

Andy Burnham

Britain's next Prime Minister?



Andy Burnham has won the Makerfield by-election and is now highly likely to succeed Sir Keir Starmer as Labour's next Prime Minister. Exactly how and when that transition could happen is dominating the political agenda at Westminster, but Burnham has cleared the first hurdle in returning to the Commons.

The impact of that political agenda on the business environment is also in the spotlight. Business is preparing for another moment of possible change and seeking to anticipate and adjust their corporate affairs and wider business planning.

This briefing brings together SEC Newgate's insight on who Andy Burnham is and what his brand of politics could mean for the country if he ends up in No.10.

Burnham stands on the brink of Parliament and of power

Despite being one of the most prominent Labour figures of his generation, it is ironic that it is so uncertain what exactly an Andy Burnham premiership would entail and what kind of politician he really is.

What is for certain is that he has been on a political journey. First the consummate New Labour Special Adviser and insider in the early days of Blair, before graduation to a Brownite member of the Cabinet. Then twice rejected by Labour members in unsuccessful leadership bids in 2010 and 2015. To the ultimate outsider as 'King in the North' as Mayor of Greater Manchester and now odds-on favourite to become the next Prime Minister. His critics say this is a sign of political opportunism, going with the tide of prevailing opinion within the party without any clear guiding principles of his own. His supporters insist this is a sign of political maturity, learning from his experience in office and moving with the times.

The Makerfield by-election was ultimately less about the immediate Burnham vs Starmer clash than the eventual Burnham vs Farage battle royale. It provided the perfect test case for the theory that Burnham is the right man to see off the threat of Reform UK, and to that end, so far so good for the new MP for Makerfield. A key target seat for Reform, Labour was defending a majority of just over 5,000 having already suffered heavy losses in Wigan, the local council, during the local elections in May. Winning the seat was not easy but was the first of many obstacles Burnham will need to overcome on his route to No.10.



Now comes the rather messy question of what next. Following the Labour rulebook, Burnham's formal route to power would be to gather the 81 Labour MPs he needs to challenge the Prime Minister. Yet events - and raw politics - often takes over in practice when power is in sight. Will Wes Streeting - who has deliberately waited for Burnham to join the battle - enter the contest against Burnham? Or will he leverage the threat of a contest to secure a key role in a Burnham government? Will someone else pick up the gauntlet if he does not. Or will the Prime Minister himself follow through on his insistence that he will not - after all - go quietly and will force Burnham, Streeting or anyone else to beat him fair and square.

Some of those close to Burnham may be urging him to move quickly upon his return to Westminster, capitalising on his moment of maximum popularity. Yet the prospect of an immediate leadership contest over the summer following by-elections in Makerfield and then the Manchester mayoralty - which Labour would be far from certain to retain - could strain relations within party HQ. On the other hand, a coronation would deprive him of both the time and space he could benefit from to earn a clear mandate from Labour members for his policy platform - insulating himself against future leadership challenges and calls for a fresh general election - and to prepare his detailed plans for the reality of taking office.

Who is Andy Burnham?

Born and raised in the North West, Burnham's path into politics was a relatively conventional one. Initially wanting to pursue a career in journalism, Burnham studied at Cambridge University before beginning his career working for the late Dame Tessa Jowell, and then as a Special Adviser to the Culture Secretary Chris Smith in the first Blair government.

Elected as the MP for Leigh in 2001, he would go on to serve in a number of ministerial posts, most notably as Chief Secretary to the Treasury and later as Culture Secretary and then Health Secretary.

After unsuccessful bids for the Labour leadership in 2010 and 2015, Burnham left Westminster in 2017 to become the first Mayor of Greater Manchester, where his profile has grown as one of the leading faces of the new devolution model across England.

Burnham's current attractiveness to Labour members stems not just from his own attributes but from deep disappointment and disillusionment with Starmer and the contrast between their styles and strengths.

The two men are fundamentally different; as people and as politicians. Ironically, the common thread they share is a sense that they are each - in different ways - outsiders.



