From the University of Cambridge, this is ELECTION a weekly politics podcast. My name is David Runciman and I am going to be coming to you each week from my office here in the Cambridge Politics Department to talk to you about the campaign, the issues, 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 my guest is Martin Jacques, one time editor of Marxism Today and now one of the leading Western commentators on China and an advocate of seeing the world through Chinese eyes. He is going to be telling us why it is so important to get a Chinese perspective on world affairs. “…And actually the greatest challenge of this century for us with the rise of China is to make sense of China and the only way you can make sense of China is in Chinese terms”, but also why we need to recognise that Britain and Europe just don’t matter so much in the world anymore, “…not only is Britain much diminished but Europe is much diminished, the world of the future is going to be shaped above all in the East”. So does this election really matter when there is a big power shift going on from West to East? Stay tuned to hear more.

Martin Jacques, the former editor of Marxism Today and the author of the book When China Rules The World. I spoke to him in my office recently and the pitter-patter that you’ll hear in the background is in fact the pitter-patter of a rainy day. I began by asking Martin Jacques whether he was nostalgic for his time in the Thatcher years when he was at the heart of British political debate?

Martin Jacques – Not really, I mean I look back on that period, certainly editing Marxism Today, as, for me personally extremely productive and creative and something I look back with, with pride actually about what we achieved because we led the discussion, the political domain about what Thatcher’s, recognising it was something new before she was elected

David Runciman – Before she knew it

Martin Jacques – As a result we got a serious following, not just on the left but also on the right. And then also understanding the decline of the left, the decline of the Labour movement, which, you know was something we were doing at the end of the 70s. And then later on with what called ‘New Times’ but the idea of globalisation, post-forwardism and the kind of reconstitution of societies on a new basis which our argument was that Thatcher understood this much better than the left did.

David Runciman – So, already then though your perspective was focusing on British politics you were already feeling that the story was way way wider than that and to make sense of what was happening in Britain you had to have a global perspective or did that come later?

Martin Jacques – I think you’re probably being slightly kind here. I think that certainly in the latter phases, like the late 80s early 90s it was beginning to happen, but if I look back on Marxism Today I think I was a great magazine, an extremely important magazine but it had serious flaws. And one of those flaws was it was

overwhelmingly western centric in particular of course preoccupied with the UK and the United States of course because the rise of neo-liberalism and so on was a kind of Anglo-Saxon phenomenon.

David Runciman – Ok, and its important to know that background because we are now going to talk about China because your perspective has shifted and your focus for the last 20 years and indeed where you have lived, living in Hong Kong and periods in Beijing your focus has been on China, understanding China and understanding what the rise of China means for the West. So now looking at it from that vantage point how does British politics look to you now, is it an irrelevance, is it just a little Island off the coast of Europe, has China taken your politics imagination?

Martin Jacques – Certainly, personally yes, there’s no question about that. I think by the early 90s, after Marxism Today, after I closed it, I did a lot of column writing for newspapers and television programmes and so on but actually deep down I think I, phases in your life come to an end probably, and I think I was bored by British politics

David Runciman – You’re not the first person to experience that

Martin Jacques – And it coincided with the Major period and so on, and it was sort of, it was not a very interesting period, not a lot was happening, and I think I began to look around, I was freed up a lot, when I was editing Marxism Today I was living off an absolute pittance and I also never had any time so I couldn’t travel really, for those two reasons. Once that came to an end I went on holiday in 1993, my first time really to East Asia, I’d been to Japan once for a conference, and I went to China, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore and I was absolutely enthralled and fascinated in a completely unexpected way by what I found and that was actually the beginning of the present phase of my life.

David Runciman – And when you first encountered China then, China was just beginning the process of modernising in the way we are now completely familiar with. I mean you caught it presumably in the first burst of that kind of political and economic energy. Is that what you saw, what was it that captured you about China in the 90s.

