David Runciman - From the University of Cambridge this is ELECTION, the politics podcast. My name is David Runciman and tomorrow is the election, for the past thirteen weeks we have being trying to provide some deep background to the vote, talking to philosophers, historians, scientists and politicians about the really big questions. What none of them has told us is who’s going to win so we’ll be back next week and beyond to try and make sense of the result, whatever it means.

For our final pre-election podcast I’m talking to someone who knows what it’s like to win an unexpected election victory; David Howarth who is Lib Dem MP for Cambridge from 2005-2010 taking the seat from Labour. He tells me what he thinks has gone wrong with electoral democracy, “There’s a populist theory which is very common in the electorate that all politicians are evil and all voters are pure, neither of these things are true”, and what might be coming next, “The civil service really hasn’t moved on in its attitude since the days of Charles I and we’re going to be back in that sort of situation of trying to govern without reference to parliament”. I’ll also be talking to the correspondent from the German Newspaper Die Zeit about how the campaign has looked from a German perspective. Stay with us.

But before that, I am joined by our regular panel: Helen Thompson who is an expert on economics, Finbarr Livesey on public policy and Chris Brooke on political theory. If you want to find out who they thinks’ going to win you’ll have to stay with us right to the end. Something we haven’t discussed at all on the podcast, partly because it’s had almost no coverage in the campaign itself is who’s paying for it all and does money make a different as it unquestionably does in American politics. As we enter the crunch point of the campaign will the Tory advantage in funding as they have said to have raised almost eighty million pounds or nearly double what Labour has raised finally make a difference? Finbarr what do you think?

Finbarr Livesey – It doesn’t seem to be making a difference, the polls haven’t moved, this is one of the comments about this election, everybody’s been waiting for the moment when the polls break one way or the other and the Conservative strategy has been that we are going to outspend, that we are going to target, that we are going to be doing the traditional things that we do, but it hasn’t given them a return. Underneath those numbers that the Tories came in with, a huge war chest and they’d been outspending Labour usually 2 to 1, is that Labour actually have been raising more money through the election. A lot of that is coming from the unions but there is something in there that says there is momentum in the fundraising for Labour, the last thing to say though is the latest report we have which is unfortunately about two weeks out of date from the electoral commission, suddenly there’s been this new spurts of fundraising from the Conservatives, does that say that they see a need to put even more money into the campaign? We won’t know the full numbers until about two weeks after the election but that seems to be what’s happening

David Runciman – But these are piddling sums compared to what would be raised in the United States and it seems to me this is one of the ways in which it’s a mistake to think this is a presidential style campaign because if it were in the US mould we’d be talking billions not tens of millions and we would really notice the difference. The presidential candidate who spends the most tends to win, ours is just an old fashioned British election isn’t it Helen?

Helen Thompson – Absolutely, and there’s a piece in the New York Times this week written really in a spirit of bafflement at what goes on in British democratic politics, the idea that the candidates and parties spend so little money, that it’s so low tech and people still run around with clip boards knocking on peoples doors and delivering leaflets, it just doesn’t look like democratic politics when you look at it from the United States

David Runciman – So it’s clipboards and leaflets but also Chris one giant stone plinth, one thing that we’re told Ed Miliband will spend some of his small amount of money on is a big stone plinth in the Downing Street garden to remind him of his pledges to the British electorate. The parties are really digging in before an election that we’re told will require them all to compromise, so in some ways the big question of this last week is why are they drawing red lines that they know they are going to have to breach?

Chris Brooke – I’m not sure that they know they are going to have to breach them, I think the parties are drawing their red lines with some care. The Conservatives are emphasising the referendum on the Euro, which will be a hard pill for the Liberal Democrats to swallow, but I think the Tories know the Lib Dems may swallow it, the Lib Dems seem to me to be drawing their red lines quite carefully to have policies they have reason to believe the other parties will accept, so I think you see the asymmetry in power are going into the hypothetical post election negotiations reflected in the kind of red lines that they are drawing, but of course to some extent they are tying their hands in advance and that may prove problematic once the votes are all in

David Runciman – Ed Miliband in some ways has been toughest on this, he’s been tying his hands more than anyone else and saying he has no intention on going back on any of his manifesto commitments because he doesn’t want to increase mistrust in British politics by breaking his word, he’s also said that he won’t do any deals with the SMP. I don’t want to get to academic about this but academics who call themselves game theorists I think would have an explanation for what’s going on here, it’s called a prisoners dilemma which is affectively that all the parties would be better off not making commitments that they may well have to breach but you don’t want to be the one party who doesn’t have red lines when everyone else does have red lines because come the negotiations you’re going to be weaker, so going into the negotiations everyone is tying their hands though everyone might be better off post the negotiations not having had their hands tied. And it’s a classic problem of politics and negotiation Finbarr?

Finbarr Livesey – Absolutely, and there’s the classic phrase don’t bring a knife to a gunfight and that’s essentially what the parties are trying to do, they’re trying to arm themselves so that they’ve got the weaponry to negotiate. The problem is that negotiational theory as you say not to get to academic has moved on, what they’re doing is called positional bargaining and what all the good negotiators do is called principle negotiation, you talk about interests, you talk about issues, you don’t say that this is my flag on the ground because it just causes you trouble. The way in which you are going to get the best result is by understanding the interests around you and trying to work through them, the problem is that you’re in a political situation and they have to put their flags on the ground they feel to defend positions to the vote and that’s essentially what’s happening, there’s a tension between the system of voting and I must say these things so that I will hold onto seats or have any chance of Labour getting *a* seat in Scotland but then in the actual negotiations to form a government you desperately don’t want to be there, you want to be in a principle negotiation

David Runciman – Chris do you think Miliband has left himself enough wriggle room on doing a deal with the SMP because he’s been pretty clear about that and we have to assume that what he’s going to do is a kind of Clinton it’s not what we call sex thing where he says it’s not actually a deal, it’s something else. But my suspicion is it’s going to be pretty hard to sell especially when he’s taken a line that politicians who break their promises are the ones who are feeding mistrust in the system, is he really going to be able to walk that line?

