David Runciman - From the University of Cambridge comes ELECTION, our weekly politics podcast asking the big questions you won’t hear anywhere else to some of the most interesting people inside and outside British politics. My name is David Runciman and we are going to be coming to you each week from my office here in the Cambridge Politics department to talk about this unique period in modern political history the campaign, what might happen, what does happen and we are going to keep going until Britain has a new government, however long that takes.

This week we are going to be hearing from Lord Maurice Glasman, one of the architects of the movement known as Blue Labour and one of the most unusual thinkers in British politics at the moment. He has a pretty clear view about what he thinks is going to happen in May, “Nobody is going to win, the new consensus is yet to be fully forged”, and why he thinks there is going to be another election not long afterwards. But we will also be talking about the new BBC drama, Wolf Hall, and the lessons is has to teach us about Tudor state craft, Maurice Glasman thinks we could all learn a lot from Thomas Cromwell, “There’s always got to be an intensity of creative destruction”, all to come.

I spoke with Maurice Glasman a former advisor to Ed Miliband, one of the architects of Blue Labour and someone who still has considerable influence in different parts of the Labour party. He is, as we’ll hear, one of the most interesting, provocative thinkers in the Labour movement and I started by asking him, what exactly is Blue Labour?

Maurice Glasman – Disabusing of the idea that things could only get better, so to reintroduce some notion that they could also get worse

David Runciman – Right

Maurice Glasman – That in normal human life there are things like death, loss, heartbreak, rejection and tragedy, and we have to be able to deal with those things as part of a human condition and not turn to the state for remedies to deal with the fact that your girlfriend doesn’t like you anymore

David Runciman – So the blue is that kind of blue

Maurice Glasman – Miles Davis blue, it was originally called ‘kind of blue Labour’, but then there’s another sensibility, which is also a kind of mystery to me at where along the line Labour became a sort of governing wing of the PPE

David Runciman – We are sitting here in Cambridge, so maybe we should say

Maurice Glasman - That’s why I’m in Cambridge because you don’t have a PPE degree

David Runciman - PPE graduates are people who took a Politics, Philosophy and Economics degree at Oxford

Maurice Glasman – Yep, they are with a very heavy focus on utilitarianism and government

David Runciman – Of the current front benches on both sides it’s surprising

Maurice Glasman – It is surprising

David Runciman - How many people have come through that program, I mean if we can all it a program

Maurice Glasman – But maybe it’s not surprising

David Runciman – It’s noteworthy

Maurice Glasman – Yes, it’s remarkable, maybe that’s the word we are looking for. Labour became the sort of governing wing of the PPE degree which was entirely utilitarian and liberal and cease to be concerned with issues like democracy, the participation of people in their civic lives, when the data decided everything. Because I come from a background with committee organising a genuine realisation that socialism and labour weren’t talking to people about they things that actually mattered to them which unbelievably are things like family, the place they live and labour itself work not just justice, fairness, inclusivity, diversity and the rest of the mantra of contemporary public sector management. So, Blue Labour is a provocation in that way, to say that the Labour tradition is much richer than John Walls

David Runciman – And when do you think the rot set in then?

Maurice Glasman – I’ve got a real date for it, which is 1945

David Runciman – Ok, that far back then

Maurice Glasman – Yeah, obviously it intensified through Wilson in the 60s and well, Gordon Brown was the genuine apotheosis of the whole deal, which was

David Runciman – So Brown, not Blair is the apotheosis of this?

Maurice Glasman – Blair was very liberal but Brown really combined the stateism – the idea that the only fair and just way of doing things was exclusively through the state, which would be done with no participation or whatever from the population. But the ’45 idea is important because that was when, up to that point, Labour was a very rich tradition, quite committed to worker participation, worker ownership of firms, very interested in vocation and the status but with ’45 you’ve got the nationalisation model which excluded the workforce from any participation. That’s when you’ve really got the PPE graduates running big industries

David Runciman – And now the PPE graduates from both sides, now we are governed across the Isle by PPE graduates

Maurice Glasman – It’s a strange country, one party, and three centre grounds

David Runciman – So, this podcast is to talk about the election in the broadest possible framework to try and give it some historical background, some global perspectives. So you take the perspective from 1945, you look at the election we are coming up to now in the blue labour gloomy view of the world; do you see grounds for hope?

Maurice Glasman – It’s not gloomy, that’s the thing, its literally nutty to think that you can live a life without being blue that you have to live with sadness and tragedy, so it’s not gloomy, a great beauty resides in there as maybe Miles Davis and Picasso to name merely two would suggest.

