David Runciman - From the University of Cambridge this is ELECTION, the politics podcast. My name is David Runciman and we will be coming to you each week here from my office in the Cambridge Politics department to talk about what really matters in this campaign and we’ll keep going until Britain has a new government, however long that takes.

This week we have two guests first I’ll be talking to the former Conservative party leader Michael Howard who served in the final Thatcher cabinet, who fought and lost a general election against Tony Blair in 2005 and as Tory leader promoted the careers of two young politicians David Cameron and George Osborne. Michael Howard is link between the Thatcher era and the Cameron era in Conservative politics, I’ll be asking him about some of the lessons from his long political career and why this election is so hard to call, “Anybody who tells you they know what’s going to happen at this election is not telling you the truth”, he’ll also be telling me what the one thing is he agrees with Gordon Brown about.

Then I’ll be in conversation with Stephan Shakespeare, one of Britain’s leading pollsters and the Chief Executive of YouGov the online poling firm. He’ll be explaining what the polls are really saying in this campaign and why they matter so much, he tells us how to cut through and get noticed during a campaign, “In order to make people think about what you’re saying there has to be something unexpected in it, it’s the element of surprise, it’s why I think someone like Boris Johnson is such an exciting politician because you have no idea what he is going to say”. And he’ll be telling us what sort of surprises might still be in store. Stay tuned for some fascinating insights.

Now to a man who was actually there when Margaret Thatcher was in her pomp. I spoke to Lord Howard, Michael Howard about what, if anything, Thatcherism still means today. But I started by asking him how this election was different from all the others he fought over his long political career?

Michael Howard – Very different, the obvious thing is that you have many more parties who are playing a very significant part in this election, obviously you’ve got the two big parties but their share of the vote is likely to be less than it’s been for some time and you have the SMP as a major force in Scottish politics, to a much greater extent than they have been before, you have UKIP which is likely, put it at it’s lowest, is likely to get more votes, many more votes this time, I imagine, than it has previously and you’ve got the Greens who are also likely to play quite a significant role, so it is completely different I think from any election that we’ve previously seen and therefore completely unpredictable

David Runciman – So if we talk about UKIP first and maybe we’ll come onto the SMP in a second and what that might mean for the future of the union, but do you think that UKIP who may poll as you say significantly higher than in the past and maybe higher than the Liberal Democrats as well, but are unlikely to win many seats, I imagine you’d agree

Michael Howard – I do agree

David Runciman – So do you think that UKIP are a distinctly different force or the kind of minor party irritant, or more than that, that the major parties have had to deal with and as we get closer to the election their influence on the outcome is likely to diminish

Michael Howard – Who knows, we don’t know, I mean it is perfectly possible and I know some people think that, there was before the recent election in New Zealand an insurgent party obviously not UKIP but shared many of the anti-establishment characteristics of UKIP which was expected to do extremely well and just collapsed 48 hours before the poll. Now I know there are people who believe that’s going to happen to UKIP, I don’t think their vote will collapse but I think there is a pretty good probability that it will shrink quite a lot from where it is in the opinion polls at the moment, but I could be completely wrong. Anybody who tells you they know what’s going to happen at this election is not telling you the truth

David Runciman – You’re here in Cambridge to give a lecture on Thatcherism today, do you have any sense of how Margaret Thatcher might have fought an election like this one, given as you say, she didn’t face an election like this one, the elections that she fought were, there was the STP but it was major parties taking each other on, how would she, for instance, have tried to see of UKIP do you think?

Michael Howard – I think it’s an almost impossible question to answer I should tell you that the major conclusion, the central conclusion that I’ve reached about Thatcherism is that it was a specific response to a specific set of problems at a specific time and that there are very few generalisation that you can draw from it that are applicable today. So, given that central conclusion it’s far from easy to speculate how Margaret Thatcher would have fought this general election.

David Runciman – And what about the politicians, who are fighting this general election, are there things you think, that they should be saying that they aren’t saying in dealing with these other parties on either side?

