David Runciman - From the University of Cambridge this is ELECTION, a weekly politics podcast. My name is David Runciman and we are going to be coming to you each week here from my office in the Cambridge Politics department to talk about this election, 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 my guest is Clare Jackson, the historian and television presenter whose widely acclaimed television series broadcasting the run up to the Scottish independence referendum last year told the story of the Stewarts, the dynasty that united England and Scotland in the 17th Century. The 2014 referendum saw the Scots voting to stay part of the union by a margin of 55-45% and the highest voter turn out in the UK for over 60 years at 85%. Clare Jackson, “I think for any of us who weren’t living in Scotland last year, we were just green with envy at the amount of political engagement, a steroid sort of injection for democracy”. Clare and I will discuss how history was harnessed during the campaign and what institutions if any, remain that can still unite people on both sides of the border in the years ahead. “Often what just holds these countries together is simply the monarchy, and that again was actually another theme in the referendum campaign that neither side were proposing to dispense with the monarchy”. Stay tuned.

I spoke to Claire Jackson about the long and complex history of the relationship between the constituent parts and the United Kingdom and how that history continues to inform the present. We started by talking about how she approached the delicate task of telling that history at a time of rising passion surrounding Scottish independence. How conscious was she as a public historian about the ways in which history can be used and abused by politicians

Clare Jackson – I think that we were all aware of it, I mean the BBC were very clear that they wanted to make a series that focused on the Stewarts very much as monarchs of three independent countries, England, Scotland and Ireland, not just because of a perceived saturation with the Tudors but actually to look at that multiple monarchy inheritance and really sort of argue that the 17th Century was the period in which modern understanding of Great Britain evolved.

David Runciman – And then you, as you told that story knew that you had to be careful about what you said because this history is very much alive in contemporary politics. Did you have to watch what you said? Did your history find itself being shaped by your consciousness of the ways that this story gets used today?

Clare Jackson – well I think all historians are careful with what they say, I hope we always are. So I think we were careful about the way in which we were talking about history but we were, one of themes of the series was, history is actually also the stories that we tell ourselves, so one of the ways we looked at the civil wars for example in the 1640s was both in terms of the ways in which we can package it, in terms of heritage as a nice day out watching a civil war re-enactment between parliamentarians and roundheads but then to think about it much more savagely almost as sort of a war of ethnic cleansing in Ireland and one of the most moving bits of talking about the civil wars was when I interviewed Fergal Keane who was talking very evocatively about the parallels he’s been struck by when he’d been in modern-day Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia and confronted notions of genocide and ethnic cleansing in the ways in which communities that had lived together for generations suddenly within the context of a civil war, former neighbours turn in on themselves and he drew exact parallels between what had happened in Ireland in the 1640s. And another theme of this series was very much the politics of memory, so we looked a lot at murals of the 17th Century in Belfast which are there, whether of Oliver Cromwell or King Billy and also things like the apprentice boys parade that each year celebrates or commemorates depending on which side you’re on the siege of Derry in 1689

David Runciman- And the referendum campaign itself, it was by contemporary political standards, pretty heated, it wasn’t violent in any sense I don’t think, unless you count what happened on Twitter as a kind of violence, but it was a very passionate debate and history played a role in it, but it wasn’t passionate in the way you were describing, nothing in the referendum campaign suggested a country on the brink of a civil breakdown. Do you think that the way that history is used by contemporary politicians, misses just how big a gulf there is between the kinds of conflict s you’re describing and the democratic arguments that were being played out last year?

Clare Jackson – Yeah, I think for any of us who weren’t living in Scotland last year, we were just green with envy at the amount of political engagement, a steroid sort of injection for democracy. And I think history is important in the ways in which history keeps alive whether they’re uncomfortable truths or contingent truths or that sort of thing but I think it would be crude and a disservice to the sophistication of the debate in Scotland last year to say that history was being used.

David Runciman – But what are some of the uncomfortable truths that you think the sort of history that you’re interested in brings to bear on contemporary arguments about the union? What are the things that you think history lets people recognise that other people might miss?