David Runciman – Ok, but seeing current British politics from that kind of perspective, do you see the hope? And if you do where is it?

Maurice Glasman – Well, the hope as ever, lies with the people of country rather than with the political class. I would say, just to apologise to your listeners, this is not the first time I’ve said it, we are still blocked politically, I think we are in the dying phase of neoliberalism which has failed to generate value and has given great incentives to greed. But yet on the left they are still committed to a welfare state model without a concept of labour value, so, there’s massive disenchantment and I think that’s the first thing we’ve got to say about the election is that no-one’s going to win, the consensus is yet to be fully forged and put to the people.

David Runciman – And if you look at it particularly from the point of view of the labour party fighting still to win this election and presumably you would like them to win it?

Maurice Glasman – Of course

David Runciman – What could they be saying that they are not saying that might just open up a gap in this closed political landscape?

Maurice Glasman – They’re not going to make the changes

David Runciman – They’re not going to say it

Maurice Glasman – They’re not going to say it. So, if you look at the John Cruddas and the policy review, a whole series of, you know this is official Labour policy it’s not as if I’m speaking from the margins of the universe, and the manifesto; we would be very interested in strengthening the self governing institutions in a redistribution of power to cities not city regions but to cities with city parliaments and then what we’d do is spend 10% of the bailout to endow regional banks so there could be genuine local growth. We are very interested in restructuring higher education to turn a lot of universities into vocational colleges with a very strong emphasis on vocation. So there needs to be a big change and maybe we’ll talk about that more when we talk about Tudor Statecraft, this is a long term political consensus shift that is required which involves not just redistribution of power and decentralisation but also a political economy that recognises that capital centralises every bit as much as the state and how to decentralise capital out of the city of London and the maximisation of returns and into a genuinely real economy

David Runciman – I’m sure a lot of people listening will like the sound of some of that and think it’s normally not the kind of thing you hear from politicians but will also have a sense that it’s very hard to imagine in an election anyone from one of the main parties saying it

Maurice Glasman – Well it’s the same as 2010, what we’ve got is a reprise which is investment verses cuts roughly

David Runciman – Plus we’ve got business every time Ed Miliband opens his mouth saying you’re going to take us back to the 1970s, that’s the narrative. I mean the campaign has got a long way to go but that’s the current story that we’re hearing, its very very constraint

Maurice Glasman – Yeah well it looks like an old left verses a new right, we’ve been here before, Brown was also pretty much abandoned by business, but what there isn’t any sense of is a common good, brokering of a relationship between the different, at present, strained interests into a constructive vision for the nation

David Runciman – So do you see anyway in which an election that’s almost certainly going to produce a confused, fractured outcome when no one has the capacity that usually is given under the British system to exercise real power as a single party. Do you see anyway out of that confusion that some kind of common ground could be found?

Maurice Glasman – One of the problems with living in a post-modern utilitarian environment is that the constant pressure of the event and the moment but if you consider, which I do, that we are living for a long term realignment and then this election is an important event in clarifying that Labour has to really significantly change and re-establish a genuine relationship with the people who, I know it’s a radical thought, who actually live in the country you know

David Runciman – What as apposed to ones who don’t?

Maurice Glasman – No, as apposed to a relationship with a set of abstract concepts, which we will pursue, so it’s about that democratic thing, and about the participation of the people in power over their lives rather than just a commitment to a set of outcomes

David Runciman – So you said the people who live in the county, so the other striking feature of this election is, it’s not clear what the country is anymore because certainly Labour have got to fight two separate campaigns, they’ve got to fight a campaign in England, they’ve got to fight a campaign in Scotland

Maurice Glasman – Sure

David Runciman – Labour in recent history has been the one party that’s been able to put together a coherent account of something for Britain; it’s much harder to do that now. What do you do if you’re labour and you’re trying to send out a message, the kind that you’re talking about, which is about reminding people of where they live, what they belong to, what the common good is, and you see the country that you live in fracturing?

