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Britain

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Andy Burnham became British Prime Minister on 20 July 2026. The former Mayor of Manchester had served in the Labour governments of Tony Blair and of Gordon Brown and in the opposition teams of Ed Milliband and Jeremy Corbyn. He stood twice previously to be Labour leader but this time was the only candidate with active support from people earlier expected to stand themselves. His predecessor Keir Starmer was forced to resign on 22 June after Burnham won an impressive by-election victory in Macclesfield in the north west of England where Nigel Farage's far right party Reform had hoped the prize might be theirs. This was in stark contrast to Labour - and Starmer's - disastrous showing in elections in May. It was clear that Burnham's success partly came from people supporting him precisely to get rid of Starmer.

Since the article below was written Burnham has appointed his Cabinet retaining many of those who served with Starmer and made a number of announcements of policies to assist with the biting cost of living crisis, while sticking to the fiscal rules. Only 5 days in, it is too early to draw a substantive balance sheet, On the other hand there is no doubt that Burnham is opening up a number of key political discussions - on devolution, on electoral reform and on reindustrialisation, for example, which it will be essential for the radical left to engage with. [TC]

Burnham is a bit like the actor using masks in a Shakespeare or Commedia dell'Arte play – he has to appear and communicate differently to the various political and class forces that surround him:

To the general public and the working class who have been deserting Labour for the Reform/Restore parties he has to convince them that he will do something quickly about the cost of living, housing and jobs. Hence Burnham has signalled he will carry out some urgent cost of living measures. More negatively he has shown no signs of breaking with Labour's reactionary policy on migrants and refugees which, despite the new leader rejecting this tactic in his victory speech, is actually all about 'out reforming Reform'.

To soft left labour MPs and the membership who backed his challenge to Starmer and new Green voters he has to convince them that he is a break with Starmer's government and he is challenging '40 years of neo-liberalism'. Already before the takeover he has announced a shift in policy on Palestine while not accepting there is genocide in Gaza and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank. Digital identity cards, a key Starmer policy, have already been dumped. A clear signal has been given that Thames Water will be taken under public control and that this could apply to other utilities like energy. Quick action on the cost of living such as social tariffs for energy, capping bus fares and raising the lower tax threshold has been signalled. Other progressive policies, like a wealth tax have been floated but nothing specific has been announced.

To the Labour right and its apparatus he has to show them that it is a reset and not a fundamental break with the Starmer regime. So the cabinet will probably include heavyweights from Labour Together, right wing, of the Labour leadership like Streeter, McFadden and Mahmood. It will be interesting to see how wide his broad church will be; surely some Labour Together leaders will be sidelined. He is reassuring the Labour establishment that his turn on Palestine only goes so far, he will not imitate fellow Social Democrat, Pedro Sanchez in the Spanish state. Burnham voted for Shabana Mahmood's racist and reactionary tightening of conditions for refugees. He has shown no inclination at all to change the general line on migrants and on the general repression of democratic rights. It would be a surprise if he loosened the noose around Palestine Action or weakened the general onslaught on protest and direct action. We have already seen a U turn on trans rights where Burnham, who previously defended trans people,

now accepts the Supreme Court ruling preventing Trans women using the women's toilets.

To the bosses and the capitalist class he wants to assure them that he is pro-business growth and he wants a new partnership, albeit with more public control over utilities and some industries. Hence in his Times interview he emphasises his pro-business views and accurately describes how the capitalist growth in Manchester was based on a partnership with property developers. They did very well and not much social housing was built. Not appointing Ed Miliband as chancellor and giving the job to Shabana Mahood would be another clear signal that the capitalist economy would be safe in his hands. In any case he has already said he will respect the fiscal rules and not let borrowing rip. The new leader has not questioned at all the NATO/Trump imposed targets on warfare spending which will please the military/industrial complex. His reindustrialisation agenda has defence spending as a key element despite the evidence that boosting welfare or education would create many, many more jobs.

A contradictory project

Despite the honeymoon period he is enjoying both within the Labour Party and worker's movement as well as in the mass media it will not be easy to keep this complex and contradictory project together.

Social care is correctly one of his priorities and if he were to come up with a fair, workable scheme it could win him a lot of support. His own father has Alzheimers and is unaware his son is the new PM. This is an issue that affects everyone. Even people with a reasonable income know the expense of paying for your own care or for your loved ones. Private equity, which now controls significant parts of social care both for young and old people will not give up their stakes without a fight.

