**UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE PODCAST – ELECTION #17**

David Runciman: From the University of Cambridge, this is ELECTION, the politics podcast. My name is David Runciman and today we are bringing you a special edition of ELECTION recorded in front of a live audience as part of the Cambridge Festival of Ideas.

Our guest is Charles Clarke, the former labour Home Secretary and I will be talking to him later on in the programme about political leadership, the Corbyn Phenomenon and what thinks Labour needs to do in opposition to become a party of Government again. But before that I am delighted to say that we are joined by our regular panel from the first series of ELECTION to discuss what has been happening in British politics since we finished broadcasting in June and to look ahead to what we might be talking about when ELECTION returns for a second series in January. So please welcome Helen Thompson, an expert on economics; Finbarr Livesey, an expert on public policy and Chris Brooke, an expert on political theory.

Back in June when we were speculating about what might happen in the Labour leadership contest I do not think any of us had an inkling of the earthquake to come but I would like to start with Helen who did say something that now looks pretty far sighted.

David Runciman: Helen, you said you thought Labour had a problem because the membership that would elect the new leader was so heavily skewed towards London making it unrepresentative of the country at large. Of course also new members joined over the summer but the question remains, how big a gap do you think there is between the people who voted for Jeremy Corbyn and the wider electorate?

Helen Thompson: I think there is a pretty big gap but I think I just want to make one point about the London issue first because it played out in a completely different way than what I was getting at when I made that remark back in June and that was the role of the London MPs in nominating Jeremy Corbyn because if you remember, Corbyn had a terrible struggle to find 35 people to nominate him when you look at the numbers 43% of the people that nominated him were from London Labour MPs. London MPs are about 19% of the total number MPs so that crucial point that got him on the ballot was very London skewed. Beyond that I think that there is a chasm between the people who elected Jeremy Corbyn and the electoral needs of the Labour party in significant parts of the country not least in the Midlands where it is very difficult to see what kind of appeal he has to the kinds of voters Labour needs to win back there and it was interesting when there was footage in Nuneaton which obviously became a kind of symbolic constituency after what happened in May and I think it was actually because of something one of the Channel 4 journalists had picked up there. There were actually very few people there so you can turn out 1200 people in St Mary’s Church in Cambridge but you …

David Runciman: And a few hundred outside as well because I was there …

Helen Thompson: OK – but you really cannot turn out more than 20 odd people for Jeremy Corbyn in Nuneaton and I think that says something pretty important about the distance between the people who elected Corbyn within the Labour party and what the wider electoral needs of the Labour party are in terms of actually winning an election.

David Runciman: So Chris, do you see anyway of bridging that gap if you accept that gap exists?

Chris Brooke: I think Corbyn’s electoral problem is he attracts support exactly where Labour does not need it given the electoral system and in so far as people are nervous about how he may be off putting to some kind of voters; those voters are exactly where Labour needs to pick up voters. So for example one of the arguments people sometimes have is whether Corbyn’s record of sympathy for Irish republicanism for violent Irish republicanism will put off voters and some people say “Well, no, it was a long time ago, and he was trying to promote peace and only older voters will remember”, but if you think well who were the voters who are likely to have very strong feelings about the IRA they are going to be older Protestant voters in Scotland. Now Labour badly needs to win back voters in Scotland, Labour needs to win back older voters, and so again and again, you see Corbyn appealing to students, he is appealing to Greens, he is appealing to young people but in constituencies where there are students and young people and Greens the Labour party already holds the parliamentary seats but I think again and again you can find these critical electoral demographics which are terribly important given the electoral system we have and there is nothing that Corbyn can do about that until he comes to power, where Corbyn is just pointing in the wrong kind of direction.

David Runciman: And what you said makes it sound very unlikely that he will come to power but we will come onto that in a second. I should also say that Cambridge is just one of the seats that you describe and it is now of course held by a Labour MP. Finbarr the other big gap that may be opening up in politics on broadly speaking the left, is between the membership of the Labour party and the parliamentary Labour party. Yesterday the final guest that we had on the first series of this podcast was Lord Gravenor who is the Master at Clare College here and is also a Labour peer, or should say, was a Labour peer because yesterday he resigned the Labour whip on the grounds that he did not believe he could remain in the party as a representative in Parliament while Corbyn was leader. There has been talk but none of it has come to pass yet that there may be defection not just among a few peers which is what has happened, but among members of the House of Commons. That has not happened yet but Finbarr do you see that tension widening as we go forward between the membership and the parliamentary party particularly in the Commons?

Finbarr Livesey: I think the tension is going to widen but there is going to be a critical moment is Corbyn going to be in this seat until we get to the next election? I see it as a four years with two transitions and two referenda and the first transition is the transition from Corbyn to the next Labour leader, I think the reason you have not seen defection so far is that much of the parliamentary Labour party who do not support Corbyn are sitting on their hands going “it’ going to implode and when it implodes then we can start putting the party back together again”.

David Runciman: And we want to be there when it implodes, we do not want to have jumped ship?

Finbarr Livesey: We don’t want to have jumped ship and so at that point those people who have come out in support of Corbyn in safe Labour seats potentially are now in a bind if Corbyn does not make it to the next election and so one of the critical questions for me towards the end of this four year/five-year cycle is will the £3 voters turn up again and in the same numbers and with the same voice because that is what they elected.

David Runciman: And just to be clear you mean will they turn up again for the next Labour leadership election because there is another question is will they actually turn up and vote at the next general election? Helen, there has also been some anxiety recently about the creation of a new movement called the “momentum” which is essentially the extension of the campaign to get Jeremy Corbyn elected leader of the party and those who suspect that there is something more going on behind the scenes see this as possibly the beginning of a campaign to start to deselect some of the MPs who are not sympathetic to Corbyn’s cause. Again, is that something you think realistically might happen as we move forward that this tension will play out around the question of the selection and deselection of individual members of parliament particularly as constituency boundaries start to be redrawn?