Maurice Glasman – Well I got into a lot of trouble last week for saying what I am going to say now

David Runciman – Do say it again

Maurice Glasman – Do forgive me, which is that a 2% swing to Labour will completely nullify the Scottish vote, I mean in strictly electoral vote we tend to forget that England is 10 times the size of Scotland, that the population of Scotland could fit into the private properties of North London setting aside the council properties, so we get quite hetup but London is a huge city that has more people living in it than the combined populations of Scotland and Wales and yet it has some kind of Mayor and twelve advisors rather than a parliament, so I’m very interested in city government just to raise the issue, rather than thinking exclusively in terms of national issues which cant work out for either side, in terms of maintaining prosperity or civil peace. Jim Murphy’s a very able, very excellent politician and I have a great deal of faith in him as an individual leader but obviously the same thing in Scotland is that Labour became managerial, technocratic and remote, people cease to belong to it as a cultural form and are extremely disillusioned, so it’s going to be very difficult, in brutal political terms the election will be fought in England and the result in England will be decisive

David Runciman – Yeah but there are various scenarios in which the election is fought in England but the MPs who are returned in Scotland hold the balance in power

Maurice Glasman – I think it’s not going to work out quite that way

David Runciman – Really?

Maurice Glasman – Yeah, I don’t think it will

David Runciman – So you don’t think, and polling suggests from people who are asked of the various permutations in our parliament which one you like best, a Labour SMP coalition is the one that people plump for, you don’t think that’s on the cards?

Maurice Glasman – That’s conceivable because there is a very strong kind of left progressive unity in that, I think that there’s, I’ll probably get in trouble for this, there’s a lot more in common between Nicholas Sturgeon and Ed Miliband than people realise, they are both welfareists, they both believe in the welfare state, neither are as concerned with the generation of the wealth as with its redistribution; they are both pretty much committed to similar things in terms of very robust equalities agenda. So we will see how that works in Scotland I mean at the moment the assumption is that Scotland is some kind of left progressive nation but maybe I just learnt my Scottish history from sort of Dads Army and things like that but I’ve always thought it was a little bit more Conservative disposition that’s yet to find its voice

David Runciman – So you think there’s a way to go yet

Maurice Glasman – Yeah really

David Runciman – Will we see the SMP telling the rest of the country how it should be done?

Maurice Glasman – Before the SMP demands more money in order for more welfare

David Runciman – And again I feel like given the nature of the conversation we are having, this is all a little bit event focused rather than looking at the big picture but the other challenge that Labour faces, the main parties all face is UKIP. What ought Labour to be saying to respond to that challenge?

Maurice Glasman - That’s obviously much closer to my heart than stitching together a series of left wing progressive alliances. Just to go back to the event focused management issue, I think that there will be another election within 18 months and that’s going to be the important election, I think this election won’t resolve, so let’s keep our eyes focused on two years down the road

David Runciman – The next event

Maurice Glasman – The next event could be much more and definitely gives Labour an opportunity to reconnect. I think the key that Labour should remind itself is government of the people, by the people, for the people, so when UKIP say we want our country back that is not to be despised but what does that mean?

David Runciman – And our country for UKIP does mean England and we need to accept that too

Maurice Glasman – And it was Tindal who said it, it wasn’t Abraham Lincoln, it was the man who translated the Bible and they asked him what does the Bible mean, the guy translated it into English and he said the whole meaning of the Bible is government of the people, by the people, for the people. So they are tuning into a long deep English tradition and the deep English tradition is a paradoxical doctrinal tradition, it involves liberty and democracy, it involves tradition and modernity, its not a rationalist country and we’ve tended to forget this I think in our political discourse. So UKIP are a reminder that there’s been a dispossession of an inheritance and that inheritance is the ability to democratically make mistakes and to learn from them. You are told, well you can’t discuss immigration, it’s illegal to limit immigration because it’s against EU laws, you can’t reassert grammar schools you know that would be, you can’t deal with free movement of Labour because that’s illegal, basically anything you think politics is about becomes bureaucratically impossible; so I take a different view of UKIP, I think UKIP are a healthy surge resistance to the domination of a rationalist progressive paradigm that has gripped politics

David Runciman – And so that means their democracy against the rationalism, that is the democratic surge for you?

Maurice Glasman – Yeah, they are a democratic surge and they’re all over the place as it would be but what the challenge for Labour is that there’s huge support for working class, from mining communities, from northern working class communities for UKIP, which wouldn’t be the case if they were a straightforward Thatcherite party. So an ability to engage with the rage and dispossession people feel is absolutely necessary for constructive politics. And how do you build a common good between locals and immigrants? How do you build a common good between north and south, between the small towns and cities, we’re not thinking of the levels of abandonment that people feel and UKIP express that. I think we’ve got to get over the instinctive despising and because they’re from an English tradition they’re not straightforwardly fascist or anything like that as people make out, it’s kind of confused assertion of reclaiming of some political power, some idea that politics involves power and that the people can make decisions about what they want

David Runciman – Is there anyway that the established parties can capture that kind of energy, because it does seem to be just a straightforward clash between the sorts of, like you say, chaotic, desperate expressions of this kind of rage and what happens when it gets channelled into a well established political party fighting a national election?