Clare Jackson – Well, I think history is a very good barometer, what we study is a very good barometer of contemporary anxieties, it’s not the exact answer to your question but you know in the 19th Century for example, the Scots were very interested in the cult of Wallace and independence and in a way that wasn’t use negatively against the union, it was to reassure Scots that union had been achieved as two equal sovereign states and this had never been a war of conquest. Obviously the dynamics are very very different and Irelands relationship with England has been very different in the types of political nationalism that evolved in the Ireland, as a result of that history were different. So, the fact that it was very much a three kingdom series, it didn’t make explicit parallels because they weren’t relevant at that time between Scotland’s experiences and Irelands but they’re there.

David Runciman – And as you say that it actually strikes me because your series clearly, the context for it is the current obsession of British politics, which is the relationship between Scotland and England, which actually is a relatively recent phenomenon. Over the last 30 years the relationship between England, or the United Kingdom and Ireland has been the central relationship and one of the striking things about this election is the extent to which that has fallen away. We are so preoccupied with what might happen in Scotland; hardly anyone is talking about Ireland anymore

Clare Jackson – I am very reassured that you feel England is obsessed by it and preoccupied, I mean think that one of the other themes of the series was the extent to which England has been actually very unreflective often about its relationships with being part of a multiple monarchy or its relationship with Scotland, unless there were particular contingent circumstances as occurred in the beginning of the 18th Century where English interests are suddenly threatened by the prospect of, in that case, Scotland electing a different monarchy, post 1689 and going for a French sponsored jacobite monarchy instead, that was enough to focus English minds at the beginning of the 18th Century ad bringing the English to the negotiating table. But my impression generally is that the English are remarkably unaware and that was certainly my impression until embarrassingly late in the day I would have said last year that the English media at any rate suddenly woke up in the late summer and this was potentially quite a momentous referendum taking place at the north of the border

David Runciman – You could say the same is true of the English political class, the politicians who allowed this referendum to happen seem to wake up relatively late in the day to what it was that they’d unleashed. And there was clearly a certain amount of panic right at the end

Clare Jackson – I think English attitudes can be quite interesting, there’s an almost knee-jerk quite emotional reaction very late, not talking about political classes here, but almost a sort of popular perception of ‘what have we done wrong?’ ‘What’s their problem?’

David Runciman – ‘Why don’t they like us?’

Clare Jackson – Exactly, and I mean my sense is, I’m not voting in Scotland, I’m not living there, by my sense is its not about that, it’s actually more about the future, it’s about Scots saying, it’s nothing to do with way we’ve been treated historically but we’re actually now thinking forward, we’re thinking what is the best way that we can organise our society and is that based on Scotland becoming an independent county or remaining part of the United Kingdom

David Runciman – So in a way, is it then a misrepresentation on my part, my sense from south of the border is that these historical narratives have played a very important part in the Scottish independence arguments, but actually maybe that’s a misunderstanding on my part, that actually that’s the cliché that’s been perpetuated by us south of the border, that the Scots are obsessed with history of their relations with England and they’re not?

Clare Jackson – I would think so because I think if you were obsessed with your relations with England that would produce a particular type of political nationalism that really hasn’t characterised Scottish identity. And cultural nationalism has always been very strong in Scotland that’s coexisted along side legal nationalism or religious nationalism and it’s only very recently that political nationalism has taken a more mainstream role. But it’s very interesting the numbers of people who very happily admitted or indicated that they’d voted yes in the referendum but would still not necessarily define themselves a nationalist and conversely the number of people who supported the better together campaign and voted no, who still would not necessarily now describe themselves as a unionist. So I think always assuming unionism and nationalism are binary opposites in a Scottish context is perhaps complicated for different audiences to get their heads around but actually crucial to understanding where Scotland is at the moment

David Runciman – And something else I was struck by in the campaign, which is that Scottish nationalism also has a strong internationalist streak to it and there the echoes are often of the 18th Century, so the Scottish enlightenment did play a part in the campaign. I heard Alex Salmond talking about it very much in the context of universities and being open to the world and so on, that Scotland is drawn on an 18th Century heritage, your series was primarily about the 17th Century heritage, this is a totally unfair question, but is the 17th Century or the 18th Century the one that you think shapes the way that these arguments are going?

Clare Jackson – That is quite a difficult question.