Michael Howard – Well I’m trying not to be partisan

David Runciman – And this podcast is a totally non-partisan podcast

Michael Howard – Well exactly. Well if you’ll allow me one partisan remark it is that I think there are an awful lot of things that Ed Miliband should be talking about and he isn’t but not many things David Cameron isn’t talking about that he shouldn’t

David Runciman – Do you want to give me one example of something that Ed Miliband should be talking about and that he isn’t?

Michael Howard – Well he should be talking much more about the deficit and about how the Labour party would deal with the deficit and they are far from clear about that. They haven’t given really any indication really about how they would tackle the deficit

David Runciman – So that then leads on to the other party that is occupying the minds of the other main parties at the moment, the SMP, to put it in very broad terms, we have no idea what the outcome of this election will be but it’s clear that I think now that the Scottish Independence referendum did not settle the question, in a sense it opened up a whole further series of questions about the union, do you have fears for the union itself over the next say 5 to 10 years given the various possible scenarios we see playing themselves out, including the SMP being the party that holds the balance of power in Westminster?

Michael Howard - The short answer to your question is yes, but I wouldn’t want to exaggerate those fears, I think it would be foolish to say that the union is absolutely safe for the next 5 or 10 years because the unpredictability of politics because nobody quite knows how things will play out with a large block of SMP members at Westminster but you know if I had to bet on it, I would bet that the union will survive, I think that it was quite a decisive outcome in the referendum and if you look elsewhere, ive always been struck by the fact that the last referendum in Quebec which I think was 20 years ago was won by the people who wanted to stay in Canada by the narrowest of majorities, I think it was 50.5% to 49.5% so you couldn’t get much closer than that but there hasn’t been another referendum and the support for separatism in Quebec has declined, now obviously there could be many differences and there are many differences between the two and it would be unwise to take that as an absolute paradigm for what’s likely to happen in Scotland but I obviously hope the union would survive and I think it will but it’s impossible to be complaisant about that

David Runciman – Do you think the prospect of a European referendum which almost certainly will happen if the Conservative party form the next government is going to make all of those questions even more complicated? I mean there is a, clearly in the Scottish referendum Scotland’s place in Europe was one of the cases that the independence campaign pushed very hard; a British referendum on European exit does put particular pressure on Scotland and the idea of Scottish identity if Britain takes Scotland out

Michael Howard – Well that’s putting it in a very stark form but there is an issue there, I quite agree, and we’ll have to see how that plays out obviously your question assumes that the result of the referendum would be a British withdrawal from the union, if there referendum doesn’t lead to that outcome then the pressures to which you refer will go away

David Runciman – Yeah and I’m not assuming that but I’m assuming that in the run-up to an election those questions will be more acute

Michael Howard – Yes but in the run-up to the election they’re going to be by definition temporary, if there’s a vote to stay in then that particular issue goes, if there’s a vote to come out then obviously it will be a live issue

David Runciman – So enough of the speculation which I totally understand why you and any other rational person does not want to engage in. Can I ask you a question which draws on your experience as home secretary, which is the question about the radicalisation of certain British citizens and how the British government should respond to that and what sort of legislations or other measures you might think is appropriate for a home secretary or government to take in the face of serious anxieties at the moment about the ways in which certain peoples in Britain seem to be radicalised and then that leading to threats of serious harm?

Michael Howard – Well I broadly speaking support the governments approach. I think it’s a mistake to suppose that you’re going to solve all these problems by legislation; no legislation has a part to play. I think we just have to engage at all levels with the differing communities in this country to try and influence people to do all they can to ensure that people don’t get misled and carried away by these terrible ideas

David Runciman – And how serious do you think the threat is?

Michael Howard – No doubt it’s a serious threat

David Runciman – It’s not currently being overplayed?