Burnham was an intrinsic part of the core New Labour Special Adviser team following Blair's election in 1997, working closely alongside the Miliband brothers, Ed Balls, and James Purnell, all of whom would go on to serve in the Cabinet. Yet even in these circles, Burnham was different, not basing his life around London and maintaining his roots in the North unlike his London-centric colleagues, even those who secured seats for themselves in northern England.

In contrast, while Starmer was more genuinely "outside" Westminster prior to his arrival in Parliament in 2015 than Burnham, his professional, geographic and social circle was firmly London-centric. And unlike Burnham, despite having a working class background and identity just as authentic, he has never been able to present a comfortable and compelling personal narrative in the way Burnham can.

These differences extend to their different approaches to politics and to governing. Starmer the lawyer has found it all too easy to be drawn into Whitehall's comfort zone: government by process. Burnham focusses less on process and more on outcomes.

Some within Labour say this shows Burnham does not always "do detail". But this has also been a strength: Burnham is less prepared than Starmer and his team to be governed by legalism and process for their own sake. And he understands that process in itself is not necessarily in fact an outcome.

Starmer and his government have in contrast displayed a tendency to venerate the advice of officials without sufficient question and to presume that Whitehall process in itself will create a meaningful and positive outcome without ensuring due diligence. Burnham served a longer political apprenticeship which honed his political antennae and his instincts of how and when to push back on official advice.

Many MPs - who had hoped Starmer's assiduous and unshowy style would translate naturally to good government - have been deeply disappointed. Those who have decided that his style is doomed to fail and that he is incapable of changing are naturally attracted to the politician who seems the antithesis. Many - but not all - are projecting their hopes that Labour can win a second term in office for only the second time in history by transplanting his approach in Manchester to the rest of the country.

View from Manchester: Burnham and the rebirth of 'Manchesterism'

Before becoming the Head of SEC Newgate's Manchester office in 2024, Simon Donohue spent eight years supporting the work of Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, with communications for the Greater Manchester Local Enterprise Partnership and at Transport for Greater Manchester.

Andy Burnham likes to be liked. And there is no doubt that his record and his approach, which he frames as putting people and place before party politics and business interests, has made him an incredibly popular Mayor of Greater Manchester.



His mantra of “Manchesterism” is defined by his belief that social progress should not be assumed to automatically follow economic growth. Instead, it requires deliberate policies to ensure residents feel the benefit. He is pragmatic and pro-business, creating the right environment for business to operate, but only if it considers the needs of ordinary citizens.

A key part of Burnham’s appeal is his accessible and approachable ‘man of the people’ persona; he is equally at home taking part in a weekly phone-in for BBC Radio Manchester as addressing a business conference.

This reflects the central importance of his reputation as a communicator. Policy is often trailed through media headlines and – crucially – Burnham feels comfortable on social media – in common with Farage and in stark contrast to Starmer.

The purest form of Manchesterism is transport. Taking local control of public transport through bus franchising is his flagship policy and his proudest achievement as Mayor. He champions this model as enabling a service that prioritises the needs of local people rather than the shareholders of private companies, providing safe, affordable and convenient access to employment and skills, shopping and healthcare. This sets the tone for his diagnosis of the same problem for other services and utilities, including water, energy and housing.

Devolution and localised ‘levelling up’ would also be central to a Burnham government. Recognising that economic growth has favoured some parts of Greater Manchester more than others, his £2bn Good Growth fund has targeted public sector funding intervention towards areas beyond the regional centre, where it can be a catalyst for more inclusive growth.

He has had to contend with some difficult reputational issues, not least the pushback against his initial vision for an expansive Greater Manchester Clean Air Plan, which faced a huge backlash from people whose livelihoods were at risk from charges for high polluting vehicles. The plan was scrapped in favour of a non-charging plan to clean up the region’s air through investment in cleaner buses, HGVs and taxis.

Overall, however, he is widely seen as an enthusiastic advocate, leader and supporter for the city region. Putting place and people before party politics has been the central theme of his three terms as Mayor.