Martin Jacques – Well, China specifically, it was, going to Guangdong province which is north of Hong Kong and just travelling in this minibus from Shenzhen to Guangzhou and just seeing before me this extraordinary transformation taking place in front of ones own eyes, you know, and so you’d be on a sometimes a tarmac road but at often as not a muddy track soon to become a tarmac road and you would have just apposed on the road a 150 years of British history if you like from the water buffalo, bicycles, scooters, people walking to the odd Lexus or Mercedes Benz with darkened windows flashing by and it was the energy of the people and I thought because I used to be a economics \***economicsdor? (16:20)**\* of Britain way back and I thought this is what the industrial revolution used to be like but compressed into this single moment of time, not stretching out over 60, 70, 80 years

David Runciman – And what was your sense of the Chinese regime then, the political system. Was this a political system that was creaking and struggling, did you feel that it was under threat by this change that it would adapt?

Martin Jacques – Well I think my interest initially in East Asia was not China and I was sort of hesitant about getting involved with China, because I watched the collapse of the soviet union and the decay of the soviet union and so on and so I was a little bit because of my own background I didn’t want to get all involved and entangled in all that kind of thing and I knew a lot about the Tigers and so on, more about them than China

David Runciman – We should say the Tiger economies

Martin Jacques – The Tiger economies, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore etc but of course China irresistibly drew me in

David Runciman – China was there looming in the background

Martin Jacques – Because this was the early stages of it’s great transformation. The trouble here was you couldn’t have a discussion on China at that point without it starting with Tiananmen Square and finishing with Tiananmen Square and as I got interested in it, it was obviously a ridiculous way of looking at China. It was only one part of a very complex larger reality

David Runciman – So let’s bring it up to date now 20 years on plus, the Chinese story, what you describe back then, the speed of change, seeing it happen in this kind of compressed space is just accelerated. China is transformed over the last 30 years, I presume you would agree with that, and Chinese power has grown at pace as well. So what’s your sense of Chinas’ role in the world now, your perspective is East/West, you see it from both sides. Seeing it from both sides, do you think we are embarking on the Chinese century?

Martin Jacques – I’ve felt for a long time that China was not about to hit the buffer switch because the Western assumption to major on buried sentiment for the last 20 years, that it’s all going to come to an end because its unsustainable, I have never shared that view. I think this has enormous historical attraction because it goes through different stages and so on, growth through it will come down but basically this is a long-term transformation. But the second thing I recognised and I think is more important in many ways is that to understand China you cannot do it through a Western prism and the great problem of Western commentary and Western writing about China is always the desire to see it through a Western prism, to expect China to become like us, just expect Chinese politics to become somehow a clone of our own I’d say

David Runciman – Or at least that we could understand it in our terms

Martin Jacques – Yeah, and my point is no, you cant and actually the greatest challenge of this century for us with the rise of China is to make sense of China and the only way you can make sense of China is in Chinese terms, in other words, you’ve got to make the effort to understand difference, the Chinese difference, the history, the culture are not the same

David Runciman – So, I’m now going to ask you a question that will annoy you because I’m just going to go against what you just said. So this podcast is called ELECTION, we are not just focusing on the British election but we are going to come onto that in a second. You don’t believe that the Chinese system is about to hit the buffers, you think buried sentiment is wrong, but one question of any regime is how it renews itself and how it adapts to not just dissatisfaction in public opinion but bubbling discontent if it exists, so one of the problems from a Western perspective is understanding how a system that doesn’t have electoral politics as we understand it, makes the adapted changes it needs to do in order to survive. So how does China adapt in the absence of elections?

Martin Jacques – Well, if you take the last 35 years since Deng Xiaoping, you’d say, well it’s adapted with extraordinary success

David Runciman – And more than us perhaps

Martin Jacques – And much more, well you’ve made the point. I mean actually the reformist dynamic in Chinese society and I include very much the state here, the question of government, has been really profound; there have been huge changes in the system of governments over this period. We don recognise it because the only form of governments reform we recognise in China is one that looks as if it’s moving towards our system, so we ignore all this, it’s not even on our radar, but they have been extremely affective in doing this. And China is a very very different place now, in the government system for example, to how it was under Mao. So I think that also you’ve got to recognise that we think that really the only source of legitimacy now is multi-party system and a universal suffrage but I think this is an illusion, I think this is wrong and the sources of legitimacy in China are historically different and one of the advantages the regime enjoys actually is that the relationship between the state and society in Chinese history and in the contemporary context are different from the West, we actually couldn’t copy that ourselves because it seems to me a profound historical and cultural difference

David Runciman – So is it a technocratic kind of legitimacy, I mean does the Chinese regime depend upon it’s ability to project a kind of expert understanding and an ability to better peoples lives like that rather than being responsive and accountable, is it a technocracy?

