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Britain

Burnham - a left response

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Following Keir Starmer's resignation as leader of the Labour Party, and thus as Prime Minister, it seems that Andy Burnham, former Mayor of Greater Manchester, will accede to these two posts without a contest, a procedure known as a "coronation".

Whatever people on the left are saying about Burnham one thing is clear. Activists in the labour movement are discussing issues today that were buried under the Starmer/McSweeney regime.

Darren Jones and the Labour Together tribute act are lobbying hard against Ed Miliband becoming Chancellor with his net zero agenda. Veteran peer, Alf Dubs, who came to Britain as a refugee from the Holocaust, has today called on Burnham to sack Shabana Mahmood and rip up her anti-migrant policies.

This is Labour's reset moment when we can consign to the past some of the appalling language used by politicians to describe refugees: 'invaders', 'an island of strangers', 'tearing our country apart'. We can't reset by bringing with us policies that many in the PLP do not support, spearheaded by a home secretary who divides opinion. [1]

The Productive State

A policy document called The Productive State from Mainstream – the Labour ginger group that has helped drive Burnham's rise to power – provides us with a devastating critique of the damage privatization has done to our society. It outlines a reformist framework for change that has been previously totally rejected by Starmer and his allies. For example Starmer's ministers have consistently rejected taking water back into public ownership. A detailed analysis by Simon Pearson of the Mainstream/Commonwealth document and its limits is currently available on this website. Trade Union Congress leader Paul Novak has welcomed Burnham and called for a real reset in favour of working people.

The current heatwave is provoking a debate within and between major unions about further drilling in the North Sea. Unite leader Sharon Graham has attacked Miliband becoming chancellor going so far as talking of him as putting a 'noose around job creation'. Of course the net zero economy is growing strongly and can easily replace jobs lost in the winding down of the North sea fossil fuel industry.

Yes, Burnham may pivot completely to some sort of continuity with the Starmer government but at least the political space in which we operate has changed.

The bosses and right wing press are piling in alongside the Labour right and its apparatus. For example they are backing Streeting for chancellor and smearing Ed Miliband. Rocco Forte, a hospitality magnate, has specifically called for a block on Miliband. If Burnham does adopt some or all of the proposals in Productive State he certainly would come under sustained attack from national and international capital which wants to restrict public spending and increased taxation. Already Burnham has floated changes to capital gains tax and some other proposals to raise money that Starmer's team rejected.

Why is this discussion about Burnham important?

Many socialists see their mission as working with like-minded people to build a party that can lead and participate in a mass movement to build an eco socialist alternative to capitalism. But the conditions in which we do that change as social economic and political forces change. The people who may be attracted to our ideas may come from different currents and mobilize around various issues. We have no choice about who those radicalizing people are – we have to move to them. Our narrative needs to intersect with their discourse and language. We have to work with people generally to our right.

For ultra left sects with their timeless method and definitive programmes nothing ever changes – denounce everybody except yourselves and build your party.

Under Corbyn's rise many of us joined Labour. The radicalisation in the Greens means we are relating to them in a way we did not five years ago. The end of Starmer and the beginning of a Burnham project is not a repeat of Corbyn but it means we have to adjust again. If he really proposes progressive taxes, proportional representation, new devolution or ending privatized utilities we have to respond. We have something to contribute.

WE engage with anything that improves the lives of working class people. At the same time – we denounce and campaign against any continuities with Starmer on Palestine, Trump, defence spending, migrants, dropping of green issues, democratic or trans rights

Two wrong positions on what Burnham represents:

- **He is just the same as Starmer**

Josh Simons' Labour together is still really in control and nothing policy wise will change, the labour machine will absorb and manage Burnham who will further turn on all his promises. Things will not materially improve one jot for working people and he will continue to open the door to a reform government. Our only task is to denounce his continuity with Starmer. As a Socialist Worker article stated Labour is swapping one centrist with another

- **A new coherent soft left alternative has been born**

We are going to see a massive increase in public ownership/control, a democratic revolution with a new electoral system, citizen assemblies and devolution including an English parliament. The Labour party will be revitalized with a real political debate and the end to witchhunts. All this will stop Reform and return a Labour government for a second term. John McDonnell's tears on Burnham's victory expresses somewhat this view. Anthony Barnett has written an article in New Statesman along these lines.