Michael Howard – I don’t think so, no

David Runciman – And then can we broaden it out even further because I want to talk about something that I know that you’re interested in and I know it may seem far removed from current British politics but it’s about political leadership and what makes the ideal politician? Your desert island book was a book that many of our listeners may not know about though some of them will, the biography of the American president Lyndon Johnson, an epic biography that runs currently over four volumes and those of us who admire it are waiting eagerly for the fifth, the story on Lyndon Johnson’s life and how he rose to power and he used power. Can you just tell us a little bit as to why you admire the book so much or indeed the man Lyndon Johnson?

Michael Howard – Well about the only thing I agree with Gordon Brown about is the fact that this is the greatest political biography ever written and the detail which Caro goes into is absolutely mind boggling and it is just a brilliant book, I have often described it as a political biography written as a Western thriller, I found it an absolutely impossible book to put down. Now partly that’s a result of Caros great skill and great attention to detail and great effort and the introduction, the dedication to the fourth volume is to his publisher, which reads forty years, four books thank you.

David Runciman – it took him longer to write the account of the life than the life that was being led

Michael Howard – That’s absolutely right. So it’s partly his great skill as a biographer but it’s also partly his subject because Johnson was in the true meaning of the words of this cliché, a truly larger than life figure. He was in many ways deeply flawed but he achieved great things

David Runciman – And for listeners who may not know the book, they may know the TV series, the house of cards which we are told has been partly inspired by Caros’ biography though it’s central character is not just flawed he’s something worse than flawed. It’s sometimes hard to imagine how one could be a Johnsonian politician today; he did live in a day where the levels of scrutiny were significantly less. He was able to devote himself, as you say, the incredible work that went in to getting legislation passed because he wasn’t subject to so many of the pressures that politicians are now. During the Obama administration sometimes frustrated either supports or opponents of Obama have wished that he would read the Caro biography so that he could understand just what it means to be president and get legislation though and that always struck me as a little unfair to ask Obama to be another Johnson just because to be president now is a different kind of job, or maybe I’m being too

Michael Howard – I do not think I do entirely agree with you, I mean obviously there are different pressures today and in some ways those pressures make the job more demanding but Johnson faced huge challenges, I think that probably any president could learn from reading the Caro book. Im not suggesting that we want another Johnson but I do think that it would be good for the world to have a president who was able to deliver many of the things that Johnson was able to deliver, now of course, some people would say yes and Vietnam

David Runciman – And that’s the fifth volume of the book that we are waiting for

Michael Howard – That’s a fair comment, as I say he was a deeply flawed figure but in terms of getting legislation through and getting things done, we wouldn’t have the civil rights act that we have today in the United States without Lyndon Johnson, I am absolutely convinced of that

David Runciman – And one things I’m sure we can agree on is what’s so great about those books is the sense that they convey just how much politics matters in an age that people sometimes want to say that it doesn’t and that we’re living in a world were technology and other things matter more but politics is still at the heart of social change

Michael Howard – Of course, I mean you know that’s always going to be the case

David Runciman – And that’s why among other things, elections matter too

Michael Howard – they do

David Runciman - Michael Howard, anyone who would like to watch the lecture that he gave in Cambridge can follow the links on our website, just Google ‘Cambridge election podcast’ and you’ll see that after his lecture there’s an interesting question and answer session with some students who ask some of the tougher questions you might have wished I’d asked. Now my conversation with Stephan Shakespeare, one of the pioneers of online polling, we kicked off by discussing Michael Howard’s claim that anyone who knew what was going to happen in this election wasn’t telling the truth; would a pollster agree with that?