Martin Jacques – Yeah I think in part, that point is very important; China is arguably the home of statecraft and for a very very long time the state has been a very competent

institution in China and this remains so. And it’s an extremely impressive regime. Its presided over the most remarkable economic transformation in modern or indeed any period of history, the state must take a lot of credit for it because it has masterminded it in effect. So I think this is an old Chinese tradition as well, its not just now, I mean this goes back to Confucius, so that’s one thing, state competence you know, infrastructure, where would you go if you wanted to be in a high speed railway system, you’d get the Chinese in to do it for you and this is all happened in a very short space of time, and they recruit very good people into the state employment because the state has a particular place in Chinese history and the contemporary situation. And they also, this also extends into areas like how to control or how to guide public opinion as well, they’ve been very

David Runciman – They’ve been smart about the Internet in ways that people couldn’t anticipate, it is a form of censorship but it’s also in some ways its more hands off that people realise, in some ways it’s more hands on than people realise,

Martin Jacques – Both of those things are true

David Runciman – It employs large numbers of people to keep an eye on what the public are saying

Martin Jacques – But in a situation where the amount of information and opinion available to the Chinese has increased exponentially, so the context of the guiding and the control is that huge expansion and a public opinion which is hugely more informed than ever it was previously. But there’s another factor I think about legitimacy, and that it is the whole way in which the relationship between state and society is viewed in China is very different than the Western tradition. I mean in a Confucian tradition but it extends to other parts to a lesser degree in East Asia there’s a familial attitude towards the state, in other words it’s not a utilitarian or instrumentalist view as we have in Western democracies but it’s much more viewing the state almost as ‘the parent’, and in fact a lot of Chinese will say this to you if you want to understand the Chinese state think of the Chinese parent and this is an interesting point

David Runciman – From a Western perspective it’s quite a scary thought as well. So what are the weaknesses, it can’t all be sweetness and light, what are the weaknesses of this regime, is it its corruption because there clearly is a lot of corruption, because competence also goes along with a certain ruthlessness and one of the things, and we’ll come onto this in a second, is that politicians in the West might envy about their Chinese counterparts is their decisiveness but decisiveness does often mean the ability to take quick decisions in the face of what would be in the West popular opposition. Where are the weak points?

Martin Jacques – The greatest single vulnerability of China is also its greatest strength and that is its size and its diversity so when Chinas working really well as it is in this period, very benign period relatively speaking, China plays to it’s great strength which is its

size but it’s also an extremely difficult society to hold together because the centrifugal forces are very very powerful in this (\***early? 25:11\*)**, much more stronger than any Western States, even the United States are relatively straight forward in comparison to running a place like China. So and historically, the periods when China’s done well have been the benign period when the centripetal forces have been dominant over the centrifugal and the periods when the country’s fallen apart in effect in some degree have been when the centrifugal forces got the better of it. So when will this period come to an end, well most decisively when that phase happens again, and it will happen again, it wont go on forever like this but I don’t think we should anticipate it being round the corner or in the near future but some considerable way down the road.

David Runciman – And we are going to come back to Britain in a second but one last question on China, when the phase does come to an end, one of the ways to hold together a polity on that scale is through nationalism and that’s one of the fears in the West is that Chinese nationalism is likely to rise just at the point where the Chinese state starts to fracture. Is that me just again being excessively Western in my fears?

Martin Jacques – Well you see I’m a little bit cagey about this, I know it’s a popular term ‘Chinese Nationalism’ but I think that’s an assumption that China is a conventional nation state in the way that we are in the West have conventional nation states and I don’t think that China is primarily a nation state, I think it is only secondary a nation state in it certainly has some forms which are nation state forms because it exists in a world of nation states but primarily it’s a civilisation state in my view. You know I don’t think China is particularly in that sense nationalistic, I mean Japan is but Japan is a much more conventional state in that sense than China. I mean I think our greatest fear of China going wrong in the West, if it did go really wrong