Helen Thompson: I think that is the crucial question is the boundary change question and when it is going to come because the Corbyn supporters in one sense only have to wait for that to come and then there has to be an awful lot of selection of candidates just because so many constituencies have to be withdrawn to reduce the number of representatives.

David Runciman: And Helen just to let people know the number that is being talked about is to get down to 600 members of parliament.

Helen Thompson: So the problem for Corbyn now is that by that time an awful lot of things could have gone wrong in terms of his own leadership so will he survive long enough to get to the point where he has got the chance? Once you have got people in around him who start to worry that he might not, then they have got some incentive to act more quickly. They act more quickly it may be that that is a destructive act of itself but it also could be very nerve racking for some of the more obvious candidates for deselection particularly those say like Simon Danczuk could be particularly vocal in criticising him in ways that clearly antagonise more than just the people around Corbyn himself.

David Runciman: And Finbarr mentioned there are lots of things that are going to happen between now and 2020 which is when the next election is legally required to be held unless they change that legislation as well one is that we know that there will be a referendum and in that referendum on Europe, the other is that we expect there will be a change of leadership of the Conservative party consequent on that and I certainly do not believe that David Cameron is going to remain on that promise, I think in an age of anti-politics it would be crazy for a Prime Minister to renege on such a clear commitment. Can you see circumstances in which despite everything that we have said, Jeremy Corbyn ends up in No.10 Downing Street? Anyone want to say yes to that question and if so, what would the circumstances have to be to get him there – for instance the Conservative party splits following a disastrous Euro referendum result?

Finbarr Livesey: I think you probably have to put that with another event and I am not wishing it upon anybody but if there is another global economic event I do not think he would get there just from even a heavily fractured Conservative party I think you have to have that plus something to get any chance of Corbyn being involved.

David Runciman: Chris?

Chris Brooke: I think that is right and the way that one of the scenarios that people sometimes play around with is this idea that if Corbyn is able to come out strongly against British membership of the European Union would he carry enough support with him if not in the Labour party then in the country that the in/out referendum would vote for out.

David Runciman: And we have to say that he has already more or less committed himself not to do that?

Chris Brooke: That’s right because the people around him, around the shadow cabinet table are so strongly pro-supporting continued British membership but just the other day YouGov was polling people about how do you vote in the referendum if Corbyn supports continued membership and then how would you vote in the referendum if Corbyn calls for the UK to leave and you get interestingly different results. So if the UK votes to leave then that is going to transform British politics in very fundamental ways and if that is going to happen, then sure, maybe when things settle down Corbyn is in No. 10.

David Runciman: Helen you are the person on this panel who knows more about our economic prospects than the rest of us do. Doesn’t mean you know what is going to happen. What about as you see it in the current state of the British economy and the problems that that may produce for the government over the next five years and particularly for the person who is currently David Cameron’s like successor George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer? Of course British economic fortunes are tied to global economic fortunes but if we look at it a little bit more in insular fashion, does the British economy face the kinds of risks that could upend people’s political calculation?

Helen Thompson: I am not sure that it does on his own terms but I think that you cannot separate it from the global question and I think it certainly does in the global context. It is pretty clear that the financial markets are becoming more and more unstable this year almost on a month by month basis and that it will be incredibly difficult for the British economy to isolate itself from a financial crash and I think there is a reasonable possibility that another financial crash will happen before the next election and that would deduce another recession for the British economy. I must say though that I am not convinced that that is something that takes Jeremy Corbyn to Downing Street. I think that what you would get in the kind of financial crisis likely to happen is more likely a shift to the right, a reaction against debt which will be seen as being an important part of what has caused that financial crash and the other thing I think Chris has already brought up on the IRA question, that to me alone is a reason why Jeremy Corbyn will never be in Downing Street, I think it is just with most voters over 40 it just means it is a non-starter.

David Runciman: One last question before we move onto to talk to Charles Clarke about some of these issues as well. We haven’t mentioned a party that we discussed a lot in the first series of ELECTION and that is UKIP and UKIP did not have a good general election in terms of parliamentary seats but they did win more than 12% of the popular vote. They have had their own leadership problems to be honest everyone bar the conservatives have had their own leadership problems since the election, it is not clear what Nigel Farage’s status is going forward. Some people think that the UKIP phenomenon has peaked. My sense of it is if you think about the Euro referendum there are various possible scenarios but say that the likeliest scenario is the result being something like the Scottish referendum result which is a 55/45 vote for the status quo but in the end anxiety about change just trumps a desire to give the political class a kicking. What the SNP have shown in Scotland is what you can do with the 45 because those are people who do not get what they want and need to channel the expression for their sense that they were asked a question, the answer did not come out the way they wanted it and they wanted to push on and I think in some ways the central question for British politics going forward is who speaks for the 45 if that is the result. Now my final question to you and we can come back to these issues a bit later – do you think UKIP have peaked or might UKIP plausibly speak for the 45% who wish to leave the European Union and don’t get their way – Finbarr?

Finbarr Livesey: I don’t think that they do I think that UKIP has peaked and I think that the referendum is going to as you say, have a number of scenarios attached to it and it is highly unpredictable right now and if there is one thing we learned from the first season that we did on this podcast is that we shouldn’t be very tied to predictions or polls.

David Runciman: Helen to be tied to her predictions because she called it right … and I should say we will get onto it with Charles Clarke who also called it completely right, the only people I know who got it right was my mother, Charles Clarke and Helen.

Finbarr Livesey: But in terms of I don’t think you say who speaks for the 45% in that sense because I think what we are living through is actually a result also of people going to the polls at the last election and having an expectation that there is going to be another coalition government and actually it has been a shock that there is a majority conservative government and so I think it actually can push a little bit in the other direction that people who felt safe to use their vote in a different way won’t feel safe to do that and so some of the smaller parties will suffer and there may be a concentration into a trust in that people will want to have a vote that they feel will land in the way that they want it to land.

David Runciman: Chris Helen very briefly UKIP do they have a future in the next five years as a really serious force in British politics?