As ecosocialists we disagree with the simplistic response of the both these positions. We need to be more nuanced and understand the complexity of the political shifts going on.

Contradictory indicators

Reading the runes is very difficult at the moment. There are contradictory indicators. The Burnham team says Reeves is out, but at same time their leader has been consulting with Jim O'Neill ex-Goldman Sachs manager. He has proposed dropping the triple lock and for orthodox neo-liberal economics. Other Bank of England economists have been brought on board too. Blairite, James Purnell, who has headed a big lobbying/consultancy company advising firms like Amazon, has been taken on as chief of staff. We have to await the full cabinet team sheet before a proper assessment is possible

We cannot define Burnham just from his past history as a minister in Blair and Brown's governments or even as a leadership challenger to Corbyn. You also have to take into account his work in Manchester and the fact that politicians can and do change. Tony Benn started off in the centre of Labour politics under Wilson.

Burnham is not quite the empty vessel with no political base that Starmer was. The latter was easily controlled by Labour Together and the party machine. Burnham has a project in a way Starmer never did. It may be limited, contradictory and end up not changing much. The new leader has talked about the 'politics of place,' 'Manchesterism' and the Preston community wealth building model. This is different from Starmer's junior partnership with corporate capital. Burnham built his base to win leadership through Mainstream and the soft left in a way that Starmer never did. Starmer was propelled by the McSweeney/Mandelson matrix who did all the base building inside the apparatus. Burnham has kept himself largely outside that grouping.

Of course that does not mean that the ex Labour Together team will not try to get on board with Burnham and try to keep him under their control. Neither does it rule out Burnham bringing some of them into his team as evidence of a new ecumenical, broad church approach. He may even integrate somebody from the Socialist Campaign Group. The latter had brought out a good list of demands for Burnham to take up that would radicalize his project.

No Burnham surge

Currently there is no sign of any movement back to Labour similar to the Corbyn surge. However those socialists who have stayed in Labour will be encouraged to a degree by the Burnham victory. The demise of Your Party will further convince them of their position so a certain revitalisation of inner party debate and activity may happen. Given Burnham's bad positions on migrants, Palestine, defence spending, democratic rights to protest and a full green programme it is unlikely he will attract any of those thousands who have joined the Greens back to Labour.

A coronation now looks likely and it does mean the opportunity for a full discussion of Burnham's ideas at this stage is still born. The Socialist Campaign Group started off by criticising the lack of debate but John McDonnell more or less accepted that there was nothing to be done and we had to get on with it. The Burnham movement is still very top down dominated by the leader and the MPs, there are no real democratic structures constraining his actions.

Can Burnham stop Reform at the next general election like he did in Makerfield? There were exceptional circumstances since you could vote for Burnham, stop Reform and get rid of Starmer. Greens and Liberal Democrat voters did that and their parties did not campaign. Burnham did not confront Reform's racism head on in the way the Greens did in Gorton. He knew he could win without doing that. Nevertheless you cannot clone Burnham in 600 seats and we will have 2 years of his government with his shine possibly being worn off.

Many people excited about Burnham are forgetting the far right still got 40% in the by-election. A poll shows 43 % of

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Britons felt no difference after Starmer going. Only 20 % were a bit or more optimistic. His northern schtick also may not run so well in London and the rest of the South. John Curtice, the elections specialist, has suggested that the Reform threat remains live. Another poll puts Labour 3 percentage points ahead of Reform when the leaders are referenced but Labour are still 4 points behind when people are asked Labour or Reform.

Reform could be stopped if Burnham really were to carry out the changes currently being discussed by some of his team. Taking control of utilities and some progressive taxation may enable his government to reduce energy costs for most families. If his radical talk about building more social houses were to be turned into reality that too could change voters' minds. But will Burnham stand up to the bosses' counterattack against any radical reforms. Just building a broad church cabinet of the right and left will not cut it.

Socialists will need to adapt our campaigns and demands to relate to the new political issues and debates that are emerging. We still need to build our eco-socialist alternative independent of the Labour Party and the Greens. A resurgence of even 'soft left' ideas provides us with an opportunity to engage with broader forces on questions that have only been discussed in much smaller circles since the end of the Corbyn project

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Source: [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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[1] *The Guardian*, 26 June "[Remove home secretary Mahmood and rip up her asylum plans, says Alf Dubs](#)".