Maurice Glasman – Well that’s where we’ve got to learn paradox, a really vibrant political party is simultaneously established and insurgent, there’s a governing aspect to it and there’s a very messy politics going on which is embedded into the lives of people and in the different places and interests of the country. So the challenge before Labour is to be able to actually talk to people who don’t understand what it’s talking about when it talks in this very abstract way and to route it in the genuine traditions of everyday discourse, you know, an honest shift, get stuck in, it’s our country, this is your country, I think there are forces really in Labour who really do talk like that

David Runciman – We don’t hear them much

Maurice Glasman – Well John Cruddas is around let’s look at that; I mean he is a very serious force that has really played with that discourse and does get heard and talks to pack meetings across the country and there are others. It’s just to say to the people who are listening, that politics isn’t a static argument over abstract principles

David Runciman – Even though it feels like that at the moment

Maurice Glasman – That’s the problem, that’s not politics, that’s just your essay in political philosophy that you have to write in your second year, really get over it and move into the world and look at it, is what I say to you

David Runciman – So one of the things I was struck by in some of the things that you’ve written is that there is great focus on Englishness and on the country but you also are very drawn to certain kinds of European traditions of political thought including kind of certain Catholic traditions and others. So that’s another frustration of contemporary politics that European wide political parties are now taking off the European discourse doesn’t happen, it’s insulated in this country. How do you bridge that divide, some of the things that want, need in some more of a European dimension to them?

Maurice Glasman – Yeah, and completely so, and Cambridge University is a really good example of an amazingly nationally embedded European institution with a university and its always been the case, so for example I’m talking about Tindal translating the Bible but obviously the reformation had a huge impact of Luther of Calvin and England’s always been part of a wider European conversation and that’s to be distinguished from what’s happened certainly since the war on Europe which is a fear of ideas following Communism and Nazi-ism and a blandness of a kind of rationalist progressive blandness and occasionally you have a sort of post-modern Schmitian saying oh no it’s all about power but they cant talk about good power or bad power so its all about power. Flujo was another example of a complete cul-de-sac of impossible to talk about ethical alternatives, you just had systems of control, that’s the compliment to the, if you like, the bland rationalism. So it’s absolutely vital to engage in European ideas and impossible to conceive England without it, that’s crazy but then not to have that captured by the concept of the EU,

David Runciman – Sure

Maurice Glasman - That is the absolute identification, so for example, Karl Polanyi The Great Transformation is a huge book for all of us on the Blue Labour wing, it’s a story about colonification; he was a Jewish refugee, born in Budapest and he in turn was hugely affected by the socialist calculation debate which was high accentry into the world with **Vomnices** against the Austrian Marxist who did believe as some members of Labours shadow cabinet do, that you could have a computer big enough you could calculate everybody’s wants and you didn’t need to go through the detour of a price system. And they won that, capitalism exerts this huge pressure to commodify and people get it and they go oh they feel these pressures in my life so there isn’t, its only a certain class that is hostile to the richness of the ideas and its never been the case that England’s been enclosed, its both open and closed and that’s the paradox, you’ve got the institutions, the common law, the monarchy, Cambridge which are very strong internal systems that mediate but they’ve always been open to the world, they are not just embedded in a local discourse

David Runciman – And when you say about Thatcherism, what people forget about Thatcherism is that it was influenced by Germany and German experience and ordoliberalism and they’re open to ideas and that’s the difference right?

Maurice Glasman – And we’ve got to be open and loving of that, and what there is, there is a timidity on the left to actually argue and debate and to be open to the right because we are stuck in an orthodoxy that we know better, when in fact we have lost the argument, that’s th tragedy of the left. So it is the case that the market and the price system is a far more complex system for the distribution of what people want but there’s pressure on innovation that can’t be ignored, that nationalisation was a failure and yet we are not alive to the possibilities that opens for the left that those really flourishing market economies have really strong self governing democratic institutions like universities, like city parliaments, have a strong sense of vocation it’s not co modified, they talk more about vocation and career so, the market requires a huge amount of non market institutions to function but if we are just wedded to the state then we cant make those arguments because we are also subordinating to abstract morals. If that makes sense

David Runciman – What you’ve just said won’t come up in the priministerial debates. It’s good; co modification goes down well when you’re saying it. I don’t think Ed Miliband, when Ladbrokes do those, which words do you think he will say in his speeches that’s not one of them