David Runciman – And that might be an unfair binary because

Clare Jackson – Well I was going to say that that is predicated on the notion that history is driving these debates

David Runciman – And that you can divide it into centuries

Clare Jackson – Exactly, and then you could look at the 19th Century and say well that’s all to do with imperial confidence and a sort of notion of patriotism that was quite easy for Scots to subscribe to and you could see that a lot in the commemoration say of the outbreak of World War 1 last year, that was patriotism in a war that the Scots recognised as part of their British identity but much more divisive were wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that most Scots felt were not wars that had been gone to in their name so those older ties of sort of super national identity were much weaker

David Runciman – So do you feel that the European background to these arguments is something again that we tend to neglect on the English side, so the preoccupation that this is England vs. Scotland or/and Scotland, Wales gets left out a bit, Ireland gets left out a lot, but Scots I think more than the English are particularly aware of their relations with the wider European continent

Clare Jackson – Very much so again you could say it’s one of the ironies or one of the interesting strengths of the arguments of the yes side last year that this is only one union we’re talking about, this is just the union with England and Scotland, this is not talking about EU membership, it’s not talking about NATO membership, now there may be complexities associated with accession and procedures but there’s never any sense that this is a sort of all or nothing nationalism, I mean that is a way in which Scottish nationalism has moved towards the end of the 20th Century away from a notion of exclusive nation state nationalism to a partnership, whether it’s Scotland in Europe or a member of other dimensions

David Runciman – So in a way then the possible future political event that really would bring some of these questions to a head is a referendum on EU membership where there could be quite clearly a division between the Scottish approach and indeed a popular vote in Scotland and what might happen in England. There is a scenario; various contingencies would have to come to pass in which England votes to take Scotland out of the European Union, does that fill you with some foreboding or is that something to

Clare Jackson – Well I think it’s definitely a key consideration, that I found myself in the run up to the referendum for example doing an interview with Polish National Radio where the London correspondent was kind of delighted he’d got a look in because so much was going on at the time in Crimea, but the main concern Poles are the largest expat community in Scotland and he said that the questions he was continually being asked was well which side will guarantee us staying in the EU? I mean much less consideration say with Scotland’s inexorable destiny or something, but actually if we vote no could we be signing up to a UK that then takes us out of Europe, on the other hand if we vote yes could we be encountering problems as yet we are unclear about, sort of excision as a separate country? So the way that the correspondent was describing it, the Polish mindset was entirely focused on Scotland’s role within Europe and securing that

David Runciman – So I’m going to ask this question again, so is there are a chance by saying no Scotland signed up to a smaller union that is going to break away from a bigger European Union and if that happened do you think that the question of Scotland’s relationship with the UK would have to be reopened?

Clare Jackson – I think in a way Scotland’s relationship with the UK is kind of on the table as long as there’s so much support as there seems to be for a Scottish national party in Scotland those questions are going to be on the table. There’s too many ‘if’s’ really to kind of be able to see into a glass ball about that relationship with Europe but definitely one of the undeniable truths that came out of the referendum was that for some people English and Scottish politics, perhaps since Thatcher, you know have been going on a different trajectory, whether that’s Thatcher and then Blairite labour, wasn’t necessarily, wasn’t in anyway the sort of natural territory in Scotland and there are different visions of politics and actually there are different nationalist visions looking ahead. I mean if you’re thinking about Europe, Scottish nationalism has always been a very civic nationalism, it’s not ever been based on ethnicity or any sort of notions of attachment to Scotland in terms of race, it’s been if you live in Scotland you have the right to determine your future and therefore the SNP policy has always been to actually increase immigration into Scotland and if you’re talking about left and right is in left wing territory. Whereas I think again instinctive ideas about nationalism and identity people’s notions of what that means tend to cluster around the right wing exclusively ethnic perceptions

David Runciman – And is it your sense as someone who spends time in Scotland, spends time in England, sees it from both sides that what we’ve seen recently, and you’ve described it a little bit just there just there, is we are getting two separate types of politics now. So this is meant to be a general election coming up, but the general bit is the bit that is sometimes hard to get a grip on compared to the past in that we have a separate government in Scotland than we do in Westminster, we have separate kind of political discourse it means something different to be in opposition in Scotland than it does south of the border. And the people in England very rarely hear the kinds of arguments going on in Scotland and vice-versa. Do you think that we’ve actually got two politics going on in a single election or maybe more?