Stephan Shakespeare – It is incredibly hard to call this election and the reason for that is we’ve seen this long-term decline of the major parties; the smaller parties coming in are bringing the distances between the major parties closer together and therefore small changes in the vote have a much larger effect in the overall, you know who gets what seats

David Runciman – So that makes in unpredictable but slightly unusual features of this which is it’s a very unpredictable election but the polls look pretty steady, certainly compared to some previous elections, there hasn’t been an awful lot of movement. There’s maybe been a bit of movement towards the Tories in recent weeks but the two main parties seem to be, as you say, fighting for this very small share. Is there anything you think that could really move the polls between now and the election

Stephan Shakespeare – The thing that we are all obviously waiting for is the collapse of the UKIP vote that is what we have been predicting for some months, years even and it seems the obvious thing to happen. We know from our polling that UKIPers much prefer a Conservative government to a Labour government and you would think that they would realise, their continued intention to vote UKIP is bound to hurt the Conservative performance but actually a poll we did shows that most UKIPers think that more UKIP MPs would actually help the Conservative cause. Now of course they are not going to get a lot of UKIP MPs but trying to get them is really going to reduce the Conservative vote so if they were to wise up you could say then that should make a big difference but I don’t know if that will happen

David Runciman – And traditionally the thing that makes people wise up is the ballet box, they may change their mind on the day even when they’re confronted not with the choice who do you want to express your preference for but who do you want to be prime minister and the choice is still going to be between two people. Is it your sense that this election is going to fall into that familiar pattern or is also different once we

Stephan Shakespeare – We really don’t know and that’s the big question and there’s perfectly rational response that a UKIPer might have and say the whole reason that we’re sick of politics because you keep forcing us down this one choice we don’t want to make and now we’ve found someone in Nigel Farage that we do like, so what if it is wasted, that’s not a waste to me. Nigel Farage is the only party leader the supporters *really* like, Conservatives quite like Cameron the supports of Labour they’re not that keep on Miliband, the supporters of the Lib Dems are disenchanted with Clegg but UKIPers really like Nigel Farage

David Runciman – And SMP voters quite like Nicholas Sturgeon as well don’t they?

Stephan Shakespeare – Yes they do

David Runciman – Obviously that’s almost a different election

Stephan Shakespeare – Yes it is

David Runciman - One of the things that you wrote in the column that you write in The Times is that you thought that there was an appetite in this election for surprises, that there is room for the politicians who feel that they’re very constrained maybe to galvanise their support by producing policies of statements that shake things up a little bit. Do you think Ed Miliband in particular has more room for manoeuvre there than he might appreciate? We don’t know what’s in the manifesto yet; we’re going to find out soon

Stephan Shakespeare – Yes, I mean I certainly wasn’t predicting surprises because everything that they’re doing is suggesting that they’re not going to do that. What I was really saying was that if you want attention, if you want to grab attention then you must surprise, nobody gets excited about hearing about what they’re expected to hear. We know not to get too neurosciencey about this but we don’t even know notice, we don’t even register or perceive things that are cord with what we expect, so when a politician starts telling you things that you expect them to say you’re not even listening, you’re not engaging and it’s certainly not going to change your vote in any way. In order to get attention, in order to make people think about what you’re saying there has to be something unexpected in it, it’s the element of surprise. It’s why I think someone like Boris Johnson is such an exciting politician because you have no idea what he is going to say

David Runciman – He sometimes has no idea

Stephan Shakespeare – You can see him making it up at the moment, if you watch him he’s looking around the room almost for inspiration for something, and he comes up with something quite crazy sometimes, I mean it’s humorous right, it’s unexpected, it’s not crazy in the

David Runciman - In the neuroscience terms

Stephan Shakespeare – Yeah, I think that if Miliband wants to get attention, wants to use the moment to change someone’s mind, he has to say something that will change someone’s mind, he has to something that’s a surprise and he actually has the ability to do that, he’s obviously much less constrained than a prime minister

David Runciman – And what are some of the things that you think the polling suggests he could say that would resonate with people, particularly with maybe wavering Labour supporters

Stephan Shakespeare – There’s a sort of contradictory appetite I think for that. People do seem to want a more left wing appeal; we’ve been through a banking crisis, the big hang over from that, people think the establishment’s against them, leftist ideas when put in polls get really good support and they’re really sick of austerity, they don’t think the economy is working for them so there is an appetite for something more radical. At the same time people feel centrist they don’t think of themselves as radical and if somebody comes along and sounds too much like a fire brand then that’s not going to help them either. That’s the difficulty for him, his appeal would be to say not Blairite things but more left wing things and that I think could at least get him attention

