

# COALITION AND THE

The last *Journal of Liberal History* (issue 88, autumn 2015) was a special issue on the 2010–15 coalition and the page 25). Here, **Michael Meadowcroft** considers the implications of the party's targeting strategy for the

## Targeting: its effect on Liberal Democrat performance in the 2015 general election

Michael Meadowcroft

**M**Y CONCERN THAT the Autumn 2015 issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* would be too close to the end of the coalition, and to the general election just a handful of months earlier, to enable a rigorous analysis of governmental decisions and of the Liberal Democrats' strategy made me predisposed to be critical of the editorial decision. I was largely wrong, and the articles under the rubric 'Coalition and the Liberal Democrats' provide valuable material for the record and for further research. Remarkably, however, all these accounts of the past five years wilfully ignore the consequences on the Liberal Democrats' performance of its targeting strategy. It is a remarkable omission when, arguably, it had a pervasive and malign effect on the party's vote generally and was a major cause of the massive reduction in votes almost everywhere and of the derisive vote in many constituencies.

Put at its simplest, twenty years of targeting, under which, year by year, the party's financial and campaigning resources were concentrated on fewer and fewer constituencies (and local government wards) has left the party with just eight MPs and 8 per cent of the popular vote. Whilst vividly true in its own terms, this statement ignores a host of other factors that impinged significantly on the strategy and its effects.

The figures show clearly that the introduction of targeting prior to the 1997 general election coincided with an increase in the number of MPs elected from twenty in 1992 to forty-six in 1997; and the one was assumed to be so self-evidently a consequence of the other that the efficacy of the strategy



was thereafter unchallenged and it could be applied unilaterally from the centre with increasingly draconian selection and support measures. As far as I can ascertain there was no review of the principle of the strategy and of its effects over the twenty years from its introduction up to last May's election. The disastrous results suggest that, even on its own terms, the strategy had, at best, failed to deliver and at worst it had so hollowed out the party in the 550 plus seats that were not targets that its base vote was minimal and that the party, no longer having a presence in some 85 per cent of the country, could not withstand the adverse icy wind that blew fatally as a consequence of a coalition with the Conservatives.

### **The consequences of continued targeting**

Targeting applied to individual wards for local elections has added to the problems of maintaining a

viable party. We do not just have a constituency targeted but also individual wards within other constituencies. What is more, when a previously Liberal-Democrat-held ward loses its councillors, unless it can demonstrate its massive commitment to winning it back, preferably with one of the previous ward councillors, it gets struck off the target list so that the party contracts more and more and areas that had previously had a significant number of activists are written off and lose any party presence. The City of Leeds is a good example of the problem. There is, of course, the Leeds North West constituency, brilliantly held by Greg Mulholland in May. However, in 2004, in addition to the four wards in this constituency, there were eight other target wards, six of which were won. By 2014 there were only four such wards, just two of which were won. Thus in the run up to last May's general election 75 per cent of the city was written off by

# THE 2015 ELECTION

Liberal Democrats. Unsurprisingly, it triggered a range of responses, including a number of letters (see the outcome of the 2015 election, and **Roy Douglas** queries the decision to enter coalition in the first place.

the party and only in Leeds North East and Leeds East, where some colleagues disobeyed central party instructions, were there even one constituency-wide election address, (they just held on to their deposit in Leeds North East.) It is no wonder that we poll derisory votes in most of the city. Perhaps the most serious consequence of such targeting is that it does not hold out the possibility of revival. If party instructions are followed, no one gets any support whatever in working sacrificially in a non-target ward with the determination to win it – as was a key method of success before the strategy.

## Statistics

The national statistics for the six elections, 1992 to 2015, are revealing (see Table 1).

It would appear that applying targeting after the 1992 general election achieved what it set out to do: it traded a reduction in the party's national vote for a large increase in the number of MPs elected. However, the results in the following three elections hardly justify the risk of ending campaigning in a majority of constituencies in order to release party activists in them to go and work in the designated seats. Clearly there was still a residual perception of a widespread party presence in that the total poll remained roughly the same in 2001 and actually increased in 2005 and 2010. This had disappeared by 2015 after thirteen years of a widespread lack of local campaigning activity and faced with the adverse political circumstances of that election; but even before 2015, the trade-off of 'presence' for seats only produced eleven additional MPs over four

elections – welcome to be sure but achieved at great cost. My conclusion is that there was an argument for targeting for a single election but not thereafter.