Chris Brooke – I think Miliband is in quite a strong position because of the corner that the SMP have painted themselves into, they said they’re going to lock the Tories out of Downing Street, they have been strongly signally that their enemy is the Conservative party. Mr Miliband can lead a minority government which can remain in office as long as the SMP doesn’t vote with the Conservative party. That’s the challenge that Nicola Sturgeon will be facing

David Runciman – Though she won’t be in the House of Commons

Chris Brooke – In that case that’s the challenge that Alex Salmond will be facing with the SMP in the House of Commons to the extent that the SMP will be willing to vote with the Conservatives, they will have a great deal of power in the new House of Commons, to the extent that they are unwilling to do so, they’ll be much much weaker

David Runciman – Helen do you think that counts as a non-deal deal? Can he sell that as not a deal if Ed Miliband is prime minister?

Helen Thompson – I don’t think that it can. In this sense is it that it still means that every time that there’s a rotate in the House of Commons, he needs to know in advance whether that bill’s going to pass or if it’s not going to pass. He can’t keep going to the House of Commons, taking the risk that the SMP is going to vote with the Conservative party, it’s much better from his point of view actually to talk to at least Salmond before any vote takes place. But as soon as he gets into that dynamic that looks like a deal. I think you can see what happened in the last Question Time when he was put in that position, as he went a little bit further than he wanted to go in ruling out the deal and then tried to backtrack a bit but it wasn’t possible for him to do so

Thanks to Helen, Finbarr and Chris, like I say, you will hear who they actually think is going to win later on. This week I spoke down a phone line to Khue Pham who’s been covering our election for the leading German newspaper Die Zeit travelling with the Miliband Campaign, visiting marginal constituencies and also taking a trip to Scotland. How different did she find the Scottish campaign from what she’d seen in England?

Khue Pham – I went up to Scotland three weeks ago to hear Alex Salmond speak when just as he entered his own bid to become an MP, that was very different, the feeling in Scotland was very different, you had a feeling that you were in a different country, people were really excited, there were loads of people turning to hear him speak and he’s a very good speaker and he really knows how to move the crowd so you really then have a sense that they really feel that this is important and this is a historical thing, which it is for Scotland of course. But it has a very temperature and set of emotions than what you get here in England

David Runciman – Have you seen Nicola Sturgeon speak at all? Because one of the odd things about the Scottish campaign is the SMP in a way have two leaders which none of the other parties do and Alex Salmond, as you say, he’s a charismatic politician. Do you sense that the leader that the people in England are seeing of Scottish nationalism, which is Nicola Sturgeon, doesn’t go down well at all with the English? Did you get any sense of her?

Khue Pham – I did see her speak at the embassy and I think she is a very interesting politician, a lot of people here in England but also Germany complain that all politicians all tend to be men and here in the UK they all studied the PP at Oxford

David Runciman – Ok but not Angela Merkel

Khue Pham – But yeah

David Runciman – We look at Germany and think you obviously have the most dominant woman politician in the world

Khue Pham – In a way we do but Angela Merkel was underestimated for a very long time, I don’t know whether with Nicola Sturgeon maybe it was the same thing

David Runciman – She may be the Angela Merkel of Scotland

Khue Pham – She seems to have a different style and she’s obviously very left wing, Nicola Sturgeon is much more outspoken where as Angela Merkel is, plays her cards, keeps her cards very close to her chest. Angela Merkel doesn’t stress to female manufacture very much, she does it in a more subtle way where as Nicola Sturgeon, I think it was something very interesting when she ganged up with Natalie Bennett and Leanne Wood at the challengers’ debate, and you could really, that was such an interesting image you could really see these three women were quite radical and antiestablishment and very outspoken, very clear in quitting Farage back, they are getting together and this girl power thing and really I felt that that really put the men in the debate i.e. Nigel Farage and Ed Miliband, put them in the corner. I think Nicola Sturgeon is a very charismatic politician even though I may not agree with her, she is different, she is important and she has something to say and that’s a big difference to what the other party leaders have put up so far

David Runciman – I also asked her what she thought of what might be called the German solution to the looming electoral impasse, which is a grand coalition of the two main parties, Labour and the Tories together in government

Khue Pham – To be honest I don’t think I would recommend it to you, in Germany the grand coalition is very popular, it’s much more popular amongst the people who are politicians because they feel it’s very stable and they get things done and that’s true, they do get things done; but on the other hand it does stifle political debate because you don’t have strong opposition, the policies that the government wants to put through they’ll just put through and here in Britain you have a much stronger culture of political debate, you also have this tribal voting identity I think. If Labour and the Conservatives were to merge it would perhaps kill off a very important part of the British political culture. People already feel that there’s no big difference if you vote Labour or Conservative or if Cameron or if Miliband are in power, people are already feel that politics doesn’t matter very much and it doesn’t matter who they cast their vote for. If you had a grand coalition it might reinforce the sense that politicians are all the same and they all do whatever they like and there’s no connection with the people and the society of today in modern times has become much more fragmented.