Welfare spending, including disability payments, will be on the agenda very soon as the right wing inside Labour, the mass media and the establishment generally are in favour of big cuts. The Timms review on Personal Independence Payments and other issues will come out this Autumn. A key part of Burnham's base that launched his leadership bid were key players in stopping the Starmer government's attempt to cut back disability payments. Will those MPs sit on their hands if Burnham comes back with a similar programme?

The essential dilemma that, along with Brexit, has produced the incredible volatility of seven prime ministers in ten years is the fact that capital can no longer afford to give significant concessions in terms of environmental measures wages or social spending for the working class. We are no longer in the post war boom nor even the Blair years where the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Chinese boom provided a different context. Some reforms to guarantee political stability and to head off the risks of a Reform government or coalition would be acceptable but anything that seriously began to challenge capitalist interests would not be acceptable and there would be a relentless counteroffensive. Corbyn was treated to this even when he was still in opposition.

Will he tax business and the rich?

Even to carry out the limited project he has outlined so far would require a lot of resources. So far he has not set out where he will get the money from. Will he really stand up to the bosses and the mass media who will oppose any significant increase in taxes on their wealth?

As we can see you have to be a quite a political gymnast to wear a different mask to each of these groups. Some masks are more dominant than others so the role he plays for the capitalist class takes precedence over all the

others. At the end of the day he is a Labour politician committed to managing capitalism, with some mitigation for working people, rather than organising a movement rooted outside parliament but intervening in it to break with a system that produces inequality, oppression and the destruction of our planet. He is said to be in favour of allowing more drilling of oil and gas in the North Sea which will bring very few new jobs but lead to further catastrophic global warning.

On the day of his inauguration the markets are up reflecting the confidence of the ruling class that Burnham is not a direct threat even if they may have concerns about some of his policies if they are pushed too far.

Same as the old boss?

For the left we need to accept that this is not the same as Starmer's government. He might be a Labourist boss but he is not the same as the old boss – except in the sense that all Labour leaders manage capitalism and will not challenge its interests.

The difference lies in the political effects we can already discern. Farage is looking very fragile with the exposure of his money grabbing and the Clacton by election farce. Burnham's success in comprehensively defeating Reform in Makerfield and the fact that he is not Starmer and has announced some more progressive policies, has helped bring Labour back to level pegging with Reform. Farage's party was already reaching the ceiling of around 30 % that we have seen in other European countries where the hard right is in the ascendant. If the threat of a Farage government or coalition is no longer so strongly on the agenda then it puts us in a different political context.

It is too early to say but if Burnham does carry through a soft left set of policies then it will also have an effect on his left flank where the Greens have been gaining many Labour voters. However the mask Burnham wears to appeal to the Labour right and to appeal to Reform voters on migration, democratic rights, North Sea drilling and Palestine will make it more difficult to win back particularly those younger voters that today reject Labour.

Nevertheless this break with Starmer will possibly keep many activists inside the Labour Party. The catastrophic failure of Your Party further feeds this tendency. We need to retain links with these socialists and involve them and as many other activists as possible in campaigns on the ground that have been working on some of the areas Burnham is talking about changing. For instance we should support any caps on bus fares but work with the various fare free campaigns such as in London and Manchester to intervene with our policies.

Burnham's project is about a Labour government managing reforms on behalf of the people. He is not going to organise any sort of mass base that can defend progressive measures against opposition and push them further.

Engaging with new debates

Consequently there will be new interventions and debates for the socialist left. We will need to not just denounce Labour complicity with austerity or on repression of democratic rights but to engage with some real but limited reforms that will be proposed. Devolution, housing, social care and public control of the utilities will become central to political debate. For example how do we respond to the idea of regional division and inequality? What do we say about his pledge to end rough sleeping? We need to work out our responses, what we support and what needs to go much further and how such reforms will always be limited by the constraints of the capitalist system. Proportional representation is also apparently part of Burnham's project. The radical left has been disgracefully absent from this

debate.

It is silly to look at Burnham's rise as just a capitalist conspiracy – Starmer was unpopular, the Tories and Reform are not reliable enough so let's find another puppet we can manipulate. In a distorted way his shifts have resulted partially from our struggles and campaigns. The rebellion on disability payments was a staging post for the soft left breaking with Starmer. Without the mass Palestine campaign we probably would not have seen Burnham saying Labour got it wrong and war crimes need to be looked at.

If Burnham does not hit the ground running and make a difference at least on the experience of the cost of living then his support could erode very quickly. Then the Tories, Reform/Restore could come back strongly. Socialists have to maintain their independence and build a broader more effective movement that can support any progressive measures, show how they should go further and work together with activists inside and outside the Labour Party to prevent a far right/Tory resurgence.

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Source: [AntiCapitalist Resistance](#).

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