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INDIVIDUAL STUDY TOUR TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Mr Douglas Martin – The Nationals

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Executive Summary

I am extremely grateful to the Australian Political Exchange Council (the Council) for the opportunity to observe the United Kingdom's General Election from the 8th of April to the 7th of May 2015.

During my program I was attached to the Scottish Liberal Democrats, who campaigned for re-election in 11 seats as part of the first-term coalition government. I gained an introductory understanding of UK political campaigning and insight into some of the rules and regulations surrounding the election.

I had the fortune to observe the lead-up to the election in constituencies across Scotland and experience polling day in Edinburgh as well as the election day wrap up in London. Among many highlights, I attended constituency debates, industry debates, the highly regarded BBC Radio political program *Any Questions?* and was privileged to be taken for a tour through the Palace of Westminster.

The personal benefit gained from my tour would not have been as considerable had it not been for the many individuals who gave of their time, and their informed opinions, freely. Candidates, MPs, staffers, campaigners, volunteers, and journalists from across the political spectrum were all extremely generous despite being incredibly time poor and provided me with helpful insights into the UK politics.

In Edinburgh, the two Adams: Strachura, Director of Campaigns for the Scottish Liberal Democrats; and Clarke, the Scottish Communications Director, were particularly generous. The Liberal Democrats' Chief Executive, Tim Gordon, met with me in what was no doubt a frenetic and difficult time and his openness was appreciated. Mike Crockart, the Member for Edinburgh West; Danny Alexander, the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury; and Jo Swinson, Member for East Dunbartonshire, and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs and for Women and Equalities; and their teams were extraordinarily kind when I was attached to their campaigns.

I benefited enormously from the opportunity to discuss the macro campaigning and the UK political landscape with leading political commentators and pollsters - Frank Luntz, Founder and President of Luntz global, and his Research and Campaigns Director, Nick Wright.

I am grateful to the Earl of Stair who was kind enough to shed light on some of the intricacies of the House of Lords and his thoughts on the election.

Throughout my travels I had the pleasure of observing a number of MPs, candidates, and political pundits including:

- Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Liberal Democrats;
- Willie Rennie MSP, Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats;
- Alex Salmond MSP, the former first Minister for Scotland, presently the MP for Gordon;
- The former Lord Chancellor, Lord Charles Falconer;
- Dr Liam Fox, Member for North Somerset, and former Secretary of State for Defence;
- Deputy Leader of the Scottish National Party, Stewart Hosie MSP;
- Christine Jardine, Liberal Democrat candidate for Gordon;
- Candidate for West Aberdeen and Kincardine, Alexander Burnett; and
- Sir Robert Worcester, Founder of MORI and subsequently of Ipsos MORI.

A most memorable interaction was to observe Charles Kennedy on the campaign trail. As a former Leader of the Liberal Democrats and an MP with over thirty years' experience in Westminster, I was thrilled to engage with Charles during a surgery in Fort William on May 2. It was with great sadness that I heard of his passing less than a month after this encounter.

General Election 2015

On May 7 four countries and more than 30.8 million voters decided the 56th House of Commons Parliament in the United Kingdom. The count represented 66.4% of registered voters from 650 constituencies, with voter turnout ranging from 58.4% in Northern Ireland to 71.1% in Scotland.

Since 2010, the UK had been led by a Conservative-Liberal Democrat government. A byproduct of this coalition was *The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011*. The resultant constitutional reform, as the name suggests, introduced fixed government terms with the first implementation at the 2015 election. Advanced knowledge of the next polling date levelled the political playing field giving all candidates and MPs equal time to prepare their campaigns. By the time I arrived in the UK the general populace had been subject to campaigning, in some key seats, since 2012; leading commentators to argue that the 2015 General Election (GE) was the longest election campaign to date in the UK.

Polling prior to the election had the two major parties (Labour and the Conservatives) deadlocked with David Cameron's Conservatives, who held 306 seats, chasing 20 seats to form an outright majority government. Ed Miliband's Labour, occupied 258 seats, and required 68 new seats to win back the Government benches.