David Runciman – Finally we talked about what Germans might envy about the British way of doing politics, did she feel that constituency election produce a closer engagement between the politicians and the voters?

Khue Pham – You know, when I went to see David Cameron and his manifesto launch in Swindon he used this word which I think no other politician of any other kind would ever use, he spoke of the dream of the British property democracy and maybe it was property owning democracy, that’s something that I found was so British. Of course housing is a very very important issue and in this Country and in London it’s crazy and creates a huge sort of equality, so I totally understand that it’s an important issue, but there’s this political significance behind a policy, which in I think in my country, would not be seen in such an emotional way. And apart from that there’s also of course, due to the voting system, the whole thing about the marginal seats, the ground war in the marginal seats and the air war about public opinions and polls, there’s also much pronounced here than in Germany. The election campaign is taking place on different levels, you actually have to go out and find the election campaign

David Runciman – You actually have to go to the marginal’s because no one knows what’s going on there

Khue Pham – I did go to the marginal’s, I went up to Thurrock the other night, and Thurrock is an interesting place

David Runciman – How was that?

Khue Pham – It’s a three way marginal seat, you could have a Labour, a Conservative, but didn’t come with a Conservative the MP, or a UKIP candidate. And I went to see this town hall meeting and it was actually very interesting and I found all three of them to be quite good candidates, when you see them up close, they listen to peoples concerns and they actually answer peoples questions as apposed to what you will see in the TV debate

David Runciman – Incidentally Khues’ other stomping ground in Greece where she is now off to cover the possible collapse of that countries political and economic system, but she promises me that if ours falls apart first she’ll be back to write about Britain again.

Now to my conversation with David Howarth who won the Cambridge seat I the 2005 election after a passionately contested campaign taking it from the Labour MP Anne Campbell. We’ve heard a lot on this podcast about what campaigns are like in general or abstract terms but what’s it actually like to fight one on the inside? Cambridge is an unusual constituency in that it was safely Tory in the 1980s, had a Labour MP in the 1990s and for the last ten years has been represented by a Liberal Democrat. I started by asking David when did he realise in 2005 that he was actually going to win?

David Howarth – At the start of the campaign I really didn’t think I had any chance at all, half way through the campaign there was an enormous rally where thousands of people couldn’t get in and I was standing outside on the Market Square and Charles Candy giving an old fashioned outdoors speech and at that point I thought, that’s interesting. And then I bumped into an old colleague or old opponent Simon Sedgwick-Jell a former leader of the Cambridge City Council, then Green I think were forming Labour and he was always a great sophrologist on local politics and he said I think you’ll get it close but I don’t think you’ll win and I remember thinking actually I think we’re doing better than that but certainly not confident. And not confident on the night, I remember being in a small party somewhere in Newnham waiting for my agent to ring, it got to 1o’clock in the morning and he said I think you’d better come, thinking I wonder what he means by that but when I got into the room the old part guard with the tally’s because what people do to count is they as the votes been verified they just look at the crosses on the paper and keep a score and at that point you know you’ve won

David Runciman – My one memory of this kind of thing is in 1983 I worked for Frank Field in Birkenhead which is now one of the safest Labour seats in the country, and even then it was pretty safe and I was sixteen and knew nothing about politics but I knew Labour were going to win and he was convinced on the night that they’d lost and he could smell it in the air and he could feel it. And I just remember knowing nothing about politics thinking there’s something weird going on here because you haven’t lost but there was just despair in the camp

David Howarth – That’s candidate-itus,

David Runciman – I thought it was a well-known phenomenon

David Howarth - it is a well known disease that you generalise from the last person you speak to, so if someone’s nice to you then you think yes we’ve won and if someone’s nasty to you then you think oh it’s hopeless we’ve got no chance, and that’s why you can’t trust candidates

David Runciman – In the last podcast we talked about the 1992 election, the famous election and in retrospect a lot of Labour people say they knew in the last 2 or 3 days that something shifted, something went in the public mood and they could smell it and wasn’t being picked up in the polls and this kind of almost mythology, a lot of it I think post-hoc

David Howarth – I think it’s entirely post-hoc

David Runciman – I was going to say do you think that’s ever possible, to sort of sniff the wind, even in this age of?

David Howarth – Not in the two days before because any proper campaign will stop counting at that point and is concentrating solely on getting the vote out by throwing out vast amounts of paper to remind people to vote

David Runciman – Because the line in 1992 was that people stopped looking Labour candidates in the eye and that’s when they knew they were in trouble. But that to me sounds like

David Howarth – No, that can happen on the day, you know counts elections where we thought we were in with a chance and then on the day people weren’t looking you in the eye and they certainly weren’t looking at you in the eye when they went to vote

David Runciman – And that’s what is always said about a jury, if the jury looks at you when they come back in you’re ok and if they’re looking away you’re in trouble

David Howarth – That’s right, so on the day itself you can pick up stuff, although again if you’re the candidate your senses are interfered with by all these emotions, but if you’re not the candidate yes you can get some idea during the day from the mood, but also the turnout. Now for which people are turning out, it’s a far more scientific thing than people on the outside imagine. So you can see whether your voters are turning out and where your opponents’ voters are turning out and then you can correlate that with whether people are looking at you, you get a pretty good idea

David Runciman – You win, and you suddenly discover your new job is to represent Cambridge in the House of Commons, the 2005 election was distinctive in lots of ways, one of it which was you won in Cambridge, you defeated the incumbent Labour candidate. Labour had a bad election in many ways, and if Cambridge had been a bell-weather they would have been turfed out but of course they weren’t they were actually returned with a thumping majority despite the fact that almost no-one had voted for them because it was very low turnout nationally they won with a relatively small vote share a little over 35% and that translated under our system into a 67 seat majority I think. So when you arrived in the Commons my feeling as the outsider, as an academic was well this isn’t going to wash because they got a thumping majority and nobody voted for them, when you got to the Commons were people saying that or were people just we’ve won, deal with it, move on?

