawns verti mown and fed ready for the summer sun. he hasn’t much inside the house, just a single divan bed and a couple of bar stools in the kitchen where he can easily see the T.V. In the wrap up of the project he is rubbing down the rust coating a very fine wrought iron double settee on the brick side street terrace. The previous owner had dyna bolted this to the terrace, probably due to the proximity of the pub it has made it hard to move.

Bruce has noted the roll up of cars to the stone church over the road and diagonally on a bit. It’s a very handsome church, must be a funeral he thinks. He has the bench unbolted and heaves this very heavy Victorian piece up and leans it against a pergola ready to work on.

As he’s doing this a big silver Ford car pulls onto his street verge and three suited men get out. They are right next to where he is working. Two are in there early twenties, big strong men, the chap in the rear seat, obviously their father is of similar size but with much enhanced girth.

He looks hard at Bruce,

“Who are you?” he asks

Bruce takes this calmly “oh just the odd job man” he says

“What full time odd jobbing?”

“Nah” says Bruce “I’m an invalid pensioner, just do the occasional jobs”.

The big avuncular man says “that would be about bloody right”, one of the many sponging on the system

“Bloody pensioners, neither use nor ornament, god you cant be 50” he says “on a pension, what’s the world coming to, you’re as fit as mallee bull and here you are milking the real workers”.

“You handled that lift without any effort. Should be made to work until 75 to even qualify for a pension”. Bruce’s pension is of course self funded.

“It’s his own retirement fund, full to the brim from cash on which he draws a monthly bank transfer, its good financial management as he hasn’t wasted his full earnings from the oil business”.

These chaps have no sign of moving off so Bruce asks “what do you do other than going around hurling insults at people going about there own business?”.

“I’m the Local member of Parliament, as well as being a Grazier Londonerry is my place, out a bit west from here, that is if its any of your business” he replies.

“Well Mr. Member of Parliament” Bruce says “what about doing me a personal favor?”

“Like what?” he asks

“Well just moving off” Bruce rejoins.

One of the big sons puts his leg over the low garden fence

“Want me to whack him dad? He’s a bit mouthy I think”

“Ummn, tempting, tempting” dad says “but we’d better get into the church, cant upset the farming voters, they go off”

Bruce considers for a moment and then lets down one of their back tyres just to complicate their life a bit.

When they leave the church and spot the flattie they hitch a ride with a couple of other funeral goers and obviously go onto a wake somewhere, re appear about 10p.m to get their car. Bruce has been watching T.V in the darkened room hears them come and switches off the T.V remote.

They pound on his door, get disgusted and he hears them go around to the back of the house.

He picks up a piece of tile baton, knows they will try the terrace doors and when they do and lumber in the flattens both on the floor, belts their knee caps for good measure. He doesn’t ring the cops, the dads not to be seen. When they come around he picks up a folding knife, slashes their suit trousers from cuff to crutch and with a few not so gentle nudges with the baton, encourages their departure.

The next day he walks down the street a bit to the local mechanic’s premises.

This chap Todd McGraw is well spoken of, tall clean cut and a very decisive sort of fellow. He has a good looking green Range Rover for sale on the next door block. They run through this and in the process of so doing Bruce remarks that he has met the local member.

Todd laughs “terrible Ted” he says “the farmers’ friend, no one else votes for him”.

“How does he hold the seat?” Bruce asks.

“Oh, National Party, rural rednecks, seems to always get re endorsed though he’s only a back bencher and spends most of his time in the city. Only comes to things farmers are at”.

Bruce settles into a very pleasant phase in his life. He does a deal of walking, gets in with the clay Target crowd and shoots at their shoots with a borrowed gun, has a sleep after lunch everyday. About 6p.m he walks across the road to the pub.

The crowd there is very mixed, a lot of kiwi shearers and their women out on the front verandah, it's sort of covered, and in the corner is the smoking area. They all nod pleasantly and accept him well. He doesn't drink with anybody, just gets a comfortable spot along the bar which has fine wood fires burning here and there. He enjoys a couple of half pints and takes his tea into the back bar. A Kiwi girl does the cooking and can do a mean steak to the turn.

He is having a quiet drink one late spring evening in the main bar watching the news prior to going to the back bar for tea. Terrible Ted comes into his view, he's already in the back bar, looks across at Bruce,

"Jesus Smithy" he says to the publican, "you don't serve bloody pensioners, where's your pride man?"

"Oh he's a good customer Ted, he's here every night unlike some itinerants I could name" the publican replies.

Bruce gets a bit irritated

"Why don't you rack off fellow, it would improve the back bar view a good deal" he says.

"Bastard" says big avuncular Teddy, a nasty look infusing his face "I'll sic my boys onto you".

Bruce grins "again?" he asks

The national party hold a meeting at the R.S.L hall several weeks later, Bruce walks down to watch proceedings, gets turned back at the door.

"You're not a member" they say

"It's a public meeting" Bruce calmly says

"We don't want you here fat Ted" yells from within the hall.

Bruce walks over to the bottom pub, never seen in there before, cogitates matters.

A couple of days later carrying only a document satchel he catches the road bus to the city and walks up to parliament house.

"Late age student, writing a thesis on the national party" he says "need to research attendance and voting patterns, can you help?"

They are pretty decent, give him a lot of help and point him to the records and Hansard. He is a bit gob smacked to find Fat Teddy is hardly ever on hand for a division, never makes a speech and in general the records come up as though he wasn't a member at all.

Finally when he getting to finishing the project he says "one member doesn't seem to have his footprints anywhere much in your records".

"Who?" asks the clerk

"Ted Maynard" he says.

The clerk laughs,

"Are you sure you're not a journo" he says

"Not at all" says Bruce "only a quiet researcher at best, not a writer".