David Runciman – Something bad always happens in the end, in the long run

Martin Jacques – The consequences of it would be, lets imagine for some reason China implodes, I don’t think its going to happen, I don’t think it’s going to happen in the next 50 years or something like that but if it did, imagine the consequences for China itself, imagine the consequences globally because the Chinese economy by then probably would be 2 or 3 times the size of the American economy projected 2030 the Chinese economy would be twice the size of the American economy. So the global consequences of it all going bottom up would be disastrous, it’s not in humanities interest for this to happen, but it might happen

David Runciman – So then, we are going to go to the parochial now because it feels parochial to talk about a British general election against those kinds of civilisational, long-term, questions, challenges, prospects for humanity but there is also an election going on in this country so as we said at the beginning, 20 years ago plus you were very plugged into this, now you have a different view, from a different perspective. Look

from the perspective that you take now on British politics, do you care about the outcome of this election, do you think it matters? It matters to us, and when I say us I mean it matters to the British electorate but does it matter in wider terms what happens in this election?

Martin Jacques – Well it certainly maters to me, you’re right that my interests lie elsewhere but I was born here, I have lived here all of my life, well most of my life

David Runciman – And you live in London now

Martin Jacques – I live in London yeah, so it does matter. And the fact is I spend a lot of my time writing about, editing and so on British politics so I have some kind of historical stake in it as well. So I do think it matters, if you ask me well, how much does it matter globally, if that’s the question?

David Runciman – That’s kind of the question

Martin Jacques – Then much less than it used to, you would have to say this, why? Because Britain is much less important than it used to be, I mean its less important to American than it used to be, it’s less important in the context than it used to be because it’s no longer a major player, it’s a relatively minor player, but most important of all the great global shift has diminished the importance not only of Britain but of Europe, I mean I remember when I was a student in the 1960s, you know, where do you look for a sense of the future, well probably Paris, you’d never dream of saying that now

David Runciman – But what about Berlin? Would you look to Berlin or not, for a sense of at least the European future?

Martin Jacques – Yeah, I mean, a German election is more important than a British election now because Germany is a much more important country. Germany’s clearly, if you look at the Ukraine, or Germanys relationship with China, which, is much more developed than any other country in Europe and Germany is a very important country in a European context, but not a global context. Not only is Britain much diminished but Europe is much diminished and the process of European if you like, diminishment, if there was such a word, is going to continue. There was an era when Europe was the maker of the world, literally, colonised most of the world, we’ll look back on that period as, well how did it happen? Why this relatively small continent with not such a large population could exercise and influence. But that is the past, the world of the future is going to be shaped above all in the East, East Asia, above all by China and I think India in time as well, 38% of the worlds population. In a way we are almost returning to the agrarian past where the demographics mattered, they didn’t matter for an era after the European Industrial Revolution starting with the British because the technological advantage was so great once you could make that step, the productivity advance so great, then the military advantage that that secured at the same time and then the capacity to colonise the world and in

colonising the world essentially inhibiting in many respects the growth of those countries. So China for 150 years the GDP didn’t grow, and India doubled or something like that, and it was then after when they became independent or when China had its revolution in 1949, suddenly instead of barely growing at all they started to grow at 5%, then 10% and so on, and then the demographic of just size has become more important and that’s the world we’re moving into. So Europe’s advantage has gone.

David Runciman – So what then is the game for Europe’s politicians though indeed for Britain’s politicians because one possible tension here is that we also have a kind of technocratic politics and increasingly technocratic politics but it doesn’t sit well with democratic politics, part of the frustration, part of the anger around this election is a sense that the parties are the same, that they have the certain kind of superficial elitism about them and pretence of expertise but basically they’re offering us the same thing and its not especially competent. So if you were a British politician do you think that we need more technocracy or more democracy because it’s hard to see how the two go together in they way that they’re currently yoked.