David Howarth - Yeah I was expecting the same as you, I was expecting to turn up and say the government is not legitimate and for everybody else to be saying this and for even the Labour members to be

David Runciman – Looking quite shamed faced

David Howarth – Yeah exactly, all these people are here but they’re not really representative of the country in any political way but it soon became clear that, I think partly to do with the ceremonies, the ritual, that feeling just goes away, the governments’ got its majority, the Queens speech lists the bill and the governments programme, they never vote and the government wins and that’s it. In terms of the rules there’s nothing you can do then, the committees are formed, the government majorities, the bills are introduced and the government wins with massive majority and you can say well in the country nobody really believes this stuff, like ninety day detention without charge nevertheless the governments got the majority and you’re just drawn into that world, that small cut-off world of parliament where in that world Labour is in charge

David Runciman – When you were drawn into that world what were the things that most surprised you about it, you’re an academic like me, you’re a lawyer, you’re an economist, you studied this world and you’re obviously a very active politician so you knew the world but you didn’t know that world right from the inside, so when you then get inside the bubble or whatever it is what were things you can remember you thought I had no idea it worked like this?

David Howarth – Actually the main memories of things not working are all administratives, I didn’t have an office for months, you’re working from a kind of committee room with a bunch of tables and you hot desk it, you have no staff and I gather in 2010 the situation was even worse that MPs were expected to set up their offices out of their own pockets and then maybe they could get the money back later, it was an extraordinarily amateurish way of doing things

David Runciman – And did you go in with any expectations as a backbench MP for a third of the three parties before the age of coalition government, you had any power at all?

David Howarth – I was surprised to find, rather more than I’d expected that’s because even with the 66 majority there were enough Labour rebellions going on that you could defeat the government; in fact there had been no government defeats a long time before 2005, 2005 -2010 we defeated the government 4 or 5 times

David Runciman – It was in some ways the most rebellious parliament until this one

David Howarth – Until this one and of course I mean this one the rebellions don’t result in government defeats because the rebellions are often safe rebellions where people know the government’s going to win anyway and so they think well that’s fine I’ll rebel for the sake of my constituents, but in the 2005 parliament the rebellions which caused the result of the vote to change, terrorist offences on 90 day detention, the government was actually defeated and the bill changed and the law changed, so that was kind of surprising

David Runciman – To what extent does a Member of Parliament feel that he primary role is to be a representative of a constituency? How did your relationship with Cambridge adapt over those 5 years, did you feel yourself very much there to speak for, I’m going to say us, because I live here?

David Howarth – That is technically impossible, there are 75 thousand voters with completely different views on things, if you’re making a speech in the House on a political matter with a political view you can’t really be speaking for all 75 thousand, there will be at least 25 thousand of those people who would disagree with what you are saying

David Runciman – And there would be quite a few who have no idea what you’re saying because they’ve totally lost interest in politics

David Howarth – That’s right. That crucial role of being a legislator and I suppose the role of being a national politician, the realistic situation is your not representing your constituents, you’re representing your political view, you’re sitting in parliament in the liberal interest

David Runciman – You’re representing your party as well

David Howarth – Yeah, and even a political philosophy because there might be battles in the party and deciding what the party’s going to say, your role then is to represent a particular way of thinking or way of feeling. The constituency role is a different one, it’s more like a social worker, there are opportunities that MPs have for getting a constituents case across to a public body, that’s messing them about which you wouldn’t have if you weren’t an MP, and you take up that work on behalf of anybody, any of the 75 thousand who writes in saying I want some help, it doesn’t matter who they are or what their political view is, that’s your constituency job, but that’s not representing in the way you were speaking about. That’s not representing the constituents in the political sense, it’s only in the service sense that you do

David Runciman – During the period that you were an MP from 2005-2010, it doesn’t neatly fit into that time frame but the problem with trust in politics that we have today, some of it came to a head in that period, some of it came from before because it stems from the Iraq war, and then the expenses scandal at the tail end of the Brown administration in 2009, again from inside Westminster and that Westminster bubble, was there a sense among your fellow MPs that something bad was happening, that something was draining away and that the political establishment was in real trouble?

David Howarth – Yes, I’d describe the atmosphere as suicidal, despair for a number of different reasons, one because of the bad behaviour of some of the MPs which was annoying, but also despair because MP that hadn’t behaved badly were having our lives trashed and despair because the party leaderships from all three party just didn’t care about the future of representative democracy, they just cared about holding public support by being seen to be more willing to be tough on their MPs, so they just kind of joined in the populous wave

David Runciman – You must have some sympathy with that because it’s quite hard to be the one who stands out in favour of the long-term future of representative democracy when the other two are pandering to the crowd

David Howarth – I don’t know what political leadership is about if it’s not about that. The betrayal I think of the whole way of governing a country by representative democracy at that point was quite profound and we are now still suffering for it and it was quite low support for representative government, there is a populist theory that is very common in the electorate that all politicians are evil, all voters are pure, neither of these things are true

David Runciman – why did you leave in 2010, did you have enough?