Campaign landscape

Despite protestations prior to the 2010 result that a hung parliament would result in political deadlock, the Cameron/Clegg, Osborne/Alexander quad and the resulting coalition surprised many over the five years in charge. During the coalition's term, more jobs were created in the UK than in all the other nations of the European Union combined. Unemployment had almost returned to pre-crash levels and the number of people in work was at an all-time high.

By April, political experts predicted the 2015 result to be even tighter and more unpredictable than the hung parliament five years earlier. The political climate was more akin to a season from *Game of Thrones*, with the major political houses campaigning against each other as much as against their smaller opponents, although the bloodshed did not commence until after the polls closed.

Under the hung parliament scenario, which was the scenario touted by almost every tabloid and commentator prior to ballots being counted, much of the political commentary focused on the 59 Scottish seats and the implications the Scotland results would have on whoever was given the first task of forming government. The Scottish National Party (SNP) were riding a wave of unprecedented popularity, picking up where the 2014 Scottish independence referendum left off, with polling suggesting they could win an unprecedented 50-59 seats north of the border.

Party synopsis

The Conservative Party

In 2010, under David Cameron, the Conservatives won 306 seats, 20 shy of an outright majority. In October 2012, the Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ) announced that it was launching a 40/40 seat strategy to win the next election, based on holding 40 marginal seats and winning 40 target seats. When the votes were tallied, they won 38 and lost 10 resulting in a gain of 28 seats. In this strategy it was reported that seats were chosen not because they were simply the most marginal on paper; but rather, consideration was given to seats undergoing major demographic changes which favoured Tory candidates, seats where unusual circumstances affected the last election, and seats with MPs who could win on the back of personal loyalty.

Major policy platforms included eliminating the deficit and running a surplus by the end of 2020, and a referendum on Britain's European Union membership.

The Labour Party

Ed Miliband took charge of the UK Labour movement in September 2010 and Labour has been on level footing or ahead in polling subsequently. During the campaign, Miliband's performances in the TV debates, especially, raised the expectations of Labour supporters. However, Miliband continued to struggle to convince the public that he would make for a better Prime Minister than Cameron.

With the likelihood of a large SNP contingent in the next Westminster Parliament, Labour went about prosecuting its economically responsible agenda whilst rebutting the Conservative line of attack that a union between the SNP and Labour would result in a coalition hamstrung by the Scottish Nationalists anti-austerity plan.

Major policy platforms included an extra £2.5 billion for the National Health Service, largely paid for by a mansion tax on properties valued at over £2m and raising the minimum wage to more than £8ph by 2019. Labour received much media around its policy to introduce a tax on all assets of persons with non-domiciled status.

Scottish National Party

The SNP has enjoyed increased support in recent times. The Scottish Parliament opened in 1999 and by 2007 the SNP were able to form a minority government. They subsequently built on that base, and went on to win in 2011 with a majority. The Party's continued campaigning for Scottish independence resulted in the Scottish referendum (held on 18 September 2014) which was lost by the Nationalists.

Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister for Scotland and leader of the SNP, was seen to be one of the star performers in the general election. Televised debates between the leaders of major political parties were first held in the 2010 campaign. There was much discussion about TV debates in this campaign and in the ITV debate on 2 April, held between the leaders of the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP, Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru, Nicola Sturgeon received favourable reviews from the public.

The SNP campaigned against a budget surplus, instead pushing for a spending increase of 0.5% a year. In addition, they wanted to restore the 50p top income tax rate for those earning more than £150,000; introduce a mansion tax and a bankers' bonus tax.

Liberal Democrats

In 2010, the Liberal Democrats received 23% of the vote share and won 57 seats in the House of Commons. In the eight months after the coalition was formed, polling indicated that their support had halved. Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg struggled to shake concessions the Liberal Democrats had made to the Conservatives during the last term, particularly relating to education fees. In 2015 the Liberal Democrats positioned the party as an intermediary coalition partner - saying it would restrain the Conservatives cuts and reject Labour's excessive spending. Despite forming a coalition government with the Conservatives, Liberal Democrat constituencies were targeted by both the Conservatives and Labour.