Martin Jacques – I’m going to sort of dodge your question for the moment while I try and work out how to reply to that because I think there is another way of also looking this which is that, looking at Britain or looking at other European countries and the discontent it may have different forms but

David Runciman – It’s palpable

Martin Jacques – Yeah, and its relatively common across the continent, why? I think there are at least two reasons, one is that ever since the financial crisis living standards have either declined or are stagnant, this situation hasn’t existed since the 1930s, in fact I think you probably have to go back to the 19th Century to find something like that because if you were in work in the 1920s and 30s you were relatively ok. So people are discontented because you know if you ask them will your children enjoy a better standard of living than you, people in the great majority now think that their children will be worse off when they grow up than they have been

David Runciman – Which is not true in China, just to put things into perspective

Martin Jacques – Absolutely not in China, the living standards are doubling in China when they were growing 10% every 7 years, so they are filled with optimism and we are filled with pessimism although that’s slightly exaggerating but that kind of picture is broadly true I think. So I think there is a sense in which the system we have got, whatever you mean by system, but the present system isn’t delivering anymore and there’s a general loss of faith in the system and its institutions and in the governing elites and therefore loss of respect for politicians and political parties but not only that, across the board there is a loss of faith in the institutions that run society. Now I don’t know where this is going to lead but it’s clearly true. And the second problem, and this is going to be a continuing problem is that the British elite like

France, like other European countries enjoy the prestige by virtue of the fact that they were so influential and important in the world. Now what happens when your country, the country you are responsible for is suffering a steady decline in it’s prestige, it’s status, it’s authority and it’s influence, it matters clearly less and less and less? Now the British have been very poor by and large across the board in facing up to this reality because the default mode is always pomp and circumstance and aren’t we important rather than where we are, you know wiping the slate clean and recognising, so we are always looking in some degree or other in the rear-view mirror I would say. For me these are the two problems, not just now but for the foreseeable future.

David Runciman – So then a last question to tie it back to the theme of this podcast which is Election, do elections get in the way of manage decline because obviously the one thing no politician is going to try and sell themselves to the electorate on is as the manager of decline. So is there a way, do you think, that a democracy like this one can negotiate that tricky process while also every few years having to fight democratic elections. Is it now a handicap?

Martin Jacques – I wouldn’t go that far. I don’t envisage democracy, as we know it being replaced by something else in Europe although it might happen in some countries, we could see this is a perfectly possible scenario in I don know, in southern European societies, it could happen, it cant be excluded

David Runciman – And it was suspended briefly as we know a few years ago in Italy and Greece, democracy was suspended for technocracy but that didn’t work either so we are now back to democracy again

Martin Jacques – Yeah except that the present Italian prime minister as the two previous ones was not elected, I mean he was appointed by his party and inherited the vote in the chamber of deputies. So I mean you can see it creaking, the system, but Britain, we are very attached to it, it goes back a long time and I think it’s durable

David Runciman – And its nothing if not adaptable, we’ve proved that over the years

Martin Jacques – Indeed, the problem is, how do we spring clean our institutions, how do we think forwards rather than constantly being in some degree or the other dragged backwards and we made one clear break for it, I think, and that was with Thatcher. But looking back on it Thatcher looks actually, I would say, and I was an admirer of hers but not a supporter, that she doesn’t look so good in the light of history because so much of what she offered was looking backwards in a new way if you like. And not least, the way she treated Scotland, what I would say which you haven’t asked me is I think more importantly than the general election, was the Scottish referendum because what I expect to happen which isn’t the same as it actually happening is that Scotland will sassed from the UK at some point in the next 20 years.

David Runciman – But sooner rather than later

Martin Jacques – Sooner rather than later yeah, and so one of things we’ve got to get used to in Britain, I mean in 1945 we had a huge empire, 20% of the worlds population, 20% of the worlds land mass then we had the great period of colonial liberation broadly speaking coming to an end on the late 60s and we sort of think aren’t we clever you know, look post imperial decline we have negotiated it but actually what we didn’t understand was that post imperial decline didn’t finish with that, its been a process that has been continuing and its now eating in to the very islands themselves if you like, and this I part of the process because Scotland got a lot out of empire but in the post imperial situation it doesn’t seem any longer the reason why its interests are necessarily going to be served by retaining the partnership with England, so probably looking down the road, what we’re going to see is something like, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland isn’t going to be Northern Ireland forever; I mean sooner or later I think there will be some kind of repression on the island, so England and Wales. It happens.

David Runciman – Thanks to Martin Jacques for giving global perspective on a national election. I know not everyone is going to agree with what he has to say about China but it is very important to hear about how this election might look from outside eyes.