Chris Brooke: Depending on what happens at the referendum absolutely. If Labour is forced into a position of taking part in the official stay or main or whatever it is going to be called campaign, then there are going to be a lot of unhappy not especially affluent voters who will be interested in what the one party in England with a clear out message has to say. The referendum could be the salvaging of the UKIP.

David Runciman: Helen?

Helen Thompson: I think yes for that reason but also because Labour have given them a significant opportunity in the North in particular but parts of the Midlands as well as a result of electing Corbyn.

David Runciman: Thanks very much to Helen, Finbarr and Chris. Now to our special guest Charles Clarke who served as Chief of Staff to Labour leader Neil Kinnock in the 1980s and early 1990s before becoming a senior cabinet minister in Tony Blair’s government as Education Secretary and then Home Secretary. Must more recently he has edited a fascinating new three volume collection of books on the theme of party political leadership where each volume comparing the leaders of the three main parties over their modern history, Conservatives, Labour and Liberals. The books use a deceptively simple measure to assess a leader’s performance. How many parliamentary seats or in one case she adds or subtract to the party’s total during their time in office. On that score, David Cameron turns out to be one of the most successful leaders not just in conservative but in modern British political history having gained 132 seats since 2005. So Charles I would like to start by asking you if you do think it is right therefore to describe David Cameron as one of this country’s most successful party political leaders?

Charles Clarke: I think he has to be considered that way he was widely derived in when I put this particular proposition to a number of very senior Conservatives who you think is the best leader nobody named him they could not see it like that but the fact is that both in terms of sharing the vote and in terms of seats gained during his period of office, he is in the top three Conservative leaders since the 1900s, himself, Margaret Thatcher and Stanley Baldwin and the case of actual seats, he is top. He has won more seats as leader than any Labour leader other than Clement Atlee and I think it is quite striking and surprising.

David Runciman: So we will come on in a second to what that measure might lead out but just following on from that thought, what then are the qualities that he has that marks him out from this long and distinguished list I mean we are talking about everyone who has led a party in modern Britain in the modern era – what does Cameron have?

Charles Clarke: Well in these three books we looked at five different qualities. First having a winning electoral strategy. He started with a big effort to bring the Tories back to the centre grounded politics, all the stuff about the Arctic and hugging a hoody and all this kind of stuff so the Tories have gone way out to the right and he had to bring them back and one of the truths of all this is that elections are fought on the centre ground and his particular election strategy for 2015 which was simply to say we can solve the economy and we say Ed Miliband is a weak leader proved extremely successful.

Secondly governing competence. That is a slight difficult one but I think most people believe that he has been a fairly competent prime minister

David Runciman: And the polls certainly suggest that …

Charles Clarke: And the polls suggest that and so people do not want to get rid of somebody who is seen as competent.

Thirdly party management, well he has played a lot of games which I find very distasteful in playing with his very little inward nationalist elements of his part in dealing with UKIP but he has held the party together. Now the final big throw of all this is the European referendum which is the final stage of that process and it could blow it all out of the water but so far he has been able to do that.

Has he been in tune fourthly with the general political argument running the country? Again I think he has done pretty well and finally bending the rules of the game well he is doing that very well we had the vote this week on English votes for English laws where there were several different areas where he is trying to change the rules in favour of the Conservative party, just today the Labour party has organised its campaign on voter registration where the Conservatives they claim are making changes which help the Conservatives against the other parties in terms for electoral registration so I think on all these tests he has actually done pretty well, I might not like it, but I do take my hat off to the way he has approached it.

David Runciman: But as you said it could all still go wrong, we may be talking about the peak of his fortunes as well because the Euro referendum as we were discussing could change everything. Do you believe as a lot of people are starting to take for granted that if out wins David Cameron must resign?

Charles Clarke: Yes but I don’t think out will win. He is a gambler David Cameron it may not seem like this but Scottish referendum was a classic gamble and he won, now he thought for a while he wasn’t going to win no doubt a week before polling …

David Runciman: He had his wobble …

Charles Clarke: He had his wobble but the fact is at the end of the day he has won the new referendum is a similar gamble. I personally think the national interest of the UK is so very very strongly in favour of continued membership that despite people’s very genuine worries and lots of people do have genuine worries at the end of the day, the poll will keep the UK inside the EU so if that is true, he has won by a mile and he has confirmed his position. If that is completely wrong, I think he would have no choice but to resign.

David Runciman: If we can now come onto the Jeremy Corbyn question. Your books have this broad historical sweep but in terms of party leadership the biggest change in recent British politics has been the move from party leaders being chosen by the parliamentary party or in the case of the labour party by a mixture of the parliamentary party and the trade unions and the membership. This becoming a democratic process, one member one vote, both for the Conservatives, and for the Labour party and now for the Liberal Democrats so you are asking an electorate which is by definition a narrow sample of the overall national electorate to choose a leader and the historical records so far has been pretty mixed on this in that never mind Jeremy Corbyn the Conservative membership chose Ian Duncan Smith quite decisively as their leader, it certainly looks like that when you ask party members what they want in a leader the answer is somewhat different to the categories that you have just been describing which doesn’t answer the question what makes a good and successful party leader in electoral sense, so what do you think that the people who voted for Jeremy Corbyn were looking for in a party leader that gave them that answer to the question?

Charles Clarke: I think that there is a large number of people who feel very very dis-effective. They feel that politicians are not solving the problems they are worried about whether it is the welfare state, the aging society, immigration, climate change whatever it might happen to be and they have got fed up with it and there is a particular group with Labour who feel that Labour in both 2010 and 2015 were saying vote for us we are not the Conservatives and that was the only argument and people see that as very negative and thought that Jeremy Corbyn was the candidate of change, something different and the other three Labour candidates were not able in my opinion, rightly or wrongly, to come over as candidates for change. I think there is an interesting statistical point. If you look at the vote for Diane Abbott in the Labour leadership election in London she got 16.8% if you look at Angela Eagle who got the support of the Corbynites in the deputy leadership election she got 16.2% and the big difference between those 16.8 16.2 voting for clear ultra-leftist candidates and the 60% who voted for Jeremy and I think the interesting thing in this period will be now what happens in Labour as those people say look we want the wide discussion label we want to get on to a forward looking optimistic agenda and I think that’s a tension between that and the traditional ultra-leftist people from which Jeremy Corbyn actually comes and from which he is surrounded and how that plays out will be a very interesting thing.