On the policy front, the Liberal Democrats were the first party to come out with a costed plan to invest £8bn in the NHS. They also wanted to increase the tax-free allowance to £12,500.

UK Independence Party (UKIP)

UKIP and its colourful leader Nigel Farage MEP has been gaining traction in the UK for a number of years and election cycles; most notably through local elections in 2013 and 2014. During the 2014 European Parliament election, UKIP received the greatest number of votes (27.49%) of any British party. UKIP approached the 2015 election with two sitting MPs, previously Conservatives, and Farage's plight to move into Westminster from the European Union received good media coverage.

Major policy platforms included a rapid referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union and a stricter control of immigration with the introduction of a points system, a limit of 50,000 skilled workers a year and a five-year ban on unskilled immigration.

The Greens

The Green Party of England and Wales was led by Natalie Bennett. The Scottish Green Party and The Green Party in Northern Ireland have been separated from their English counterparts since 1990 but to the general voting populace they ran similar tickets.

The Green Party won its first seat in the House of Commons in 2010. After a tough run with interviews from the BBC's Andre Neil and LBC's Nick Ferrari, Natalie and her team focused on retaining their sole seat of Brighton Pavilion and targeted a few specific constituencies.

Major policy platforms included working with other countries to ensure global temperatures do not rise by more than 2C and a £85 billion program of home insulation, renewable electricity generation and flood defences.

Plaid Cymru

Leanne Wood, the leader of Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales) sought to retain the constituencies held before May 7, with early commentary suggesting they might lose two of their three seats.

Major policy platforms included a deal for Wales to get the same powers as Scotland and opposition to the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system in the UK.

The Battle for Scotland

During my visit there were two very separate campaign battlegrounds; one in England and then the campaign north of the border. Prior to May 7, of the 59 Scottish constituencies, Labour held 41, the Liberal Democrats 11, and the Conservative and Unionists a single electorate. They all faced an assault of unseen proportions from the hugely popular Scottish Nationalist Party who only had six sitting members in Westminster.

During my visit, polling predicted the SNP would claim anywhere from 50 to all 59 Scottish seats. Interest in Scottish politics was at fever pitch in no short measure because the Scottish referendum had only just taken place in 2014.

2014 Scottish Referendum

The Scottish Independence Referendum Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in November 2013, following an agreement between the Scottish and UK governments, and was enacted as the *Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013*.

To pass, the independence proposal required a simple majority. The Nationalists' "Yes Scotland" campaign was the main group for independence, while the multi-partisan "Better Together" campaigned in favour of maintaining the union. The referendum question, which voters answered with "Yes" or "No", was "Should Scotland be an independent country?"

Almost 4.3 million were eligible to vote including all European Union or Commonwealth citizens resident in Scotland over the age of 16. The coalition received more votes, with just over 2 million (55.3%) voting against independence, with 1.6 million (44.7%) voting in favour. The turnout of 84.6% was the highest recorded for an election or referendum in the United Kingdom since the introduction of universal suffrage.

Campaigning in Scotland

From a tiny rump in Westminster to potentially the king makers of the next parliament, the SNP's surge in popularity provided the British media and the general public much to discuss in the campaign.

In what turned out to be a successful campaign strategy to harden up Conservative supporters in England, David Cameron used the popularity of the SNP and their potential power in a voting bloc to frame an image where the SNP were a Scottish tail that would wag the dog of a Miliband Labour government.

A senior campaigner told me that without the luxury of preferential voting, the Scottish Liberal Democrat strategy centred around squeezing Conservative and Labour minded voters to support popular Liberal Democrat candidates. The "goldilocks" strategy that only the Liberal Democrats would force the Conservatives to spend and Labour to save, proved a hard sell when it came down to voters selecting a Party on the ballot paper.