## The issues

There are seven questions that need to be addressed in the light of recent elections, and particularly that of May 2015:

1. Does the party wish to be a national party with at least a minimum active presence in every constituency? If so this is incompatible with targeting as practised up to the 2015 general election. Unless there is a widespread national presence there is no point of contact for potential members, for the media, for campaigning to change illiberal local policies, or for applying national policies and campaigns locally. At the very least, the Liberal Democrats cannot be a political party making the argument for Liberalism and seeking to recruit and sustain those who have a personal allegiance to that philosophy unless there is a party locally to join and to participate in, and this applies to ensuring that there are activities for surges of new members such as after the leaders' debates in 2010 and post-election in 2015.
2. What is the value to seats that are designated as target constituencies in activity across the board? In Leeds, over the fifteen years it took to win the West Leeds seat it was certainly helpful that there was activity across the city that was commented on in workplaces

and in working men's clubs etc. as well as producing a great deal of coverage in the local newspapers. Also, there is at least a minimal value in tying up activists of the other parties to inhibit them from working against the party in its key seats.

3. Does targeting produce significant extra workers in key seats? Some additional workers certainly transfer their activity to help in key seats but it is only the dedicated party members that do so, as most local activists only see a need to be involved in their own patch. Also, there is a diminishing return as the lack of local activity causes activists to become inactive.
4. Is there a value in having as large a national vote as possible? I certainly believe that there is. I would not dispute that winning seats and having a significant parliamentary presence is crucial, but the extended influence of the party's MPs, their moral authority and the political legitimacy of Liberalism is underpinned by a massive national vote. It is also important to the advocacy of electoral reform.

**Table 1: Liberal Democrat performance, 1992–2015**

Year	LD votes (million)	LD %	MPs elected
1992	6.0	17.8	20
1997	5.2	16.8	46
2001	4.8	18.3	52
2005	6.0	22.0	62
2010	6.8	23.0	57
2015	2.4	7.9	8

5. Is there a viable alternative to targeting? Historically, an example is provided by West Leeds over the long years the Liberal Party took to win it in 1983. (Incidentally, West Leeds is currently one of the many seats in which currently there is no activity whatever.) We encouraged activity in all the Leeds seats and did not seek to 'poach' key individuals from other seats; however we had special 'work weekends' and similar activities for which we asked for outside help – and got it, often from many miles away. The same tactic could be used now to designate 'special seats' to which extra effort could be encouraged and directed.
6. Is there a long-term effect of the strategy in the target seats? It is curious that there had still to be target seats – many of them the same constituencies as in 1997 – after twenty years. A concomitant danger of targeting is that it encourages a constituency to rely on outside activity rather than seeking to be self-supporting.
7. Over a period of time, the establishing of a base Liberal Democrat vote of electors who identify with Liberal values, even if inchoately, and who are predisposed to vote Liberal Democrat even when the party is unpopular, is incompatible with targeting which prevents activity to seek out and to sustain these individuals.

**Conclusion**

The party's targeting strategy had a positive impact on the 1997 election but not significantly thereafter. Moreover, by curtailing activity in a large majority of constituencies, it has had a malign effect on the party's general presence in the country and has diminished the party's base vote. As such it was a contributing factor to the party's poor performance at the May 2015 general election.

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**Can Liberals learn from history?**

Roy Douglas

**I**N THE AUTUMN 2015 issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, a considerable number of senior members of the Liberal Democrats gave their views of the 2010 general election and its aftermath. There appears to be substantial unanimity that the Lib Dems were wise in participating in the coalition. I contend that this view is wrong and that the Lib Dems had a better option open to them. I also contend that the action they took was rooted in a fundamentally flawed view of the proper role of Lib Dems in the political system – a view which has implications not only for the present but also for the more distant future. I shall go further and contend that unless the Lib Dems take serious and drastic action soon, they will have no future and deserve none. I base these opinions largely on the history of the Lib Dems and their predecessor Liberal Party.