David Runciman – in the column, my memory of it, you said that there was a way that he could, as it were, bridge that divide, that he could for instance move to the left combined with something that seems to distance himself from the trade union

Stephan Shakespeare – So one of the things he could do is to announce that he would like to renationalise the railways, that’s a very popular move, but at the same time say because this is a national infrastructure because we all depend on it for our work you cannot strike as a member of the union; that would be surprising because he would be pushing himself away from the unions in a way that nobody would expect, at the same doing something that is a leftist status sort of popular thing

David Runciman – So a double surprise in a way

Stephan Shakespeare – A double surprise, exactly

David Runciman – Something that Michael Howard said in our interview with him when I asked him what might happen if Britain leaves Europe is that we shouldn’t get too carried away at the prospect of Britain leaving Europe, a) we don’t know if the referendum will happen, but if it does we shouldn’t assume the British people would vote to leave. I know you’ve already started polling on this, it’s a long way out, do you have any sense yet of how we should be thinking about public opinion on this question?

Stephan Shakespeare – Well there will only be of course a referendum if the Conservatives win. Only the Conservatives have promised it and Labour have said they would not do that; if the Conservatives win and there’s a referendum then it will be I think near certain Cameron will lead the referendum campaign in favour of staying in, I think he’s indicated that, of course he’s said only if I can get certain concessions. When we’ve tested this pretty much any concession of any size, a fig leaf of you know one inch size as it were, will actually make the people vote in favour of staying in. That is to say, what people really want is to stay in but get some acceptance from the EU that it’s gone wrong and we need to listen to Britain and that we will make some change. I think it’s the arrogance or the perceived arrogance of the EU that really makes people angry about it, we don’t see much appetite for actually leaving

David Runciman – And do you think there are lessons from the Scottish referendum campaign for a future campaign, not least what seems to happen in almost all referendums on big constitutional questions which is that the status quo is where people move back to as we get closer and closer to the vote. Which would suggest in a way that this is a campaign where the supports of Britain’s relationship with the EU do have an advantage here; that they are the status quo and change would come with all sorts of risks and it was the change in Scotland that in the end seemed to settle the question?

Stephan Shakespeare – That’s right, I mean normally in politics when we see movements in a campaign we think that’s not real, we think that’s probably bad polling but in the case of the Scottish referendum we measured that there was actual people talking to the same people before and after and during different parts of the campaign and they were changing their minds and why? Its because change is exciting until the ramifications get really close and a referendum campaign of the Scottish kind is of course not a rather marginal choice between a Miliband future or a Cameron future, it is a once in a lifetime decision that you cannot reverse, once you break up the union you can’t put it back together again in a short period of time and you’re making a really big decision for lots of people, for your family into the future. A European referendum would be exactly like that, Britain’s position in Europe is now so institutionalised, it is so much part of our way of life, it’s something we grumble about but use in our lives all the time, people making a decision to come out of that would be an enormous step and a frightening step, I mean a lot of turbulence and my very strong sense is that it wouldn’t take much to make the negative sentiment by the EU be a grudging acceptance

David Runciman – Now the Scottish referendum, as you said, people did change their minds and YouGov were the pollsters who tracked the change most dramatically because famously you had the poll a bit more than a week before the vote which was the one poll which showed the yes campaign marginally ahead and it did clearly produce panic I think among the main party leaders in Westminster and some people then think they made concessions that they went onto regret, and it’s not the only time that YouGov has had a real influence on British politics and indeed on wider politics, you also conducted the poll before the vote in parliament on potential military action in Syria which showed the British public were strongly against and that poll was widely sighted in the parliamentary debate. You may have had some impact on that vote in parliament, which resulted in defeat for the government’s motion to enable military action in Syria. As a pollster do you feel pleased, uncomfortable when you see your polls really impacting on the way politicians behave or is it simply you’re the messenger and it’s up to them how they deal with the message?