David Runciman: Well I think that is very interesting because then we have got another split, then we have got three way in that we were talking about the membership, the momentum movement, the movement for change and parliamentary party that you feel within the movement for change there is another between what you might call the organisers and the wider momentum simply for some different kind of politics because the organising mode of that looks very traditional it seems to have its roots in the 80s.

Charles Clarke: Absolutely. Its roots are in the 80s but the way I see it is if it is right the large section of the electorate and the disaffection with politics generally maybe a quarter, maybe a third, and you can see in the Parti movement or the Front National in France that exists in this country too. I think that is the best of the UKIP support, I think it was the base of the SNP support and it’s a question of who can lead this general feeling of disaffection and that same group has come to support Jeremy Corbyn in this election.

David Runciman: But they could move on?

Charles Clarke: They have no allegiance to any particular group other than the charismatic Pied Piper the Nigel Farage, the Alex Salmond, the Jeremy Corbyn but then can move on in different circumstances.

David Runciman: And so do you think, as I said when I introduced you, you did work very closely with Neil Kinnock through the long period of Labour opposition and some of what we are seeing now has its roots back then and I totally take your point that the appetite is for something new but then there may be lessons from that period as well and I want to talk about how you think Labour as a party of opposition can start to plausibly once again become a party of government. I have just been reading the second volume of Charles Moore’s biography of Margaret Thatcher and he has a very striking passage in there where he says “The mistake that Labour made in the 1980s with the most passionate Labour supporters, was their hatred for Margaret Thatcher that actually became a distraction from the real business of opposition which is to understand what it is that people want and how it is at the moment being channelled into the electoral fortunes of your opponents”. Now my sense is that Labour may be repeating that mistake now, there is so much anger and bile. There is a long way of asking you if you recognise Charles Moore’s description and are there lessons from the 1980s that you think do need to be applied now?

Charles Clarke: I do recognise the description and I am really trying to attack it from the point of view of how do you oppose. It is easy to oppose at one level the government says “X” and the oppositions says “X is a load of rubbish” for whatever reason and this is about whatever X the government does there will be serious arguments against it which you can mobilise. Is that the base of the opposition? Or alternatively is the alternative to compare what the government is doing with what you would do were you in government and that is a whole different basis of opposition. Now in the 80s we had a whole series of policy issues, membership of the European Union, selling council houses, nuclear disarmament, privatisation where we went through a long and hard discussion in the Labour party which was about coming to terms with the values which Margaret Thatcher represented. We found that as a party very very difficult but at the end of the day by the time we got to 1992 we had done most of that, not all of that actually, and then Tony Blair from 97 took it a further step forward to say that Labour at that time was in tune with what people were thinking which it had not been previously and that policy change which was very hard is what Labour has to do now. It has to say what are the choices that we will put before the British people in 2020 in policy terms. I am doubtful whether Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership team can do that but I am confident that within Labour there are whole series of people who are able to think that through in a positive way.

David Runciman: And if I had to ask you for one policy area where you think they should start, where would it be, where does the heavy lifting have to start?

Charles Clarke: It has to be the economy I mean the way elections work is if the electret doesn’t trust you to run the economy you are not in the ring. Once you have passed that test you can have a discussion what would be better what would be worse but we absolutely failed to pass that test, both in 2010 and in 2015 people haven’t trusted us on the economy. That has been Labour’s historic problem of course going right back to 1931 the only time I believe in the whole history of Labour where you could say it was trusting on the economy was from about 1998 just after we were elected through to about 2006/2007 but we threw that away because we didn’t explain what really happened in 2008 allowed a Tory narrative to get going which was in my opinion inaccurate so our key challenge is to be able to persuade people that we know how we could run the economy in a coherent way very difficult to do from opposition impossible if you are called Jeremy Corbyn.

David Runciman: Is it now too late to explain to people in your terms what really happened in 2007 and 8, if there a way that the message that the Corbyn team would like to project was that there is responsible and economically efficient way of doing anti-austerity politics if you genuinely understand some of the structural forces at work, is it too late for that message?

Charles Clarke: It’s not too late it should have started in 2010 Labour allowed itself to be distracted by its own leadership election then and a set of arguments were made which were never contested and I don’t understand to this day why Labour from 2010 to 2015 didn’t try and set out a better picture. I wasn’t a big fan of Gordon Brown as prime minister but his period immediately after the 2008 crisis in relation to the G20 world economy he played an outstanding positive leadership role that in fact the whole world crisis was a lot less than it would have been in my opinion, and Gordon Brown not being the UK prime minister at that time, others may disagree of course but I think there is actually a perfectly coherent story to be told about Labour and the economy. Whether Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell are even able to open the door to people listening to what they say I am very doubtful. I agree with what Helen said earlier if we have another great economic crisis people won’t just say oh blimey McDonnell and Corbyn were right all along I’ll vote for them it is not going to happen.

David Runciman: Thanks very much to Charles Clarke. Before we return to our panel we went onto the streets of Cambridge to ask people how the remarkable events of the summer might have affected their view of politics. If Jeremy Corbyn can be elected leader of the Labour party what other seemingly impossible things might happen?

Member of public 1: The most impossible thing was to renationalise the railways I think. Cost a lot of money to renationalise. I lived through the days when it was nationalised before and it didn’t work and I don’t believe you should go back and do things that didn’t work again.

Member of public 2: There was a national front going downhill in France, that would be great. I think it is absolutely appalling what is happening in France and not just in France and I am interested in France because I am French and Marine Le Pen is doing very well which is a worry.

Member of public 3: What could happen next? I think there will be a very quick Labour election for a new leader. I see this as a Michael Foot era, now going to a steady decline there could actually, there could be another offshoot of another party like the SDP a few years ago.