In the House of Commons of 650 members elected in May 2010, there were 306 Conservatives, 258 Labour, 57 Lib Dems, 8 Democratic Unionists and 6 Scottish Nationalists, plus a total of 9 from Plaid Cymru, Social Democratic Labour Party, Alliance, Green and Independent put together. In addition there were six non-voters: the Speaker, who can't vote and five Sinn Fein who won't vote. Conservatives and Lib Dems together could provide – did provide – a comfortable working majority with 363 seats, against 281 for all other voting MPs.

Another option, which is occasionally discussed, was a combination of Labour and Lib Dems. This would have provided 315 seats: rather more than the Conservatives but well short of an overall majority. Whether such a combination could have been formed at all seems doubtful, because a lot of Labour people would have fought it tooth and nail. But, if it had been formed, it could hardly have been expected to last long, being highly vulnerable to minor rebellions, winter flu or small parties feeling their muscles.

A coalition in which the Conservatives were much the largest party has always led to disaster for others. That was the case in the

coalition of 1918–22, even though Lloyd George had more than twice as many MPs behind him as Nick Clegg had in 2010. At the ensuing general election, the Liberals were split into two warring groups. Even if those groups could come together (which they actually did a year later), the Liberal Party would still only have been – for the first time ever – the third party of the state. The National Democratic Party had also supported the coalition, and every one of its ten MPs was defeated. When the National Government was formed in 1931 with Liberal support, it was almost immediately dominated by the Conservatives. The Liberals in the House of Commons promptly split into two groups of almost equal size, plus a splinter of four MPs separate from both. Most members of one of the two substantial groups, the Liberal Nationals, and some of the others, eventually disappeared without trace into the Conservative ranks. A few very important former Labour MPs stayed in the government, constituting themselves the National Labour Party, which also gradually vanished.

Warned by such experiences, the post-1945 Liberal Party resisted temptations to participate in Conservative-dominated administrations. Clement Davies was offered a cabinet job by Winston Churchill in 1951 in what proved to be a remarkably benign Conservative government. Jeremy Thorpe was offered a job by Edward Heath in 1974. Both leaders consulted their colleagues and, following their advice, loyally resisted the temptation. If they had acted otherwise, it is difficult to see how the Liberal Party could have survived.

So what other options remained? 'Go it alone: a plague on both your houses' had some attractions in 2010, but it carried its own risks. A widespread view among Lib Dems at the time was that, if no coalition was formed, the Conservatives would form a minority government, behave with studied moderation for a short time, and then call another general election at which they would win an overall majority. Voters could reasonably judge that the Lib Dems were

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ducking the responsibility to help deal with a very serious economic crisis, and they would lose ground – though it is difficult to believe that they would have fared as badly as they did in 2015.

Suppose, however, that Nick Clegg had greeted the 2010 election results with a speech rather like this.

All three major parties have been disappointed by the results. We Lib Dems hoped to improve our position, but in fact have lost a few MPs. Labour hoped to retain a majority, but they are now well short of a majority. The Conservatives hoped to win an overall majority, but they have not done so. The verdict of the electors might be summed up, 'None of the above.'

Yet everybody agrees that the country is in a dire economic mess and some sort of government must be formed to try to sort it out. We Lib Dems call for a genuine three-party coalition to do so, and are willing and eager to play our part in such a government. However, we are not prepared to join with the Tories to do down Labour, or with the Labour party to do down the Tories.

How would the other parties have responded? There is a theoretical possibility that they would both have accepted the suggestion and the Lib Dems could have expected credit for having suggested it. Much more likely, one or both of them would have refused. The other two parties would have had to sort out the immediate question of who was to form a minority government. It would probably have been the Conservatives, but the possibility of Labour remaining in office and awaiting defeat in the new parliament could not be excluded. In either case a new general election would probably have followed soon. The Lib Dems would have been in a position to argue in terms like these:

In spite of the real economic crisis, the other parties prefer to play silly politics rather than attend to the problem. We have called for a three-party government, which seems to be what the voters really wanted, and

we still call for a three-party government. If you, the voters, agree that this is the right way of handling the crisis, then give us a lot more MPs and that will send a message to both other parties which they cannot refuse to accept.