Campaigning under Labour banners in Scotland was tough; the SNP had poached huge chunks of Labour's traditional voting base. The SNP ran a highly successful campaign in Labour seats running the line "we didn't leave Labour ... Labour left us".

Campaigning events

Canvassing - Edinburgh West

Much emphasis is placed on canvassing in UK politics due to non-compulsory voting. The rewards of a well-run and properly targeted campaign can be enormous. In Scotland, I was told that the Liberal Democrats were primarily focused on their traditional strength of targeted on-the-ground campaigning in an attempt to sandbag individual seats with popular MPs rather than over engage in a losing battle with the SNP over the airwaves. In Scotland, it seemed not to matter how hard the Democrats defended their seats with constant on-the-ground activity, the SNP tide of popularity had too much momentum. Be that as it was, in the seats where the Liberal Democrat on-the-ground campaign was strongest, they came closest to retaining their seats. There was much to learn from the professional and coordinated way the Liberal Democrats went about canvassing.

I was able to observe canvassing in different campaigns, across regional and urban constituencies, the most notable being an outing in the Edinburgh West constituency where I joined incumbent MP Mike Crockart, the Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, Willie Rennie and other activists for a day of targeted canvassing. The highly organised nature of the canvassing team was impressive and the commitment of the crew of volunteers in Edinburgh West wasn't hard to see as the team soldiered on despite hail and near sub-zero temperatures.

On their doorsteps, I found the British voters forthcoming and willing to engage with both MPs and volunteers. Constituents were on the whole very happy to disclose voting history, including which side they supported in the referendum, and voting intention.

Oil and Gas Hustings - Aberdeen

The Scottish constituency of Gordon attracted much national coverage during the campaign. The seat straddles Aberdeen north and the surrounding countryside and had been held by Liberal Democrat stalwart Malcolm Bruce for 32 years. In 2015 Malcolm decided not to re-contest and the SNP's Alex Salmond nominated. The former Scottish First Minister and ex-leader of the SNP is a polarising yet formidable figure in Scottish and British politics. I was eager to observe one of the UK's most controversial politicians. I received my chance during the Oil and Gas UK hustings in Aberdeen when he debated Danny Alexander, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and other candidates.

The Oil and Gas industry is arguably the most important industry in the north-east of Scotland. During the referendum, the SNP had made much of the revenue stream generated from waters in the North Sea and the subsequent benefits that could be derived as a result of independence. With a global drop in the price of oil, the industry was in need of stabilisation and the government had been working with the sector to help maximise its recovery. It was enthralling to watch two current political heavyweights debate over a broad range of issues from the local economy and the oil and gas industry to global issues, without pausing for breath. I noted that whilst panelists from most major political parties were represented, there was a mix of candidates from differing electorates. Both TV, radio and print journalists attended and the event was live tweeted.

BBC Radio 4 Hustings - Inverness

I was also fortunate to attend BBC Scotland's hustings debate program on April 23 for candidates contesting the Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey constituency. The program was recorded at the Eden Court Theatre in Inverness, Scotland. Less than a 100 seats were allocated to live audience members and candidates were put through their paces by questions from the audience, mostly relating to local issues as expected. At times the debate was fiery, and local Liberal Democrat MP Danny Alexander, was challenged by all the other candidates. Being one of the four most influential members of the coalition Cabinet, Danny was more than capable of defending his record. However, Peter Hendy, the SNP candidate and local councillor, went on to win the seat with a substantial margin; highlighting the dangers of high

profile candidates who are forced to spend time campaigning across the country at the expense of their own electorate.

Any Questions? - Logie Coldstone

Any Questions? has been running nationally since 1950 and the program is broadcast nationally every week by BBC Radio 4. It is chaired by Jonathan Dimbleby and features public figures or politicians. I was lucky enough to get a ticket to attend with 140 others when the weekly show broadcast from Logie Coldstone in Aberdeenshire, a fortnight before polling day.