Interviewer: If Jeremy Corbyn can be elected leader of Labour what other seemingly impossible things could happen?

Member of public 4: Oh wow, I think we are going to see interesting results in the next election and then we are going to have to reform from someone who I guess sadly for the sake of modern politics is far more centre of the left and doesn’t divide people quite as much.

Member of public 5: Bernie Sanders to be elected president of the US.

Interviewer: That would be equally surprising do you think or more so?

Member of public 5: Similarly yeah. Bernie Sanders has been a fringe politician for decades one of the long self-proclaimed socialists in the US Congress with a graduate community that is 80% international here in Cambridge a lot of people are talking about these elections side by side. The only thing that both sides of these increasingly polarised countries have in common is dissatisfaction with the current system and I don’t think it is just the specific politicians I think it is the role of money in politics and the disenfranchisement of marginalised voters.

Member of public 6: Conservatism gets the heart.

Interviewer: And that would surprise you because …

Member of public 6: Because I think it’s gone too far the other way. They are trying to present themselves as being sympathetic and they are not.

Member of public 7: Well it really…how absurd can politics become? I suppose you might say the Conservative party should be taken over by those that wish to leave the European Union and bar immigration despite the fact immigration has been one of the major elements of growth that has taken place.

Member of public 8: Oh my goodness, there are surprises all the time isn’t there? I honestly don’t know. This country seems in a very disorganised state politically and otherwise, one minute we’re supposed to be very good voting all the money’s all alright the next minute we haven’t got the money for this, that and the other it’s very confusing.

Member of public 9: Putin I suppose could decide to come on the side of the West perhaps couldn’t he and could show a more egalitarian approach to his apparent approach to the situation in Syria perhaps, that would be a surprise wouldn’t it?

Member of public 10: I couldn’t tell you, I don’t know after that who knows?

David Runciman: What we are going to go on now and do is to talk through some of those themes, particularly the American election which is what we are going to be covering in the second series of this podcast but also some of these wider international questions but does anyone want to pick up?

Q: Is there a scenario where the Greens and UKIP could actually take away Labour votes particularly in the former case in the University towns latter in the Northern towns so that Labour doesn’t become the second power in UK politics?

Q: A midterm vote of no confidence in the current government triggering an election.

Q: Theresa May becoming leader of the Conservatives.

David Runciman: So the first one which is I think it is fair to say that we have been talking on the assumption which is just being challenged that under a first pass the post system, Labour is pretty entrenched as the only possible alternative government and it is certainly true that it is hard to see how you get from where we are now to electoral reform but were there electoral reform a lot of the calculations we were describing change because not least both of the main parties could plausibly split and under PR systems you don’t get too main parties you get a range of parties and there is a way in which it makes almost perfect sense for Jeremy Corbyn to be leader of a further to the left than the mainstream Labour party which maybe pitches for about 20-25% of the vote and then could form part of a coalition government but under where we are now because there isn’t, under the current parliamentary arithmetic, a way I think you can get to electoral reform because the Tories would block it. Are we right to assume that Labour will remain the party of opposition rather than having the vote chipped away and the support chipped away such that insofar as there is a party of opposition it is some coalition of the minor parties instead? Chris?

Chris Brooke: Some people do have this for them it is often the optimistic thought that there might be a popular anti-conservative front that will bring together the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the Scottish Nationalists, the Welsh Nationalists and Labour and they think about what a common platform might look like which would have a move to a more proportional voting system in its heart, but it is very difficult to see how that common interest could emerge because these other parties are trying to take support away from Labour. If you look at where the Greens are targeting they used to be strong in Oxford East which is Andrew Smith’s seat, a Labour seat, they hold the Brighton Pavilion seat, they are facing a challenge from Labour. There is one of the Bristol seats where they are popular but Labour won the seat at the general election and in Charles Clarke’s former City in Norwich the Greens are strong there but the constituency they are strong in is a Labour seat so it is not the case that there is any ground for sort of re-directing Green fire against the Conservative party, the Greens at the moment, their strategy, is all about winning Council seats and trying to challenge for constituencies that are held by Labour. It’s a zero sum game and it is very very difficult to see where the ground or a sort of popular front to the left might work in terms of electoral strategy.

David Runciman: Charles do you have any anxieties that the Labour party might actually be some kind of terminal decline and that even with our very rigid British electoral system there is a risk that the Labour party ceases to be the alternative party of government?

Charles Clarke: I am worried about it but I don’t think it will happen. The last time the great British party declined it was the Liberals and the Liberals declined for a number of reasons but there was in the wings a Labour party and organised trade union movement which could move in, I don’t believe that is the case at the moment. I think Chris’s analysis is entirely correct I was interviewing Caroline Lucas on Thursday this week in Norwich about this and she talked about an overall deal but actually there isn’t any deal that makes sense, the only place that there could be a deal which made sense was with the Liberal Democrats where you could imagine half dozen seats with potential Liberal Democrat wins and half dozen seats which are Labour wins or you could have some kind of electoral pact of the kind that has happened in the past and that could help take away the Tories overall majority so it only takes them to lose 6 seat to lose their overall majority. Then the next enormous hurdle is even if the Tories are a minority and not an overall majority as they are, how can you get a joint position amongst all the other parties and in particular between Labour and the Scottish National Party which will be capable of governing. I just don’t quite see how that works and a pre-condition in the current arithmetic of an alternative government of the Tories after 2020 is that there is some viable proposition that the British people would accept before the election effectively of some kind of alliance between Labour, the SNP and the other parties, so I do worry about this but I think the answer for Labour is to reduce the support of the Greens and UKIP by having a coherent political strategy themselves and at the moment we haven’t but if we did, the Greens and UKIP would very much fade away.

David Runciman: So to come on to the second question if I can para phrase it a bit from one of the other features, the British electoral system as we now have these fixed 5 year parliamentary cycles and 5 years seems to me a long time in a world that is changing very fast. Uber didn’t exist 5 years ago I think. Helen do you think there is any plausible way in which the British political system could introduce some mid-term form of sanction, recall, a primary system for party leaders, maybe something analogous to what happened in the United States of course it is very hard under a parliamentary system to do that and is there is any way if five years is too long and we don’t change the fixed term parliament Act is there any way we can inject a bit more accountability half way through?