What would have happened? Perhaps the message would have hit home, and the Lib Dems would have improved their position. Perhaps it would have failed, and the Lib Dems might have slipped back. The one thing that is pretty certain is that they would not have sustained catastrophe on the scale they encountered in 2015.

When the general election of 2015 approached, disaster for the Lib Dems was predictable. Many people who had voted Lib Dem in 2010 were profoundly disappointed. The volte-face over tuition fees had been utterly inexcusable, for many people had been induced to vote Lib Dem by the promise on which many – but not all – of the MPs later reneged. The Lib Dems had countenanced an increase in VAT – the worst and the most regressive of all our major taxes. They had made fools of themselves over electoral reform: the referendum was bound to be rigged against the idea unless the Tories backed it. Furthermore, the proposed 'reform' would have been little better than the present voting system and was completely different from proportional representation which the Liberals had always supported. Against the many disappointed former supporters, the Lib Dems had nothing to say which might attract new support in compensation.

Some people – I was one of them – thought that the 'incumbency factor' might have saved twenty-odd Lib Dems who were good constituency MPs. But this was not to be and the party was reduced from fifty-seven MPs to eight. In the country as a whole, there are no 'strongholds'. No two Lib Dem seats are contiguous. There are only two constituencies, Westmorland and Norfolk North, in which the Lib Dem majority is as great as 3,000 and in Norfolk this may be explained in part by the unusually high UKIP vote which probably damaged the Tory challenger selectively. Lib Dems are certainly in dire trouble and unless something

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drastic is done about it they face the real threat of parliamentary extinction in the foreseeable future.

Reflecting on the catastrophe, would the Lib Dems have fared much better if, somehow, they had formed a coalition with Labour and – against all probabilities – that coalition had survived for five years? I very much doubt it. There is little reason for thinking that voters would have taken a kindlier view of the junior partner in a coalition with Labour than they did of the junior partner in a coalition with the Conservatives.

So, what can be done? There is a historical parallel. In 1951 the Liberals were down to six MPs and did not improve on that figure until the Orpington by-election of 1962, which brought them up to seven. In 1970, however, they were down to six again, after which they began a slow climb to sixty-three in 2005. What played the biggest part in keeping the Liberals in existence as an active party in the bleakest years was the conviction among party activists that the Liberal Party had absolutely unique policies. There was nowhere else that Liberals could go.

Does that conviction still apply? For a considerable time it has looked as if the aim of the Lib Dems was to find themselves in the very position which arose so disastrously in 2010: holding the balance of power between Conservatives and Labour. This implied the hope that they could slip a few of their own people into the government and restrain the larger party from doing some of the nastier things which it might contemplate. There was no prospect of securing any important objectives which were distinctively Liberal, with the very improbable exception of real electoral reform. Whatever else the 2015 general election established, it proved that the electors have no time for that sort of party.

The best hope for the Lib Dems today is to cast their minds back to the 'unfinished agenda' – things for which Liberals fought in the past, which are still unfulfilled. Some of those things have been superseded by events; but many have not.

Free trade was always on the Liberal masthead. However the voters decide in the 2017 referendum on 'Europe', much will be required to establish something like

free trade as Cobden or Gladstone, Asquith or Samuel, understood the term. It remains as true as ever that 'if goods cannot cross international frontiers, armies will'.

For well over a century, Liberals fought for a taxation system more just and more efficient than the present one, pivoting on Land Value Taxation. With huge rises in land values – both in an absolute sense and relative to the value of other things – the case for 'LVT' today is even stronger than it was a century or so ago, when it was winning elections for the Liberal Party. It is the cheapest and simplest way of raising public revenue. It will play a major part in the battle against poverty. It is a major instrument against unemployment. It will help deal with many urban problems ranging from housing shortage to inner-city decay. It will help the rural environment and the farmer, while boosting food production. It will be of great value in countering the cycle of booms and slumps.

As far back as 1929, Liberals fought a general election on the slogan, 'We can conquer unemployment'. Alas, they did not win; but they substantially increased their representation. On the same theme, later William Beveridge produced his plans for 'full employment in a free society', which for a long time was largely accepted by all parties. It is urgently needed today. In a sane society, the problem would not be 'What should we do for these people who haven't got jobs?' but 'How on earth do we find people to do all the work that needs to be done?'