Clare Jackson – I would say probably maybe more. I mean I think again when I was talking earlier about the ways in which the English media were sort of going ‘well what did we do wrong? Why don’t they like us? What’s wrong with Westminster?’ Well there’s plenty wrong with Westminster but it’s not so much that, it’s actually what’s worked, and people will vote on different levels but I do think and I get the sense in those classic taxi conversations or just talking to people that there is a different political spectrum in both countries and as Scots felt notoriously, justifiably a lot of Scots felt disenfranchised during the Thatcher era or when Scotland was being ruled by conservative government often with very few MPs you know maybe some English feel that as well, that if you’re faced with spectrums of people on the right to centre that the ground you would traditionally associated with the left is there in Scotland but not here

David Runciman – And there is another possibility coming out of this election, and you’re a historian, I’m not going to ask you to speculate on outcomes in the next few weeks but just in broad terms, one way in which the English might feel disenfranchised in this election in a way that they never have in the past is that the government in Westminster could be determined by the presence of the SNP and to ways in which the SNP might support a minority government or that’s harder to imagine form a coalition with one of the main parties down south. What’s your sense of how that might play out in these broader arguments about the future of the union if the English find that the result of this general election is that the SNP is the lynchpin of the future government?

Clare Jackson – Well again, there are quite a lot of ‘ifs’ in there, I think its interesting how notions of coalition have become more mainstream than they were, you know the first past the post system doesn’t usually result in coalitions and just as the PR system in Edinburgh wasn’t meant to produce a single party government

David Runciman – And it did

Clare Jackson – And it did, and both sides are now getting used to political novelties and I think one of the interesting things is how fast politics is changing and how fast people’s identities and allegiances can shift. So, I think it’s really an interesting time, the last election and presumably the next one showed there was quite a lot of unknown unknowns

David Runciman – And you’re completely right to say there were too many ‘ifs’ in my question, but one of the possibilities here is that I’m one of the people who maybe assumes that nationalism takes a particular form, so there’s an assumption here that there will resentment on the English side and that there is a kind of little England-ism which is waiting, it’s the dog that hasn’t barked yet in British politics but what you suggested is that actually we should be more open to the thought that all of these nationalisms are up for grabs at the moment, they’re all subject to lots and lots of competing pressures and we just don’t know what an English response to this forthcoming election will be; there’s lots of different shapes it could take

Clare Jackson – Yes, and smaller parties have traditionally talked about interesting coalition relationships, so Nicola Sturgeon has talked about Plaid Cymru or the Greens and you can see that in the debates about the televised debates and who should be members of them and the experience of power sharing in Northern Ireland has suggested that interesting coalitions can emerge. So, if you’re being optimistic, this is a time for opportunity, I think there is growing dissatisfaction or impatience with the idea that these are two rigid monolithic two party systems and people are being presented with the binary choice, UKIP in England are showing that is not necessarily the case, so if that results in a broader spectrum of interest then that’s a good thing

David Runciman – So one of the ironies of the current campaign is that we have a unionist party in its name and that’s the Conservative Unionist Party but actually the one remaining party of the union is the Labour party in a sense that the Labour party is the one party that until now has been able to claim representation if you exclude Northern Ireland from across the United Kingdom, and there is again, this is another if, but we have to speculate because that is what this podcast is about, there is a possibility that the labour party if not going to be wiped out in Scotland, is going to suffer a historic perverse in that election. Do you think that could change the fundamental dynamics of the unionist politics in the United Kingdom, if there isn’t a party anymore that can claim representation across England and Scotland?

Clare Jackson – I think it’s very important to emphasize the unionist, the conservative unionist is not the Anglo Scottish union, it’s the Irish union and that’s when the term was formed and those dynamics are interesting in terms of the ways in which a lot of people in Northern Ireland and in England who are very interested in the union and Scotland maybe felt disenfranchised in the referendum, now I tend to agree if you’re going with the civic nationalist route which to me seems right, those arguments are kind of invalid, that it should only be the people who live in the country who vote, but nevertheless people did feel passionately about the union, whether is be from a Northern Ireland perspective or Welsh or English. In terms of labour, yes I mean the challenge for labour is both to, if it wants to, to tell the unionist story in a positive way, to explain why devolution, they would perceive as being, has been good for Scotland and that reticence, I think, was frustrating for people in Scotland that project fear wasn’t necessarily the only way to argue the better together case, that there had to be a more positive case and I think that was really where the yes campaign was successful in fusing a message with optimism

David Runciman – So I think you can have some sympathy I think for the labour leadership in this election because they are having to fight on well more than two fronts, but two key fronts, one of which is to sure themselves up against affections to UKIP which is telling, UKIP is not really a UK independence, it’s an English party, telling a story that makes sense in England, but also giving an account of why the union itself remains important. Do you have some sympathy?