Helen Thompson: It is not obvious to see how we can I mean I think something interesting could happen half way through this parliament or roughly half way through this parliament if this referendum were lost from the point of view of Cameron because that would be a reflection of the chasm between the voters and the political class essentially given that the centres of each of the three parties are in favour of continuing membership of the European Union that would be turning our politics upside down and something new would emerge but I find it very difficult to see how that quickly turns into some extra measures of accountability that come half way through a Parliament. I think the other thing though is that the electoral system is going to find it incredibly difficult to cope with what is going to come, particularly perhaps in the scenario in which Corbyn or a version of Corbyn fights that election for Labour and Labour does very badly and say the scenario going back to your point earlier about who is going to represent the 45% in which UKIP does well in terms of the popular vote a not inconceivable scenario in which the amount of the popular vote that Labour gets and the amount of the popular vote that UKIP gets is within touching distance of each other a bit like the 1983 situation with Labour and the Alliance and at the same time you have a divided, in some ways, unpopular Conservative party. Can the electoral system really cope again with this amount of disconnect between what voters are expressing that they want and what the constituency boundaries turn out in terms of parliament – I am not sure that it can.

David Runciman: I do think that one of the really fascinating features of British politics at the moment is in one description we have these huge gaps between elections but by historic standards five years is a very long time in fact the average time I think is closer to three and half but on the other hand we are in this unique period where we have these three very very important, not elections, but votes – the Scottish referendum, then a general election and then European referendum all within about 3 years of each other, each of them hugely significant but this is this weird period of British politics which is both rather stagnant and a period of extraordinary change and I think that the change narrative when historians look back is likely to be the dominant one.

Charles Clarke: The other timescale problem though is that many of the problems we have in the country whether it is say welfare reform, aging society, immigration or whatever are issues which require long term solutions and one of our problems is that we have very short terminus political culture which makes it much more difficult to get the kind of agreement you need to change long term solutions so that is a real contradiction in the process but unfortunately there is no way through we have to change our political structure, we do need a more proportional system, we do need more flexibility, we need more accountability of MPs to their constituents and so on but the current system is not doing that, unfortunately the Conservatives are the most resistance to any form of change of any of the main parties. Labour now I think is ready to look at doing things in a different way if only as the force majeure of being in opposition.

David Runciman: If we can go to the third question then and have a brief discussion about this because we haven’t talked about it and I am sure people maybe would like to hear our views on this if it is the case that David Cameron does stand down which I think he will before the next election there is also the question of who is likely to be the next Conservative leader so we heard as a seemingly impossible scenario but actually it doesn’t seem to me to be seemingly impossible it could be Theresa May I mentioned that I just read the second volume of Charles Moore’s biography of Margaret Thatcher which covers the period from the Falklands War through to the 1987 general election and one of the really striking things about that book is apart from a couple of footnotes John Major features in it nowhere so in the history of the middle period of the Thatcher government there is no mention of the man who is three years later going to be prime minister which people often point to that if you want to win the Conservative leadership election it is good if no one has heard of you three years before it happens because the favourite doesn’t win. Well we are probably more than three years out I think from the Conservative leadership election. At the moment the conventional wisdom is that the choice is between the favourite George Osborne, the conventional right wing candidate Theresa May and the maverick right wing candidate Boris Johnson and it is also worth remembering that the Conservatives have a variant on the Labour electoral system for leader unlike the Labour party they don’t let anyone nominated past the threshold go to the members only the top two so if Labour had had the Tory system the vote would have been between Andy Bonham and Yvette Cooper and that is designed to add an extra threshold to rule out the Corbyn effect – it didn’t work with Ian Duncan-Smith but I think in the case with the Tories the question therefore is does Boris Johnson get into the top two because the evidence of the Conservative party conference is he is still hugely popular with the membership – so anyone can jump in on this – the first question is does anyone think that Theresa May might be the next leader of the Conservative party or does anyone want to suggest that it might well be a candidate from outside those three favourites. First anyone for May?

Chris Brooke: I think May could win. I think she only has a small amount of support from key people in the Conservative party and I think the kind of people she has the people that have worked for her in the past, her former special advisers, people who have worked on her team, I think they are pretty effective operators and I can imagine an election that is Boris Johnson against Theresa May in the run off in front of the members after George Osborne crashes and burns somehow and we see May’s back room people destroying Johnson in the Tory press with his long history of inciting his friends to break people’s legs and his various affairs and so and so on. I think if anyone can destroy Johnson’s reputation with the public, it is some of Theresa May’s associates and that is for pure political skulduggery is something I would really really like to see!

David Runciman: And as an extension of that of course one of the things that marks her out in this field is that she is a woman and does that help her if it is a showdown with Johnson for some of the reasons that you described?

Chris Brooke: Maybe but I think one of the underestimated aspects of the Labour leadership election is that we don’t think enough that when Labour elected its leader it might also have been helping her select the next Conservative prime minister. I do think May’s chances would have been better had Yvette Cooper won the Labour leadership election, I do think that would have helped Theresa May because a lot of the people who supported Yvette Cooper had this idea that the Tories like Cameron and like Johnson and like Osborne aren’t very good at dealing with strong articulate intelligent women and I think there might well have been a move in the Conservative party to see May as exactly the right candidate to put up against Yvette Cooper leading the opposition. I think you can tell other stories where had Labour selected other candidates that would have enhanced the fortunes of that particular Conservative politician who looks like the best answer to that leader of the opposition.

David Runciman: Finbarr do you think those three are the field or do you think it might be broader than that?

Finbarr Livesey: Right now those three are the field but as he said John Major wasn’t mentioned up to three years before when he became prime minister and there can be another candidate coming from another part of the party. For me the interesting conversation underneath the hood as part of the skulduggery is what’s the relationship with Cameron for Osborne and as we get closer to the point of when is he finally going to step down, how is that relationship managed?