Long before the First World War, Winston Churchill was castigating the Conservatives as 'the party of the rich against the poor', with the intended implication that Liberals were appalled at the maldistribution of wealth which prevailed and intended to rectify it. Wealth is still maldistributed; the poor are still much too poor and a great deal needs to be done, and can be done, to improve the situation.

It was Liberals who in 1870 first made legislative provision for universal primary education. Does our educational system yet provide any opportunity for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to make the most of their talents? If the nation needs many people with high educational qualifications for the

benefit of all, is it acting wisely in imposing high tuition fees, which will inevitably discourage many aspirants? Lib Dems today need to undo the follies of the 2010–15 coalition. Everyone complains about weaknesses in the National Health Service. At the root of the trouble is a shortage of medical and nursing staff. There is no short-term answer, but the long-term solution must be greatly to increase the numbers of people undergoing the appropriate training.

In matters of 'defence' and foreign policy, we may look back to Cobden and, indeed, to some of the Radicals of much later times. Why involve ourselves in conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, where we cannot hope to determine the long-term consequences? As for 'defence', how much is necessary to protect us from attack, and by whom? Would anybody sleep less comfortably in their beds if we abandoned not only Trident but a great deal more besides? Much money and many lives could be saved by drastic reduction in both weapons and commitments.

As every experienced politician knows, good policies are not enough. They must be backed by good organisation. That was recognised by Liberals in the aftermath of 1945, when Liberals decided that their declared objective of a 'Liberal majority government' presupposed the creation of strong constituency organisations. Branches were set up in many places where they had not existed for years and existing branches were given much clearer ideas of how to organise. Of course they failed disastrously in their primary objective, but it is a fair guess that they would have disappeared altogether long ago if they had not given serious attention to their grass roots. My own experience in the constituency where I live, which was won by the Lib Dems in 2010 but lost again in 2015, is that Lib Dem organisation, even in hopeful places, is still very far from adequate.

All this seems to portend a long and stony road back; but politics is full of surprises – good as well as bad. There is some reason for thinking that the situation today may have parallels with that which prevailed in the late 1840s and the 1850s, when old parties were breaking down and new ones appropriate

to the needs of the times were beginning to emerge. I think we should watch the Labour Party in particular. I have said that a Labour–Lib Dem coalition in 2010 would probably have been no better for Lib Dems (or, I may add, for the country) than the Conservative–Lib Dem coalition which actually took place. But a lot of things have changed since before the massive events of May 2015.

If the general election wrought disaster on the Lib Dems, it also wrought disaster on the Labour Party. Ever since 1918, the Labour Party has aimed at forming an independent government. For most of that period, the dominant reason for this was that the Labour Party believed in socialism. That faith gradually evaporated and it was formally renounced in the late 1990s in favour of what was called 'New Labour', which looked uncommonly like a mild form of Conservatism in domestic affairs and subservience to the United States in foreign policy. If the choice of a new leader signifies anything, it strongly suggests that 'New Labour' has also been repudiated. The Labour Party is casting round for new policies and – who knows? – it may eventually land up with policies not wildly different from those which I have suggested as appropriate for the Lib Dems. That, however, is completely hypothetical at this stage.

Labour also faces a major problem of a different kind. Will it ever be possible to create another Labour government? Labour's great stronghold was Scotland right down to 2015. Now they (like the Lib Dems and the Conservatives) hold just one Scottish constituency. On top of that, there is a serious prospect that within a few years Scotland will be an independent country and out of the UK political equation altogether.

Is it possible to secure, not a coalition, but some kind of electoral understanding, with Labour? An old question, but a valid one. I have before me the 'official' party publication, *Liberal Magazine*, of June 1914, p. 323. This records six by-elections to the parliament of the day in which seats that had been Liberal at the previous general election, and one where the seat had been Labour, had been captured by the Tories through the intervention

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of a third candidate. It concluded, 'What is clearly wanted is a policy of accommodation between Liberal and Labour which will reproduce in the constituencies the cooperation which obtains at Westminster.' It would be useful today for both parties to consider how many constituencies were won by the Conservatives in 2015 where the victory could be attributed to the presence of a 'no-hope' candidate – Lib Dem in some cases, Labour in others.