Panelists included a former Lord Chancellor, Lord Charles Falconer (Labour), a former Defence Secretary and current MP for North Somerset, Dr Liam Fox (Conservative), Deputy Leader of the Scottish National Party, Stewart Hosie MSP, and Minister for Equalities, Jo Swinson (Liberal Democrat). Given the high calibre of the panelists, it was a fascinating experience with questions ranging from the recently held Leader's Debates to refugees at risk in the Mediterranean Sea, what happens when you vote SNP, British nuclear submarines, and English votes for English laws.

The population of Logie Coldstone would not have been much more than the 140 people crammed into the local town hall. The sleepy hamlet is set at the foot of the Grampian's in Aberdeenshire's Royal Deeside. It was inspiring that the BBC was willing to send the *Any Questions?* team to a relatively remote location and that such high calibre of panelist's attended.

Charles Kennedy surgery - Fort William

During their term, UK politicians routinely set aside time, often at a predetermined location, to host a surgery where constituents can engage with their Westminster representatives and discuss their issues.

In the regional seat of Ross, Skye and Lochaber, Charles Kennedy actively continued holding surgeries during his campaign and encouraged constituents to attend, especially using social media. I joined his Fort William surgery a few days before the election. It was a low-key event but listening to Charles Kennedy talk was a privilege and he provided a political masterclass.

Charles faced a relatively hostile audience with many SNP supporters who did not hold back. Judging from his responses some had travelled across the many surgeries he held to ask questions. Charles was able to offer insightful commentary, his campaign message and to diffuse those in the crowd with a rare combination of charm, modesty and intelligent debate. Irrespective of political bias, it was a privilege to witness one of his last surgeries.

Making the news cycle - Campaign PR

A stark difference in campaigning tactics in the UK is the prohibition of political advertising on television or radio, enforced by the *Communications Act 2003*. Parties are allocated party political broadcasts, however, because Parties are unable to purchase airtime to spread their messaging, the coverage in the news cycle becomes a critical component of messaging strategies.

There were 11 key Liberal Democrat seats in Scotland. A week out from polling day, I was part of a "soccer team" of young Liberal Democrats. We appeared before news and print journalists with Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Willie Rennie at the World of Football indoor soccer centre. Our shirts were emblazoned with the 11 key constituencies and we were able to garner reasonable news coverage that night. Labour leader Jim Murphy was at the Donald Dewar Centre, west of Glasgow, and was filmed dancing with pensioners. But the day was well and truly captured by the Scottish Conservative leader, Ruth Davidson who was filmed and photographed driving a tank near Dundee.

Land's End to John O'Groats

In a final push for votes, and to maximise airtime in the news, political leaders traversed the UK with lightning speed in the final few days of the campaign. On May 5, Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg started a 1,600 km bus tour from Land's End in Cornwall to the most northeasterly point of Scotland at John O'Groats.

I caught up with the campaign bus when it made a stop at Westerton Nursery in Bearsden, north of Glasgow, in the East Dunbartonshire constituency on the eve of the General Election. The Deputy Prime Minister was joined by local MP, Jo Swinson and Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, Willie Rennie.

I had thought the effectiveness of using buses for publicity was questionable. On the day there was a strong media presence and the Democrat Leader's visit subsequently received solid media coverage in both TV and print. Being included in the visit was a tour highlight and I relished engaging with various staff involved and of course seeing the stage management of such a large project.

Digital campaigning

The way political organisations convey their messaging and interact with their audience is continually changing, as is the way activists, supporters and voters interact back. Social media platforms, whether Youtube, Facebook, Twitter or blogs (run by volunteers) were central to each campaign I observed. UK politicians, campaign teams, and political parties all used social media platforms with laser-like focus both as a means of individual interaction and as a medium for generic broadcasting.

Social media provides authentic two-way communication, often proving a good medium to engage with younger voters. During the 2015 campaign, the Conservatives favoured Facebook whilst the Labour Party preferred Twitter as a social media platform. Unlike some more traditional campaign communication channels, user generated content can be created organically, gain enormous traction, and can spread rapidly for very little cost. The term "e-expressives" is used for individuals who create content and disseminate via social media. Individuals or groups who may not have a particular interest or affiliation may through parody or support generate news or more importantly campaign momentum with minimal effort.