Maintaining and adapting that approach to Westminster will be a different scale of challenge, but it will be the guiding philosophy he brings with him should he take the top job.



Unpacking the 'Manchesterism' agenda

“ We have built a pro-business approach and a new political culture that could be part of the forward plan for the country, a more collaborative politics in Westminster creating a stable platform for some of the long-term structural changes the country needs.” writing in [*The Times*](#) in response to Tony Blair's recent essay.

Though an inherently vague term, the concept of Manchesterism broadly follows the principles of:

- **A 'place-first' approach:** a model which prioritises delivering for the place over the party and representing the whole electorate, and devolving powers to decision-makers based in their communities. Burnham has built on the critical legacy of Sir Richard Leese and Sir Howard Bernstein as previous Leader and Chief Executive of Manchester City Council to strike devolution deals with Conservative governments, rather than work in opposition to them. Locally, regeneration has been planned through cross-party consensus and business partnership to deliver regeneration in areas including Stockport and Bolton, where transport infrastructure has been a catalyst for 'place-first' economic development.
- **Good growth:** economic development that drives improvements in living standards, public services and social outcomes, such as the Greater Manchester Good Growth Fund, targeted at places where it can be a catalyst, with 30 projects funded to date. This includes allocating £26m for 423 homes across three brownfield sites in Wythenshawe, Manchester, to kick-start a 2,000-home masterplan, and £69.8m to deliver transport infrastructure improvements that would support a bid to host the Ryder Cup.
- **Public service reform and early intervention:** integrating public services to tackle the root causes of issues, most notably through the "Housing First" approach to homelessness in Greater Manchester, and the integration of transport through the 'Bee Network'.



- **Constructive engagement with business:** a pragmatic approach to working with the private sector, particularly in areas such as regeneration, infrastructure and energy. Examples include the regeneration of Old Trafford, where the public sector, via a Mayoral Development Corporation, is partnering with the private sector for the biggest sports-led regeneration since the 2012 Olympics, and the Stockport Mayoral Development Corporation, which has attracted £600m in private sector investment alongside public sector investment in Stockport town centre and a new £140m transport interchange.

Economy

“We’ve got to get beyond this thing of being in hock to the bond markets,” Andy Burnham, *speaking* to the New Statesman in September 2025.

Perhaps Burnham’s most high-profile recent misstep, his claim that Britain should avoid being “in hock to the bond markets” triggered a significant backlash from the market and is still hung around his neck by more sceptical colleagues.

Although he has since clarified those comments and promised to stick to Rachel Reeves’ fiscal rules, he nevertheless has a significant task on his hands to provide sufficient reassurance to the bond market about his plans for public investment, with the expectation that a Burnham government will borrow more than Starmer’s to fund his domestic policy agenda.

As a former Treasury Minister, Burnham is all too aware that spending has costs and must retain fiscal credibility. He has also seen that the priorities of the Treasury and wider government are not always aligned, and he is more than comfortable in his own skin and political instincts than some in Starmer’s government to go against prevailing Treasury orthodoxy. His decision to announce his preference to reverse the hike to employers’ National Insurance Contributions and cut business rates for pubs and small businesses reflect this.

On wider tax policy, Burnham last year called for an increased in the top rate of income tax to 50p and for a re-evaluation of council tax in favour of a new land-value tax. Burnham has also called for the abolition of Inheritance Tax in its current form, to be replaced by a care levy to fund a National Care Service.



Speaking at a conference in 2023, Burnham said that he “had never shied away from the call I made as Health Secretary for a National Care Service to get care funded in a different way. I would abolish inheritance tax in its current form but replace it with a care levy which everybody would pay but obviously the wealthiest would pay the most”. Burnham clarified that “it’s not asking people to pay more, it’s just that people [are] paying in the most unfair way possible at this moment and I think there’s a much better way of doing it”.

Housing, planning and development

“Since the 1980s, housing has increasingly been treated as a commodity to be bought and sold. If you see housing purely like that, you end up with a housing crisis - and that’s exactly where we are,” speaking to the trade press website [Negotiator](#) in May 2026.