David Runciman: How is that process made because up again under the British system it is not like a presidential system where you can have a lame duck and then the leadership election running alongside it the transition is actually incredibly hard to manage because the new leader of the Conservative party becomes prime minister and then has to fight an election – how long do they need before the election to be a plausible candidate?

Finbarr Livesey: And so for me there is going to be a growing tension from Osborne’s team of when, when, when and that will start to express itself in potentially a loss of discipline and at that point you also get to see the Osborne he has to now be prime minister and a lot of people would say that he isn’t at present and his expression his body language and the other things he does the Superman pose for those who have seen the photographs they scream that he isn’t going to be the person in the slot.

David Runciman: Charles?

Charles Clarke: I think the final choice will be George Osborne or “a n other”. I think that Theresa May has already gone over the top, I think she did that at the Conservative party conference, Cameron is distancing himself from her in some respects the only way in which her candidacy could be strengthened is if we did vote no in the European referendum and I think in those circumstances perhaps I am not a fan of hers normally as a former home secretary’s club where we think the other person to be terribly good that is not my opinion of Theresa May I think she has been a very bad home secretary and I think that will play. Boris Johnson while charming in some respects is extremely frustrated. He will have to be a cabinet minister after he finishes as Mayor of London and I am sure Cameron will put him there, what post, how, how will he do it, well or badly – the number of hurdles for Boris Johnson to trip over between now and the Tory leadership election is very large. I think Osborne will be the favourite all the way through despite all the negatives but I think that by the time we get to 2019 2018 or whenever it is, there will be another candidate emerge who will do better in the parliamentary Conservative party than May or Johnson meaning the final choice will be Osborne who will be strong enough to be in that final run off and the “a n other”. But I think that both May and Johnson are on a declining path and increasingly frustrated so we will see a lot of theatre around them but I don’t think they will make it.

David Runciman: Helen, very briefly, do you have a prediction for us as our predictor of the future …

Helen Thompson: Part of my prediction is going to be not to make a prediction so I think that if the referendum is won then its Osborne and the transition is actually not that complicated because it provides a timing for Cameron to go, if the referendum has the possibility of being lost and I do think it has the possibility of being lost and that becomes clear before the referendum then I think no one should make any prediction about it.

David Runciman: Thank you very much. In January we are returning with season 2 of ELECTION when we will be looking beyond Britain to discuss electoral politics around the world starting with the US Presidential primaries. As we were hearing from people on the streets of Cambridge earlier, while we have been enjoying Corbyn mania, American politics has experienced the rise of its own maverick candidates including Bernie Sanders but most notoriously, Donald Trump and although Trump clearly stands for very different things, Finbarr I think it is a real question as was suggested by one of our contributors earlier that the popularity of these maverick candidates is part of the same phenomenon that led to the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party so do you think it is plausible to see if something that joins British and American politics and that as weird as it might sound, Trump and Corbyn are part of the same phenomenon or is Trump a uniquely American phenomenon?

Finbarr Livesey: I think I am going to say yes and no and be fence sitting. Yes there is a connection obviously because of this rising discontent with the way in which political systems are not giving people what they want, they aren’t as people has said, seen to be solving the problems that are facing us but Trump is a very very different beast in terms of the manner in which he has come into the process and specifically how money works within the American system and Corbyn comes with £3 price tag attached to vote for him and Trump comes with billions of dollars and ad buys in every state that he wishes to an ad buy and ignoring the traditional politics of not doing ad buys and not doing a lot of investment in field operations and Iowa and other states so there is a grain of connection but everything after that is completely different.

David Runciman: And we may have reached peak Trump already but it is not that Trump has peaked and is being replaced by another of the mainstream candidates it is now Ben Carson the doctor not the politician who has risen to the top of the polls and then on the democrat side as we heard the clear Corbyn analogy candidate is Bernie Sanders. One difference which goes back to some of the things we talked about earlier is that we have just seen the first democratic presidential debate in which Hilary Clinton did pretty much deal with Bernie Sanders and it did make wonder why no one among the rival candidates to Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour election was able to come even close to that effective essentially squashing of Sanders and I suspect it tells us something about the qualities of Hilary Clinton, relative to the qualities of Corbyn’s rivals. Do we now think on the democratic side that Hilary Clinton has seen off her maverick rival – Helen?

Helen Thompson: I think so but I think the crucial thing that happened last week was Joe Biden deciding he wasn’t going to run, he had decided he was going to run he was the boomers preferred candidate rather than Hilary Clinton but once that obstacle is out of the way it is hard to see how she in the end doesn’t get the nomination although I can still see her having difficulties in Iowa and New Hampshire because she is not popular in Iowa and New Hampshire is as good a place as any for Sanders to make his stand but in the end she will win the nomination unless Clinton should win the presidency in the end.

David Runciman: Chris – and you said the American election hadn’t really caught fire for you the fact that you weren’t that gripped by it at all, what would it take to excite you in this context – or do we just need to get nearer to the real deal?

Chris Brooke: I think we need to get nearer I mean one of the things about the Republican field is that there are so many politicians that if you break double figures on any poll you look like a front runner because …

David Runciman: And I think Carson has risen to the top he has got 25% or something …

Chris Brooke: See it is very difficult to get a handle on things at the moment but that field is going to narrow down as people run out of money because people don’t want to give money to politicians who are polling 6-8% in the various races I agree with what Helen said that the first two states in the democratic nomination for the primaries and the caucuses are good for Sanders but when we get down to states for example with large Afro-American populations the African-American vote seems to be well organised for Hilary with Sanders making few inroads there and I think Helen is right that Hilary Clinton is going to get the democratic nomination so a lot turns on who the Republican challenger is it is too early I think to see who it is going to be, I don’t think it is going to be Donald Trump but when the Republican field simmers itself down we will get a shape of what the dynamics of the race are actually going to be and when I look at the race at the moment I just find it a bit too confusing and I don’t have a high tolerance for these multi-candidate debates that they have so I switch off.