David Howarth – Partly because of that

David Runciman – Because just to remind listeners you left before the election which was going to result in the Liberal Democrats joining government for the first time in their history, and presumably you would have been part of such a government if you’d stayed?

David Howarth – Well for a few months, I almost certainly had to resign December 2010 so it wouldn’t have been a very long ministerial career

David Runciman – What would have precipitated your resignation?

David Howarth – A lot of tuition fees, so I can’t really regret a long missed ministerial career because it wouldn’t have happened, most of the reasons for leaving were personal. It’s almost impossible I think to live a normal life as a British politician anymore, and some of this is just the technological change, everyone’s got a mobile phone, everyone can photograph you and record you at any moment and so your life is one of being constantly on show; so at this very moment I am talking to you on a microphone, so I am on show, this is part of the political life is like this. But the idea of doing that every minute of every day, even in your own house because you got no idea who might be outside your door from some Sunday newspaper photographing you. And the ability of the media to distort and selectively to quote and to destroy anybody they like, Greg Miskiw once described what the News of the World does, as we destroy peoples lives, that’s what we do and you’re in the front line of that. The person, you’re quite likely to have that done to you, it doesn’t really matter how innocent you are. So where the expenses scandal fits into this story is the utter capriciousness of who was destroyed and who was saved was extraordinary capricious

David Runciman – And something that’s happened since 2010 as we move from scandal to scandal, one of the next shoes to drop was the phone hacking scandal. Is it your sense in this election that the power of the press, that capricious power, that arbitrary power to essentially attack people without compunction has been tamed at all?

David Howarth – I don’t think so, it was never the case, the power of the press had the power of shifting votes, the fact that a newspaper supports this party or that party wasn’t really that important; in fact most of these newspapers go with the wind, you see the classic example with The Sun, now supporting two different parties and two different parts of the United Kingdom because that’s where he thinks its commercial interest lays

David Runciman – The SMP in Scotland and the Tories

David Howarth - The SMP and the Tories yeah, but the power of the press is to destroy individuals lives, part of the problem is politicians being treated as Z list celebrities, and so this habit of mind, this habit of the press doing this isn’t really about politics at all, it’s about selling newspapers, it’s about celebrities but its transferred to politics

David Runciman – The Leveson Inquiry, which was set up in the aftermath of the phone hacking scandal and was intended to tame the press, that hasn’t happened, yet, there is no consensus as to what the consequences of Leveson will be?

David Howarth – I don’t think there will be any consequences. Some legislation was passed but then suspended and I think this legislation will never be brought to force

David Runciman – We are now on the cusp of another election where the Liberal Democrats might continue to play a role in deciding who forms the next government but we’ve moved on a long way from 2010, not least because that was a three way election and this one clearly involves, four, five, possibly six different parties and as the polls stand at the moment you can cobble together coalitions which have so many different moving parts, it’s hard to see how them lasting. 24 hours I’m not going to ask you to predict the outcome

David Howarth – Well the only answer to that is I don’t know

David Runciman – And no-one knows at this point but if we are moving into an even more complex phase of coalition building or minority government different kinds of arrangements in which perhaps Ed Miliband does a Labour prime minister, both does and doesn’t depend on the SMP for support and so on. Do you think the British constitution is sufficiently flexible and adaptable to cope with this? We are clearly entering unchartered territory but are we actually going beyond what currently our political system can deal with?

David Howarth – It’s not really unchartered, it just hasn’t happened for a while. Most of the people who know how to work it are dead, that’s the second election in 1910, the parliament 1911-1915, the Asquith government were a deep minority in the same that the government after this election might well be, it was dependant on support from a very large nationalist party, the Irish parliamentary party but there was also a splinter group of Irish MPs based around Cork and the idea was that just one big Irish party is wrong, the was this sort of Labour party with about 39-40 members, a similar position but perhaps to the Lib Dems a few more members than we expect but structurally the same sort of numbers and the system survived the home rule build pass, the parliament of 1911 pass which a rather more important constitutional change than we’ve had recently. The answer to the question is of course it is, there’s going to be a lot more pressure for change and its also the case that you don’t need formal coalitions in these circumstances, that the small parties might think reasonably that they have more chance of getting what they want through a minority government with a vote by vote arrangement or not arrangement

David Runciman – And they may draw the lesson from the experience of the recent parliament that the Lib Dems by locking themselves into a 5-year coalition at the outset ended up the losers and ended up the losers and actually didn’t gain nearly as much as they could have done by supporting a Tory minority government?