Stephan Shakespeare – Well the only thing that matters to me is that we’re accurate and we have put the question in a reasonable way, in a fair way and that it’s reported fairly. If those things happen then I think I have done my job, I think the purpose of polling is to bring more information to decisions, if you don’t have that information then you’re likely to make worse decisions. So I’m always glad to bring good, accurate, fair information to any decision making process, that is what I think we are all about. So in all those cases, there’s a third case I’m going to mention as well, I think it’s important that’s what we do. And we do think that we’re being accurate, I know in the case of the Scottish campaign, the Mail On Sunday actually wrote a piece at the weekend saying ‘this is the company that cost Britain 64 billion pounds

David Runciman – The concessions we were supposed to have made

Stephan Shakespeare – Yes and the assumption is of course that if you hadn’t made the concessions that things would have been exactly the same, to which I replied to them, why have a campaign in the Mail On Sunday? Why do people advertise? Why do people have money off sales or whatever it is? People do change their minds as a consequence of offers made and that was exactly what happened here, that once the Westminster establishment realised it was truly at risk and it had to do something they did the thing that Scotland wanted them to do, essentially to engage in what was happening and to reassure them on some points and to make concessions and that’s what they did and that’s the result they have and it’s a very good example I think of information being used to improve the decision making. You mentioned Syria? I think it did have a difference, it did make some difference to the vote there, what was clear was that the British attitude to that potential intervention was emphatic, it wasn’t a small difference it was 2 to 1 and its very I think for parliament to vote on something that has the sort of heavy repercussions that a military intervention has when a really strong majority is against it. Whether or not people actually change their minds, one of the things that some politicians, some of the MPs we know said to us is that it emboldened me to go against the party line, I already wanted to go but it emboldened me to do that so I don’t think anybody would read a poll and think I used to think intervene, now I don’t think that anymore. I think it would change the way they expressed their opinion, whether they would actually vote against their party for example

David Runciman – And it was striking in parliament that a large number of those MPs did sight the poll, which was the new feature of a parliamentary debate in a way, its not common for MPs to make that claim in parliament

Stephan Shakespeare – That’s right, and a third example where I don’t think it was that we had changed anything but there was an unusual use for a poll; we had done a poll on the eve of the Iraq war and parliament was voting on whether they should take part and we had done a poll for the Daily Telegraph that was showing that a plurality, not a majority, but a plurality of the British people and it was a very small number were in favour of this going ahead, people forget that actually at that moment the argument for taking part was just about wining. I got a call from Charles Moore and the editor then of the Daily Telegraph saying that Alistair Campbell had been on the phone, could they release this poll early within the chamber and apparently that’s what happened. They felt they needed to show their MPs that actually the British people, perhaps marginally but nevertheless were on side

David Runciman – One way in which polling might then influence this election, not so much in the run up to the election, and we are familiar with polls and the run up to an election but if this election does produce a result which is unusual and maybe unprecedented which is some kind of grid long, not just a hung parliament but makes it very difficult for a government to be formed, you along with other pollsters will presumably ask people what they think about the alternatives post the election, the various permutations, are they happy with a Conservative minority government, are they happy with the SMP having a particular kind of role, am I right that you would expect a poll on that and presumably that also may be a case where those polls really do matter?

Stephan Shakespeare – We will absolutely be ready on the day, I mean I’m sure we will be polling on Friday, we poll everyday anyway and I’m sure we will be set up to do that I think quite in depth; and even now I wrote a poll last week to say not which party would you vote for but what outcome do you want at the end of this and we had a 10 point lead for a Cameron led Conservative government of some kind verses a Labour, a Miliband led Labour government of some kind, and that’s a pretty big difference, a 10 point difference at a time when the polls, that was you know the numbers in that poll about voting intention actually gave Labour not a majority but would make them the biggest party, that gave me a sense that there was a discrepancy about what people wanted and what their vote was going to achieve. I’ve just done a poll for The Times in which I asked people if Cameron gets the most seats and can just about hang on do you want him to stay prime minister, do you want him then to stay on as prime minister for five years? Overwhelmingly people said he should stay prime minister for the full five years, people actually want this election to be over, that once they’ve voted and the result is in, the deals are struck, whatever it is ought to hold for five years, they don’t really want a second election, they don’t want endless argee bargee about what concessions are made who gets to be at number 10, I’m putting that question now so that when the results come in we already have in mind what people intended when they actually made their X in the ballot box