Maurice Glasman – But if you think co modification is ok, do you think prostitution’s ok? That’s the way that debate actually works

David Runciman – But it is really important, there’s no question, one of the frustrations with this election and this campaign for most people is that they recognise the sterility of the language and the narrow frame of ideas and yet when you hear a conversation like you have just had with me, it does feel a little bit outside of what people think politics is

Maurice Glasman – It’s frustrating from all sides

David Runciman – Let’s just go back to the thing you touched on earlier which is what I wanted to ask you about it watching Wolf Hall, which is you once said and continue you to say, so not once said, you believe that we can learn from Tudor state craft, there’s something about that way of thinking about politics, I watched Wolf Hall and I found myself thinking about this as watching it. What can we learn?

Maurice Glasman – That Thomas Cromwell is a huge figure in my life, you know, when I started here I studied history as well as doing contextual history of political thought, with all the frustrations that that involves, there was a historian called Jeffrey Halton who taught the Tudors and that was magic for me and I really loved that. And he kind of had Thomas Cromwell the basic idea is this, in 1500 England was a backward country we were behind in science, we were behind in munitions, in ship building and within 100 years we were really established in terms of science, technology, gun powder, we had so much gun powder we could even have a national holiday which showed it off on November 5th and we translated the Bible, the King James Bible had come out and particularly in terms of currency the city of London becoming the centre of currency exchanges and the whole Atlantic trade so we basically ruled the waves and had a nationally established language and had bridged the gap in terms of ship building and munitions. And when I was looking at that it was the establishment by the Tudors of independent institutions so you’ve colleges Trinity, here, Kings, very important colleges but they were endowed chairs in Hebrew, Greek, maths in particular at Trinity and by the end of the century particularly through the endowment of the Cambridge colleges England was leading in some ways in terms of science and then you look at the Greenwich Maritime College which was established for the ship building and map making. You had the city of London established as the global emporium for insurance and trade. So within a century you had a transformation of the conditions of the nation but it wasn’t through policy, it wasnt done through centralised state policy, it was done through creating autonomous institutions that were self governing, that’s why I think Cambridge is such an important institution it’s one of the last remnants of academics who actually have some power of human resource departments and general external because you’ve got endowments because the university cant be really bullied by the government or the market, it still has some internal judgement

David Runciman – But it was done by destroying some institutions as well, I mean that’s the crucial thing about Tudor state craft it’s destruction as well as creation

Maurice Glasman – There’s always got to be an intensity of creative destruction, the institutions that were destroyed were the monasteries and the redistribution of land of the monasteries

David Runciman – And the power of the Catholic Church

Maurice Glasman – Yeah, obviously a huge part of what I’m saying is to reconcile with the Catholic tradition, we lost a huge amount of thinking about the common wealth, of thinking about the common good with that. The state craft was based actual creation of traditions and independent institutions, which then could not be interfered with very easily by governments. What I think Cromwell and before him and the Tudors genuinely could do was discern the direction of travel and create a set of institutions that could prepare the nation to affectively deal with that rather than setting targets so it’s a longer term form of institutional statecraft and I think we’ve got a lot to learn from restoring and renewing these ancient institutions and creating new ones too

David Runciman – And finally do you think you could get a Cromwellian politician and 21st Century British democracy?

Maurice Glasman –I certainly think so, I think there’s an appetite for, you know many politicians have a tremendous appetite to excerpt power so, the paradox is only where there is a way is there a will at the moment what I am trying to do is open up a space to see what is needed, what we can do and how to work within our traditions and not just have a uniform metric administration

David Runciman – And I am sure dealing with the horror of the event of the campaign a few of them are watching Wolf Hall and having moments of thinking gosh it must be hard to do it like that

Maurice Glasman – Wolf Hall opens up the space for thinking that’s politics and that’s power

David Runciman – Certainly politics, certainly power

Maurice Glasman – And that’s the right way, so one thing I am interested in, does Cambridge think of itself as a great institution anymore or is it just interested in the RAF, you know, does it have a role in the nation?

David Runciman – That was Maurice Glasman, Lord Glasman the Labour peer, one of the leading lights behind Blue Labour and one of the most interesting thinkers, and most original unusual thinkers in British politics, as you’ve just heard. Among other things he thinks we need to learn from the Tudors, he’s been watching Wolf Hall, I’ve been watching Wolf Hall, it’s sometimes hard to see exactly what the lesson is from that but he certainly thinks there’s a clear one for us.