David Howarth – Well I think probably looking back the Lib Dems would have gained quite a lot in policy terms by being part of the coalition but weren’t able to explain that to anybody so didn’t get any credit for it and therefore the drop in their support is a consequence of the political, the choice over policy or politics and they chose policy over politics and suffered for it, but I remember being in the Commons and standing next to Alex Salmond once, it’s one of those votes where we were trying to stop the Labour party taking peoples civil liberties away, it was quite common experience

David Runciman – One of those votes

David Howarth – One of those votes and often we won on those, we didn’t win on this one though we didn’t know that at the time because what was going on, the Labour party had managed to buy off the DUP, this is a sentence you will hear quite a lot in the coming years and I say to Alex, “what do you think of this then?”, Just making conversation expecting the reply well it’s just the DUP again what do you expect, but instead of saying that, what Alex said was, “I think this is the future of politics”, and I said “well what do you mean?”, And he said “well many opportunities for small parties”, and I think that he’s right, that is the future of politics, there’s lots of opportunities but those small parties need to be very careful about how they exploit those issues and not to undermine themselves. Being in coalition probably that is what you lose is visible and what you don’t lose is invisible

David Runciman – You made the comparison to the 1910 election and I think it would be naïve to think that the press would be any less feral in 1910

David Howarth – Absolutely yes

David Runciman – Was it in some ways when you look at past election and what newspapers write, some of our newspapers look a little tame, but the difference is the difference you mentioned earlier, which is the macro technological scrutiny. So its not as if politicians in 1910 weren’t being roundly abused in the newspapers but they weren’t subject to the same kind of round the clock scrutiny but also that thing of there being a record of everything they have said or done. And my sense to what’s going to be difficult about this one is that people will not forget because the internet forgets nothing, all the things that have been said to secure votes have then become hostages to fortune in the post election negotiations and my anxiety is that it’s going to be really really messy in ways that we haven’t seen before, because politicians are going to find it really hard to compromise

David Howarth – Yes you can see that happening right now with people drawing red lines on things that make it impossible for them to get majorities, it’s still part of the problem that people haven’t adjusted to the politics of splintered parliaments. Their minds are still in the theory of the manifesto and mandate and the majority governments, the policy process where you decide what you are going to do, then you announce it and then you defend it to the death. All those processes don’t work in a split parliament, the people at the top of the big two parties are just not psychologically there yet, perhaps we’ll need the kind of experience that Nick Clegg has had and the Liberal Democrats have had over the past 5 years to try and get them into a different place, to persuade them to talk about politics in a different way

David Runciman – Ed Miliband on last weeks encounter with the Question Time audience, which was probably his most hostile audience on |TV in this campaign, took exactly the line as you’re describing as the old politics line and as I watched him I thought this is very old Labour, in which he said I am not going to be like Nick Clegg, I have a manifesto you’re going to trust me, you need me to stick to my manifesto commitments, that’s why I am not going to do any deals with the SMP because I must defend the manifesto, and you watch it and you think well you can say that but if the reality is that that’s impossible that really is a hostage to fortune, that is old politics and the world has moved on

David Howarth – That’s right, I suppose the one thing I did find surprising in this is just how strongly large numbers of MPs believe in that theory of politics, that theory of manifesto, the mandate that your duty as an MP was simply to support your party in what it said at the last election and in delivering its manifesto, and that that produced an accountable government. It wasn’t just an idle academic theory, it was the heart of how democracy worked, that unless that was the case, unless all those elements were in place, people voted for a manifesto, that manifesto then became a mandate that the party had and it had to book into operation. Unless you had that series of connected events there was no democracy, I would guess that if you talked to most parliamentary Labour party with a few exceptions I’m not going to name, that’s what they really think. To some extent that’s what the Conservatives think, although the Conservatives always had a much more flexible view of this than the Labour party, in many ways that theory of politics is driven by the Labours parties development and the other parties have sort of had to adopt it and now we are going to see it unwind

David Runciman – And as someone who has both experienced it but also studied British politics, the British constitution, how Westminster works and how Whitehall works, has the civil service adapted to this new reality, because they also to a certain extent once I think had bought into that idea that part of their role in a democracy was to help the government delivery their manifesto, how do civil servants view our rapidly evolving political system?

David Howarth – They’re going to be in great difficulty, because as you say the operating theory is that the civil service works to the government, the assumption in the system is that the government is the same as the parliamentary majority and so there’s no problem with split loyalty, one equals the other, what that will do is bring you the sharp focus what the theory is because I think the theory has been hit from the public and for nobody else. The public sort of imagines that the civil service works for the state, in some kind of altogether way that includes the parliament and includes the executive bracket but they do not and this will becomes really clear, such a deep minority government. Government policies will be defeated and more to the point and I think this is a crucial point, government will look for ways for governing without parliament, it will look to govern by ordering council, it will look to govern by it’s ability to spend and so if it has supply and varies where it spends without any parliamentary approval, the question then is the civil service, to what extent are they prepared to help govern a government without parliament? My impression, they will have no compunction at all, they will actually do that. The civil service really hasn’t moved on in its attitude since the days of Charles I and we’re going to be back in that sort of situation of trying to govern without reference to parliament

David Runciman – So do you fear for parliamentary democracy, I mean that’s a fairly bleak assessment of what we’re about to introduce, if you think that parliamentary democracy is the lynch pin of the British Democratic system?

David Howarth – Well I do think that and I do fear for it because the question then is well what reaction will there be to this governing without parliament? If the public believed in Parliamentary Democracy and believed in representative democracy, then you’d expect a public reaction, a very hostile reaction to a government who tried to just ignore parliament. But since the evidence is the opposite, the government is just ignoring the body, but will people care? A lot of evidence is that people don’t support parliamentary democracy, they certainly don’t support representative democracy they don’t support the idea that their representatives in parliament decide on the policies and who the government is and so on. Now if they believe in a more direct populous form of democracy and the government that’s governing without parliament could easily put themselves in a position where that’s the type of political theory that it’s pushing. And so am I fearful for the future of representative democracy in Britain? Yes

David Runciman - Thanks to David Howarth for giving us an unusually frank insiders view. Now back to our news panel, on this podcast we’ve tried to avoid horse race predictions but inevitably we’ve all made some calls about what we think is going to happen as we’ve talked over the last 3 months. With the vote a day away, I thought we should revisit some of these predictions to see if anyone wants to admit they were wrong, I’ll go first; in episode one I said the heavyweight contest in this election was going to be between Nicola Surgeon and Jim Murphy, the Scottish Labour leader, well if it was a boxing match, the referee would have stepped in long ago to put him out of his misery, Sturgeon has wiped the floor with him as far as we can tell, partly because Murphy has been fighting so hard just to defend his own seat. Chris you also said you thought the SMP vote might be softer than it looked, do you have any lingering feeling that that might still be true?