Clare Jackson – I think it’s very difficult for Labour because in a way Scottish Labour is only going to reclaim some support by positioning itself against London Labour, I mean you could see that in the leadership change that happened post-referendum where these arguments about being treated as a branch office weren’t just bad feeling, they seemed to have some credibility. And also, one of the themes about The Stuarts series was about contingency and how substantial political shifts happen because a succession dies out or something. But one of the points about The Stuarts series was that often quite seismic political shifts can happen just as a result of historical contingencies so 1701 the last of the Stuarts airs dies, the Duke of Gloucester, and the English decide they will go for the Hanoverian dynasty, now Andrew Marr has drawn attention to the unexpected deaths of key labour politicians when they’ve been at the height of their political powers, depriving that labour voice of a strong unionist perhaps anti-Blairite or distancing itself and he sites Robin Cook, and then looking backwards Donald Dewar and then looking even further back John Smith

David Runciman – So then let’s bring it back to the TV series you are about to make? I think you’re about to film it?

Clare Jackson – Next week

David Runciman – Next week, taking your historical account further forward into the 18th Century to talk about what happened to the Stuarts in exile. What, again, to go back to where I started, how do you see the account that you’re going to give there, fitting into some contemporary anxieties and concerns in the run-up to the very important votes we are talking about?

Clare Jackson – Well the series will be screened after election so by then we will know what the outcome is

David Runciman – It may be screened in the run-up to a European referendum

Clare Jackson – It could be, and I think the feeling was that whatever the outcome of the referendum, whatever the outcome of the election that people remain interested in notions of national identity, multiple levels of identity and the early 18th Century is really interesting. I mean for the first time, there are two clear dynasties, the Jacobites that are seen to embody legitimacy, divine right monarchy but staunchly Catholic and bringing on France or the protestant Hanoverians perhaps with a less convincing legitimist claim to the throne but supporting Protestantism, putting on real onus on the United Kingdom, this very new entity to stick together in the 18th Century and the Jacobite threat puts an onus on the Hanoverian state to sharpen ideas of Britishness and to promote the union and that’s the year in which you see the idea of the Scots promoting themselves as North Britain’s, the English never really take on with the South Britain idea. But I think it’s to explore those multiple levels of identity, again to look at contingency in history, I mean, one of the things about in the 17th Century and the 18th Century is that there isn’t a common ethnicity in Britain, there isn’t a common religious traditions, there is a shared parliamentary tradition, but there very distant cultures, often what just holds these countries together is simply the monarchy. And that was again another theme in the referendum campaign that neither side were prepared to dispense with the monarchy, this wasn’t going to be a republican gone

David Runciman – So we are still living, this is a society like the one you have just described, it doesn’t have a single ethnicity, it has lots of multiple competing identities, in a way do you there is a real continuity here from the sort of history that you’re telling through to now. Because I began by saying this is a very different world, you’re describing where politics is a life or death struggle in many respects and it’s really by our standards shockingly violent and volatile and our politics is stable and is relatively peaceful. But nonetheless what you’ve described makes it clear that the continuities run all the way through. Are we closer to the 17th and 18th Centuries than we might think?

Clare Jackson – no, I think we are participatory democracies now and the levels of involvement are much higher in that as I go back to where I started, I mean that’s the thing that I look at the referendum last year and I’m quite envious at that grass roots engagement in politics and that wasn’t the case 1707 and nobody ever pretended that it was, on the other hand one of the parallels that was often sighted in the referendum campaign last year was the velvet divorce between the Czech and Slovak governments but that wasn’t a democratic decision either, that was a negotiation between governments, so, I think it’s very important that societies tell their history accurately and drawing resonances where appropriate. And I think actually one of the very nice things that was said about the series actually the day it went out in Scotland, in January, Lord Bilimoria of Chelsea said in the House of Lords that he liked the series because it tended to shrink the tendency to assume that everything that’s happening now has never been thought of before and I think that really one of the points of the series was to give some sort of historical legs to the ideas that people have always thought quite creatively and in sophisticated ways about different constitutional ways of right ruling these Islands and the fact that there’s always been political and constitutional asymmetry, there’s always been multiple identities and that you can’t really reduce these things into simple binaries.

David Runciman – Thanks to Clare Jackson for a historian’s perspective on our complicated present.