David Runciman: I am sure you are not alone in that. So on the question then of who she might face I was speaking to someone recently who was quite closely connected to the Hilary Clinton camp and I asked him who did they fear and he had a very very clear answer he said there is only one candidate that they really fear and that is Marco Rubio the Latino senator from Florida and that I was told that the ticket that they really fear is Rubio plus John Kasich who was the governor of Ohio and American politics is weird because the electoral college system means it is not a national election at all certain states count much more than other states and the two states that count most of all are Florida and Ohio and from a democrat perspective they look at the electoral map and they think if we lose Florida and Ohio we lose the White House, it’s a very very weird system. Charles I don’t know how fully involved you are in this at the moment but apart from anything else you will have known Joe Biden back in the day …

Charles Clarke: He was guilty of plagiarising Neil Kinnock’s speech why am I the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to go to University and Joe Biden used that in the election campaign and had to withdraw from the democratic race …

David Runciman: And this is Joe Biden’s second time around isn’t it …

Charles Clarke: I had sketched down just before you said it Marco Rubio I think he is personally both most likely and potentially the most successful Republican candidate, partly because of the Florida factor but really much more because of the overall ethnic factor of representation I mean the great success of Obama was that he was able to build the sense of America which was all ethnic elements within it and the Republican opponents simply looked like a very old past group. Jed Bush might have been able to do that to some extent except for the fact that the name Bush is so resonant of that elitist East Coast in fact Texas, but nevertheless East Coast and I think Rubio will come across as somebody who can speak much more credibly for the Republicans for the future country which America wants to be and I think he is absolutely the guy to watch. I also think that Hilary Clinton, I would be with her and I think Hilary Clinton will be elected I wonder about her I thought she should have been the candidate not Obama 8 years ago and I wish she had been, I think she’s a fantastic woman, I just wonder at the final point whether she will be tough enough in the breaks and she wasn’t against Obama in the democratic selection and if it is her versus Rubio right at the end I wouldn’t absolutely put my money on Hilary to be able to get it which I would be very sad about because I think despite all this email stuff and so on, I think she is a genuine public servant who would be a fantastic president of the United States of America.

David Runciman: And of course she has the disadvantage that Bush has which is the Clinton name …

Charles Clarke: Accept that they had one president elect not too …

David Runciman: I know but to become a dynasty in American politics is a challenge, so we will re-visit these questions including some of these predictions. There are lots of twists and turns to come in the American process so our second series of ELECTION will start around the time of the Iowa primaries and we will take it forward from there. Finally the other thing we are going to do in the second series because the first series very much focussed on Britain is we want to look internationally at electoral politics because we don’t have a general election coming up but we are still called ELECTION but there are elections happening all over the world all the time and every country’s election is fantastically important for that country and so while we broadcast in the New Year we are going to be looking at elections as they take place in places like Uganda and Peru which we may think have nothing to do with us but we hope we will be able to explain why they really matter for the people there. So the final question I wanted to ask everyone was where possibly in the world do you think over the next year or so we might be forced to think about or have to think about that we are not thinking about at the moment? If you think a couple of years ago Ukraine wasn’t on many people’s radars and then it suddenly rose up – Syria has been on our radars for a while but things spring up in international politics that suddenly even in parochial insular domestic politics force people to pay attention and this is not asking people for predictions, it is just a sense of when you look more broadly more globally where you do think politics might be going to get interesting in the future – Helen?

Helen Thompson: I want to go with Yemen it is already interesting that we are not paying huge amounts of attention to it partly because we are paying a lot of attention in the Middle East to Syria but you have fairly direct conflict going on between the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran including Saudi Arabia taking direct military action with the support of 8 other Arab states, you have ISIS controlling part of the territory of Yemen, you have the Americans providing some logistical assistance to the Saudis this is going to get horrible and complicated and I think we are going to hear a lot about it.

David Runciman: Chris – do you have a view on this?

Chris Brooke: I wonder whether things might get really interesting in the European heartland in either France or Germany, Germany is taking an awful lot of refugees from the crisis in and around the Mediterranean and that is going to play out somehow in German politics we don’t know how but to go back to what somebody in the voxpops that we heard earlier the Marine Le Pen phenomenon in France is a disturbing one, you expect on the face of it that a presidential election in which she made a run off would have the same dynamic as the one where Jac Chirac beat her at her father …

David Runciman: He didn’t just beat her he absolutely annihilated her …

Chris Brooke: But with the republican left rallying to the Gaullist candidate history doesn’t tend to repeat itself that straightforwardly and Marine Le Pen does look like a much stronger candidate to me than Jean-Marie Le Pen ever was. I don’t think she will end up in the Elyssee I think it is probably going to be back to Sarkozy I wonder whether something will happen in one of the core European countries that will make things quite different to how they have been hitherto?

David Runciman: Finbarr?

Finbarr Livesey: It is the impossible question, the known/unknowns being very personal next year there are elections in Ireland and it is also the centenary of the 1916 rising and I think it is going to be a fundamental moment for countries like Ireland deciding which path they are going to take.

David Runciman: And we will be talking about Irish politics in the season 2 of ELECTION. Finally, Charles, we didn’t warn you about this question but feel free to …

Charles Clarke: I would have gone for France or Germany as Chris said earlier, France in particular, if I was to pick somewhere completely different I think Iran might prove to be more surprising than people think following the agreement and how that goes and I could see some change in Iran but I would hope for this one.

David Runciman: Thank you very much to Helen Thompson, Finbarr Livesey and Chris Brooke. To our special guest Charles Clarke. You our live audience for your contributions as well and to our new production team of Catherine Carr and Barry Culfer and for very valuable technical support to Nick Carter and Glen Jobson. Please do join us again in January when ELECTION returns every week to look in much more detail at the US presidential election as it unfolds as well as continuing to keep an eye on what is happening in Britain, Europe and the wider world. We will have a really exciting new array of guests lined up for you to explore politics from every different kind of angle, so do please join us. Until then, my name is David Runciman and this has been the University of Cambridge Podcast ELECTION.