Chris Brooke – Obviously, I was completely wrong about that, it looked to me as if there was a great deal of volatility in Scottish political opinion and maybe the polls would be a bit all over the place and we might see something of a swing backed to the unionist parties. That obviously hasn’t happened, I think it may still be the case that there’ll be some tactical voting on the unionist side that may benefit some candidates who are standing against the SMP

David Runciman – And Jim Murphy is one of the people who may benefit from that, in his seat if enough Tories vote Labour, he’ll be safe

Chris Brooke – And I’ll be keeping an eye out I think for Edinburgh South to see if the Labour firewall can hold there, but sure I was wrong about that, this election has been Nicola Sturgeons election, it’s an extraordinary win for the SMP.

David Runciman – Helen, one thing that you said was that you believed that Ed Miliband essentially every time, I am slightly paraphrasing you here, but every time he opened his mouth he did nothing to help the Labour party and it’s likelihood of securing votes. You’ll know that most people believe he’s had a pretty good campaign and he certainly surpassed expectations. Do you think you were wrong, do you think now when he opens his mouth he attracts some people into Labour who weren’t going to vote Labour before?

Helen Thompson – I think I was wrong in two ways and right in two ways. I think I was wrong because his self-presentation has undoubtedly improved; he sounds more assured and less adolescent. I think I was also wrong because he’s had the good fortune to have been attacked very directly about his personal weaknesses and in that sense it’s allowed the attention to move away from the fact that he still flounders on issues like the deficit and immigration, and I think the Paxman interview was a good illustration of both of those dynamics. The reasons why I would still hold onto at least part of my judgement is first that if you take Scotland it’s very difficult to say in which a party leader has presided over the collapse of his party in the parties heartland has had a successful campaign, and again I still think his basic weaknesses that he appears to lack political judgement has still not gone away and I think if you’d said to me at the start of the campaign, what might be a good illustration of that? I don’t think I could have come up with anything as bad as the Moses stone, so in that sense I don’t think I’m entirely wrong on this judgement

David Runciman – Now Finbarr we’ve been trawling through things that you’ve said, and you’ve been very cautious or prescient or maybe prophetic, you don’t seem to have said many things that we are going to show you now that cant possibly be true or part possibly from one and that’s that if you go back, and this seems like a long time ago, when the Bishops of the Church of England issued their letter, telling people how they should think beyond party politics about some of the deeper issues you thought it might have an impact. A lot of those things seem to have come and gone and none of them have had any impact at all, unless we’ve missed something?

Finbarr Livesey – At that moment in time I was probably optimistic that there was going to be a broader discussion in the campaign and I was wrong. And one of the things that has been very striking to me about the campaign is just how strongly everybody has stayed on message. The parties seem to have gone, to me, beyond some invisible point where a media interview used to be about dealing with the questions and possibly answering some of the questions but obviously getting your message out and it’s now for me gone completely to the point where it is absolutely clear, ignore the questions, keep repeating the party lines, and so I think the letter from the Bishops was one that possibly twigged my past from my upbringing in Ireland where the Church had more influence but I also think letter by letter from the church to the business letters to the small business letters and all the rest of them, they all were attempting to move into their own constituency, they weren’t all attempting to do the same thing, about broadening the nature of discussion into the debate. But for me it absolutely contrasts to what was happening in the conversation and it’s really disappointing to me actually that in every moment over the last two weeks, pretty much at any time where any of the leaders have been asked a question it’s pivot, pivot, pivot, acknowledge the question very limply but go straight to the party line

David Runciman – And the other thing I’ve been really struck by in this campaign is there have been no stories about divisions in any of the parties, even including the minor parties that are split from top to bottom. No one has even been able to dig up Greens who want to go against their slightly hopeless leader. No one’s managed to persuade Douglas Carswell to say anything against Nigel Farage, no one has opened up a gap between Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, I can’t remember an election; I think the press hasn’t done its duty here. No one has found a story in which anyone has dissented from the party line and that to me is why it’s been such a boring campaign, no one has dissented from the party line, there are no splits

Chris Brooke – I don’t think it’s been a boring campaign at all, I think it’s been a riveting campaign. I like watching test match cricket and a test match can end in draw; a draw can be a completely satisfying outcome

David Runciman – Not in politics I don’t think

Chris Brooke – Obviously a stalemate may be disastrous for British government over the long run, it may disastrous for the British state over the long run but I think there is something satisfying about a contest where both sides batter each other for months without either side getting the upper hand and that extraordinary party discipline has certainly been a part of that

David Runciman – Now it may be unfair in an election that is proverbially to close to call to ask you to call it but I’m going to ask you anyway and I suppose at the end I will try to call it myself though I’ll make my mind up while you’re speaking. Helen who do you think is going to be prime minister? The question I am going to put to you know is one that some bookmakers would pay out on because they leave a bit of time for the parties to negotiate, so they’ve set an arbitrary date I think of the 1st of July, who do you think is going to be prime minister on the 1st July?