The clerk lowers his voice "try the parliamentary bar" he says "old Teddy never misses a session in there".

"What is he an alky?" Bruce asks

“Not at all, he’s part of a small clique who spends their days in there and who come out pleasantly pissed towards midnight. He’s got a flat on the freeway, doesn’t have to drive to get home”.

“How does that grab you?” Bruce asks

the clerk turns serious, “between you and me he probably causes less harm than many who attend every session and never miss a vote or division. But also bear in mind the chap says that state politics are in the main toothless tigers as Canberra has a hold on all the real Gelt.

Bruce is no slouch in politics. Quite recently he swam against the tide in Rutland and got a conservative elected against a strong Labor candidate. Even Mrs Thatcher (retired) and Geoffrey Archer (in jail) wrote him nice letters commending his feat.

He next goes to the state electoral office and after several hours’ hard graft and a bit of cajoling he walks away with a lot of paper in his satchel.

While Bruce has been enjoying a bucolic break his brain has been ticking over, he goes around to Ogilvie and Mather, the advertising gurus. Talks to the M.d’s secretary. He’s been rather taken with a series of evocative commercials put together by this firm and running currently on T.V. He wants to know who the creative director is.

“Oh that’s Sean Jefferies” she says

“No it’s not Sean’s work, I really want to know who did the real work on those green candidate 15 second commercials” he replies.

“Awkward” she says “he no longer works with us”.

“It doesn’t lessen my need to know” Bruce says.

“He’s around” she says “even more awkward is that go out with him time to time”.

“Let me take you both to a slap Lip dinner, go out to a call box and invite him”.

She laughs “I have no idea who you are, but you sure know how a big agency works” she says. She comes back, Drinks with him 6:30 at the commercial bar at the Menzies, she says “I’ll be along to dinner at 7:30. This is all old rope for Bruce, he’s seen it all in his U.K Conservative Party Work.

In the wrap up of Bruce’s idea he talks Teddy into expanding his community role as chairman of the Shire Finance Committee more than somewhat into running as an unendorsed candidate for old Teddy’s seat. They Zap Quickly into the media work, only make two commercials which spin off into newspaper ads and voting cards.

Its pretty simple, Toddy in a magnificent business suit which he had made on the cheap in Bali rocks up to film the commercial. He wants some hints and some lines to rehearse.

“Don’t even think about it” says Bruce “just lean on the bonnet of my nice green Range Rover and talk to me the way you did the day I bought it”. Thus commercial one is both of them leaning on the opposite side of the bonnet, Bruce in a country sports coat and soft tweed hat, Toddy as described and they just chat away. The second commercial is filmed about a mile out of town where a vintage 6 furrow State Implements works plough has been rusting away for 60 years in a nice hillside paddock and leaning on this they discuss the problems of

farm world. The clever art director show's them what he's got. It is a very, very effective vision.

"I'll take it home, a bit of editing and a voice over will do the trick" he says. It comes up so well that Toddy now at Bruce's suggestion runs the conventional ad that says in a response to a number of requests he will contest the local seat as an unendorsed National Party Candidate and if elected he will sit with the Nationals reserving the right to bring to both the party and Parliamentary Forum the Generational changes of view point that electors will expect from a new, modern and younger member.

Almost concurrently Bruce manages to get the high quality standard of the media campaign to be leaked to the Local and National Press.

Three days pass. Bruce is sitting on his sunny Terrace drinking filtered coffee when his cell phone goes.

"Toddy, the head of the national party is a few miles out of town, he wants to talk". Bruce laughs, "We're all organized Toddy but you should listen, but play hard ball, very hard ball". Toddy is as tough as and his stern mein and impressive size equips him very well to do this. Bruce arrives at the same time as the visitor and another fellow, they walk in the work shop door, a customer also bowls in. Todd eyeballs the customer "not now Charlie" he says "later".

The chap goes and the four meet and greet. The visitor is the Preliamentary head of the Nationals. No great ball of fire. The other is part of the department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. At least this is how he introduces himself, "Ah, one of the hollow men eh? Nice to meet you" Todd says "now take yourself out of ear shot, right out on the street and stay there".

"I don't know about that" the chap said

"But I do" says Toddy "move and move now".

The decks now cleared and Toddy gets into it

"What do you want" he says

"The leader says we've checked both you and Mr. Shiplett out. You are both extra Kosher and we think it's best to disendorse old Teddy and parachute you in, that's if you agree. What do you think Bruce?" Toddy asks, "after all we're all set to go without last minute dramas".

The visitor says "if you will allow me to finish my proposal we have a leading Senator in a fight with Jack the dancer, a fight he cannot win. It would be nice for his family moneywise if he goes out holding his senate seat six months at the outside, half more likely. We are not against parachuting Mr. Shiplett into the place for the balance of the term, four and a bit years. Bruce speaks for the first time, "I'm not oz, but we can fast track you into citizenship. But in all fairness we also realize you could win any half chance conservative seat in the old dart as and when you want".

"Yes" he says "perhaps, but the climates a deal better here".

"Go out to talk to your adviser on the street for a moment" Bruce says

He goes.

"Nah" says Toddy "let's do our own thing".

A bit of tumult and shouting goes on for the next few weeks with Toddy emerging as the new member of Goulburn.

Teddy concedes early on the night, his case was well lost. His concession speech is gracious and he ends this with “another thing I’ve learnt from this vigorous campaign. Never, never be rude to pensioners. This goes over the head of most but not of course the main players”.

Bruce rings his girl

“What about coming to Oz” he says “I have a house for you to decorate and furnish, you might like to stay on”

“The horses?” she replies.

MMMN well the freight arm of Air Lingus is flying out the Melbourne cup runners within a fortnight

“I’m sure we can squeeze the hunters in”.