A few conclusions seem to emerge. There is no future for a party which aspires to no more than junior partnership in a coalition dominated by others, though tactical arrangements in some constituencies may well be useful. The job of Lib Dems today is to decide on policies aimed not just at dealing with short-term problems but at producing a long-term Liberal future. It will be necessary to give

much more attention than in the recent past to strengthening local organisations. Lib Dems should, however, keep in mind the prospect of eventually participating in a major political realignment. There are people in the Labour Party and there are people in the Conservative Party too, who are already thinking on truly Liberal lines.

These and many other objectives are suggested by the actions and policies of Liberals in the historic past. Whether Lib Dems have any future will depend on how well they learn from the past.

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### **The Great War and the Liberal Party (1)**

Michael Steed in his very interesting article, 'Did the Great War really kill the Liberal Party?' (*Journal of Liberal History* 87, summer 2015) writes of the belief of the historic Liberal Party 'that reason, trade and moral principles could together bring peace' as 'close to a *raison d'être*' and as 'an important constituent in the glue that held together the disparate elements making up the party'. Two letters in the *Manchester Guardian* in August 1916 seem to provide sharp confirmation of this analysis.

Mary Toulmin, wife of Sir George Toulmin, Liberal MP for Bury, wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* on 5 August 1916:

It is difficult for a life-long Liberal like myself – and one growing more Radical with years – to write with moderation of the present position of Liberal politics. The members of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons, with a few noble exceptions, have slavishly obeyed the dictum of the Prime Minister – 'Wait and See'. They have waited and they have seen! They see a unity of parties indeed but how achieved? By the continuous surrender by the Liberal Party of all those things it held most dear – a voluntary army, right of asylum, respect for conscience, education, Home Rule, and international law as touching the rights of neutrals.

The President of the Yorkshire Council of Women's Liberal Associations, Mary Isabel Salt, wrote on 10 August 1916:

The letters appearing in your columns from Lady Toulmin, Sir William Byles, and others, undoubtedly express the opinion of thousands of sincere rank-and-file Liberals who have hitherto remained dumb under the impotence of the present situation, but who are none the less eagerly awaiting the first opportunity to battle effectively for the old principles which formed the bedrock of their political faith. Some of us are asking ourselves whether we can honestly remain associated any longer with a party whose official

# LETTERS

## **Labour and the Liberals; questions for readers**

Anent James Owen's article 'The struggle for representation: Labour candidates and the Liberals, 1886–1895' (*Journal of Liberal History* 86, spring 2015), Keir Hardie was refused the Liberal nomination for the Mid-Lanarkshire by-election in 1888. He then left the Liberals and unsuccessfully contested the by-election as Independent Labour. John Sinclair, a protégé of (Sir) Henry Campbell-Bannerman and a future Secretary for Scotland, was offered the Liberal nomination but refused, as he did not want to oppose Hardie.

In 1901, Sinclair, then Scottish Liberal Whip, supported, with Sir Henry's approval, the unsuccessful Scottish Workers Representation Committee (SWRC) candidate at a by-election in North-Eastern Lanarkshire, rather than the Liberal Imperialist candidate who was also unsuccessful. The intervention of SWRC candidates resulted in the defeat of Liberal candidates in North-Western Lanarkshire and

Ayrshire Northern at the 1906 general election.

Anent the report of the meeting on 'The Liberal-Tory coalition of 1915', why did Bonar Law, the Tory leader, who joined the Cabinet in May 1915, not have to submit himself to a ministerial by-election? Such were not suspended during the war, as Harold Tennant, Asquith's brother-in-law, had to submit himself to an unopposed ministerial by-election in Berwickshire when appointed Secretary for Scotland in July 1916.

And one more question for your readers. Some biographers of William E. Gladstone state that his brother, Robertson (born 1805) was educated at Eton and Glasgow Academy. However, Glasgow Academy was not founded until 1845. Can any of your readers advise where in Glasgow he was educated? Incidentally, one of the original directors of the Academy was Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's uncle, William Campbell.

*Dr Alexander S. Waugh*