Helen Thompson – I think David Cameron is going to be prime minister but I’d put maybe a caviet in that a Conservative is going to be prime minister on the 1st July

David Runciman – So you think David Cameron himself might “win the election and lose the leadership of his party”?

Helen Thompson – I’m not saying I think that will happen, I think that it’s in the range of the possible outcomes now in front of us

David Runciman – Finbarr who’s going to be prime minister on the 1st July?

Finbarr Livesey – I think it will be Ed Miliband, I think it will be a difficult administration. I think they will get a Queens Speech passed and that Nicola Sturgeon will do that and then say now its up to you to negotiate and rather than saying that he’s staring Nicola Sturgeon down etc and daring her to put the Tories back in she’ll say fine be in the seat but everything you’re going to do around the budget you’re going to have to go through me and that’s where the real discussion is

David Runciman – Chris, prime minister 1st July?

Chris Brooke – I agree with Finbarr, I think it’s going to be Ed Miliband leading a minority government and having a great deal of difficulty getting much done. I do think it will be hard for the Conservatives to get a majority supporting a Conservative prime minister in the government, so I think Mr Miliband is sort of going to win this one by default

David Runciman – I possibly agree with Helen and I think it’s probably right that we should come out 2/2 on this. If I had to say though I’d rather not say, I think it will be David Cameron but I would add two things, if it is David Cameron that means that the polls are wrong, though on the current polling the Tories are ahead, the poll of polls 1-1½ points, that shouldn’t be enough under the electoral system so something would have to be wrong, it could be that the UKIP vote is softer than we think, it could be the encumbrance does have a much bigger advantage. There does seem to be a very different outcome when you name the candidates rather than if you name the parties but the polls would have to be wrong. So my big caveat is, my gut my instinct tells me it’s going to be David Cameron but what does my gut or my instinct count against opinion polling? It seems ridiculous actually to go against a serious, professional business by people who know much more about this. Helen just to finish on this, if you and me are going to be right the polls have to be wrong, why do we think the polls are going to be wrong?

Helen Thompson – Well I think that you’ve got to ask which polls you are talking about. I mean one reason I incline in the way in which I do, is there is a clear difference between the phone polling and the online polling, I think actually in the present day both of them are methodologically suspect but if I was going to say which of them is the least bad, the least likely to be flawed in the situation in which we are in, I’d say the phone polling has got a better track record including comparing it with elections in other countries than online polling has. If you’d go for one particular point here is that there is evidence I think from the last European parliament elections that online polling overdoes right wing populous parties like UKIP. UKIPs vote has actually held up pretty well during the course of this campaign, it’s not had a lot of attention because the attention on the outlined parties has been on the SMP, now if that is just a little bit softer than what the polling suggests then that’s probably a couple more percentage votes for David Cameron

David Runciman – And it is worth adding that in 2010 the polls were wrong as were we mentioned this before the betting markets, everyone overstated the Tories support in 2010. There are two possible explanations for that, one might be that polls now overstate, they’ve factored in too much for Tories, the other which seems to be more likely is that polls overstate the advantage of opposition and of course the Tories were the opposition in 2010. Encumbrance does have an advantage that doesn’t show up in online polling probably my reason for thinking the polls might be wrong. Finbarr do you want to agree with me or Helen or are you going to stick to your red line?

Finbarr Livesey – No I’m going to stick to my red line but I’m going to agree that I think the polls are probably going to be off, the interesting question will be how much? And there are other affects underneath here that we don’t have a read on yet, probably the most important for me will be whether or not the youth vote actually comes out or doesn’t come out because we’ve spoken about UKIP being soft, Russell Brand saying vote for Ed Miliband, is that going to make a difference? We don’t know but if there’s a significant change in youth voting patterns that could have a significant impact that the polls just aren’t catching

David Runciman – Finbarr says significant numbers, but Chris in this election when it is this tight significant numbers do not have to be big numbers. A lot of people have pointed out that Russell Brand is asking people to vote who may not have registered to vote in time, but it only takes a few of the ones who have registered to vote, to vote in the right seats and a few thousand votes here and there could swing it

Chris Brooke – The election will be won and lost in the marginal seats which the Conservatives and the Labour party are fighting over in England and some of those margins are very tight and that’s where we should be focusing our attention on tomorrow night. Its not only that very small numbers of votes may turn out to be absolutely critical, I think even if the phone polls are better than the online polls, even if the Conservatives take a small lead on the day there’s also the point that people think that the electoral system still has a skew in it towards the Labour party in England. Labour seems to have to get fewer votes to win each seat, their vote is more efficiently distributed across the country so even if the polls are wrong I’d still hold onto my prediction that we will see Mr Miliband in Downing Street before too long

David Runciman - Thanks as always to Helen, Finbarr and Chris, to David Howarth and Khue Pham and to our production team of Anna Critchlow, Francis Dearnley and Lizzie Presser. We cant know what we’ll be talking about next week, it depends on what happens tomorrow but we hope to be speaking to Chris Huhne who was part of the negotiations in 2010 that put together the coalition government and we’ll be asking what it’s like to be doing those deals from the inside. Whatever does happen over the next week, we’ll be here next Wednesday to try and make sense of it, so do please join us then. My name is David Runciman and this has been the Cambridge University podcast ELECTION.