During the campaign, seventeen-year-old Abby Tomlinson started the Twitter hashtag (#milifandom) in reference to her support for the Labour Leader, Ed Miliband. The #milifandom mania spread mostly by young women who objected to the media's portrayal of the politician, which they believed was skewed, and spread with enormous speed. Nicola Surgeon tweeted that after the Leaders' debate on April 2 she received a spike of 15,000 followers, enabling her and the SNP to amplify the reach of their message in a very short time.

Parties will no doubt audit the allocation of funding and human capital in each campaign and question the effectiveness of the time, effort and expense invested across communication mediums. Whilst social media's voter influence is extremely hard to measure in a concrete way, it is not going away. It provides campaigns with a tool to transfer messaging in an instant and undiluted medium and simultaneously grants enormous power, right of reply or protest to any member of the public.

Polling day

Knocking up

Previously, my only experience of election day has been in Australia, so to observe polling day activities and knocking up in a campaign where voting was not compulsory was a foreign concept. The UK tend to hold their polling days on a Thursday and as such polling stations open between 7am and 10pm to accommodate voters who would rather cast their votes outside working hours.

On May 7, the West Edinburgh campaign sent two groups out to 'knock-up'. The first team of activists was dispatched mid-morning. Notes from the first round were then used to ensure the second group (sent out in the early evening) did not spend time contacting constituents who had already voted, nor those who had indicated that they were voting for another candidate. Where supporters were unable to make it to a polling station unassisted, provisions are made for a vehicle to ferry voters to-and-from the polling station.

Polling Stations

Unlike Australian polling booths, very little time or focus was spent preparing polling stations in the UK. I visited the Murrayfield Parish Church Polling station and was surprised to find very little in the way of party promotional material. The station had one or two portable candidate posters on the sidewalk but no other candidate or party advertising paraphernalia. Whilst I attended, the polling booth activists were permitted to wear a rosette and greeted voters but did not engage with a political message, nor hand out *How To Vote* cards as voters entered the building to vote. Unlike Australia, candidates are listed on the ballot paper alphabetically by surname.

Conclusion

As I waited for news of the exit polls in London, I was fortunate to listen to Sir Robert Worcester discuss his thoughts on the campaign, and as the results began to trickle in and the Conservatives looked like winning a majority of seats outright, everyone was surprised. The Conservative strategy of focusing on holding 40 seats and winning 40 seats had paid dividends. They lost 10 of the 40 marginal seats they focused on holding and won 38, giving them a net gain of 28. The campaign to muster "shy Tories" had won David Cameron an election outright and the Conservatives had 330 seats in Westminster.

While the result in England came as a surprise, in Scotland public polling had been right all along. Prior to May 7 a senior Liberal Democrat told me that all 11 seats were on the line but their internal polling was more positive than the publicly predicted wipeout.

Labour's disappointment in Scotland would have been equally understandable, with their seat count being reduced from 41 to 1. On the ground the campaigns worked incredibly hard but they could not match the media the SNP received throughout the campaign.

During my program I was attached to the Scottish Liberal Democrats, who campaigned for re-election in 11 seats as part of the first-term coalition government. I gained an introductory understanding of UK political campaigning and insight into some of the rules and regulations surrounding the election.

Being afforded the opportunity to visit the UK during the campaign for the 2015 general election is something I will never forget. The experience was hugely rewarding and expanded my political horizons considerably. Through my visit I was able to gain firsthand insight into various idiosyncrasies of the British campaigning and election processes, whilst broadening my introductory knowledge of UK politics.

Many people were extremely magnanimous, I would once again like to thank and acknowledge their generosity and I look forward to fostering and developing the friendships I developed whilst overseas. I would like to thank all the fantastic individuals who made my visit such an incredible experience.

Finally, I thank the Council for the opportunity to participate in the program and those from The National Party of Australia who selected me.