David Runciman – Because that also suggests that one of the possible outcomes of this election which is a minority government, so not a coalition locked in for the five years but something more ad hoc, again polling will play a really important role, not just because as you’ve described people will get quite impatient with that but also a minority government by definition is kind of pulling together as it goes along, it’s doing it on a piece of legislation by piece of legislation basis, it’s trying to make sure it has the alliances in place to get through the week or the month, and polling will impact on that too because people presumably will then be polled by you about how the government is doing this week or this month and the government is only living by the week or the month. So polling could become more important in that scenario?

Stephan Shakespeare – I think it could be and I think it will be in any case, in all aspects of life public opinion is becoming more powerful and that is really why I think there’s a greater owners on us to show that we are accurate in the first place. But being accurate with a badly worded question or a question that’s asked of people who don’t actually know any background is sort of meaningless, so I think it’s also incumbent upon us to ask ourselves, what is it that we’re asking, why are we asking those questions, how in-depth do we want to go? When I started YouGov I was waiting in the wings of some television studio about to talk and Tony Benn came up to me and thrusted in my hands an old leaflet about the need for a national institution for national opinion because he thought, this is back in the 70s I guess, he thought public opinion was so important that it needed to be nationalised and it needed to be institutionalised by scientists so that it could play the proper role in public affairs that it should have in our policy making and so forth and I think he had a really important point, that if we have poor quality polling perhaps inaccurate but more importantly not actually explaining issues properly, not asking the right questions at the right time, then it undermines what is in fact a vitally important role

David Runciman – One thing Ed Miliband could do to really surprise everyone would be to nationalise the polling firms, I’m not advocating that! One last question about polling, obviously the famous disaster for opinion pollsters was 1992, it looked like a very very close election, quite similar to this one though it was of course it was between the two main parties, the other parties really didn’t get a look in and then the Tories pulled ahead dramatically on the day, so not only where the polls wrong, even the exit polls where wrong and polling was meant to have left that behind but we’ve just seen a repeat of that in Israel this week, something similar, another disaster there which presumably you weren’t polling Israel but another disaster for the pollsters which shows if nothing else, these things can still throw up significant surprises even with the ways in which polling as a science has advanced in the last 20 years. Do you have any fears or expectations this could happen again this time or are you much much more confident that 1992 is impossible?

Stephan Shakespeare – No, it’s always terrifying, it terrifying because things change, and whatever sampling frame, whatever techniques you use that were perfected from the last experience, they may not be quite right for this experience. We had a very difficult time over the referendum; we’ve now all forgotten the previous one about AV. We were polling on something that nobody understood and to say do you support AV even with a half of a sentence explanation got you nowhere

David Runciman – And for our listeners who have forgotten what AV is, is it’s the alternative voting system, it was a vote to change first past the post to something which was closer to proportional

Stephan Shakespeare – That’s right

David Runciman – Even then I struggle to explain it and I do this for a living

Stephan Shakespeare – And it was very complicated and to put it in a polling question was very difficult and if you start lecturing people on the background that changes them as well, so there are things that are just hard to predict because of the circumstances, so the science has definitely improved, we use much much more data in modelling our results than was ever possible in the past and that makes it more reliable but there are lots of other dynamics so it’s going to be really hard to ever be sure that your going to get it right

David Runciman – So this is an exciting election for you too and an unpredictable election, it’s an anxious night for pollsters as well as politicians

Stephan Shakespeare – Yeah, yeah