In line with Burnham’s overarching focus on local and regional devolution, Burnham’s solution to housing and planning is to give more power to Mayors, Combined Authorities and local government to deliver based on their local need.

Speaking to the [Negotiator](#), Burnham argued that Homes England should operate differently, calling for less “scheme by scheme micro-management” and more freedom for regional authorities to deliver housing locally.

Burnham has argued for a return to a “Housing First” philosophy centred on social housing, local delivery and stronger tenant protections. He said that ministers should go further and prioritise social housing above all forms of housing investment, with his ambitions to build more social homes than are lost through Right to Buy. In Greater Manchester, the Housing First program aims to house almost 1,000 individuals across the 10 boroughs and is backed by a wider £74.6m regional plan to overhaul temporary accommodation and end the housing crisis by 2038.

Energy, transport and infrastructure

“The lesson from Greater Manchester is that you can’t just leave it to the market. If you want higher growth in areas that don’t have it, you need strong public control and direction over both the investment strategy and the enablers of a more productive economy, such as transport, energy, water, education and housing,” writing in [the Times](#) in response to Tony Blair’s essay.

With the Bee Network - Manchester’s locally controlled, integrated transport network - seen as one of Burnham’s crowning accomplishments as Mayor of Greater Manchester, public services and utilities including transport, energy and infrastructure are one of the areas where we have a clearest idea of what a Burnham government could look like.



He has consistently argued that the country's current malaise can be attributed in part to what he sees as the "giving away control of the basic things that people depend upon every day", including utilities, transport and energy.

This does not however mean a return to the types of policies championed by Jeremy Corbyn. At the heart of Burnham's approach to ownership and control of utilities is the ongoing crisis of confidence that voters feel about the performance of privatisation, with water being a particular standout case. It is as much an attempt to inject new energy into Labour's existing commitments to improve the performance of public utilities, and to be tougher on the worst performers.

While it isn't yet clear what Burnham means by local control for housing, energy and water, local control of buses in Greater Manchester may provide some clues. Private bus operators must submit tenders for franchises to run bus services in line with requirements set by the public sector, prioritising social need over shareholder returns.

On Net Zero, Burnham set ambitious targets for Greater Manchester to be carbon neutral by 2038 with a focus on reducing household emissions, decarbonising the region's transport system and stimulate growth in clear sectors while creating jobs and investment locally too.

He has remained uncharacteristically quiet on Net Zero during the by-election campaign, aware of how divisive the issue has become, particularly among Reform voters - and this was one of the notable omissions from his response to Blair's essay (who was critical of the government's - and Ed Miliband's - approach). Moreover, he has also said that he is "[open-minded](#)" on new licenses for North Sea oil and gas, indicating a more pragmatic approach than seen under Starmer.

Key players in any Burnham government

Positioned on the soft left of the current Labour Party, Burnham's inner circle and political allies are reflective of his ideological positioning and priorities for his potential leadership.

Among the soft left contingent still in Cabinet, Energy Secretary **Ed Miliband** and Culture Secretary **Lisa Nandy** have both publicly supported Burnham's return to Parliament (including criticising the Labour Party's decision to block him from standing in the Gorton and Denton by-election earlier this year). Elsewhere, former Transport Secretary **Louise Haigh** and former Deputy Prime Minister **Angela Rayner** can also be expected to hold roles in a Burnham government, with the former being appointed the political lead for his campaign in Makerfield alongside the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party **Lucy Powell**, his geographical and ideological neighbour.



It is notable that a number of the new intake of MPs are heavily involved in the running of Burnham's campaign, including political lead **Anneliese Midgley**, MP for Knowsley and former Political Secretary at the Unite union, and campaign aides **Sally Jameson**, Ed Miliband's neighbouring MP for Doncaster Central and **David Baines**, the MP for St Helen's North. Yet Burnham is likely still a relatively unknown quantity among the new intake of younger, greener MPs, and so Jameson, Midgley and Powell will likely play a crucial role in garnering support for Burnham among the Parliamentary Labour Party.

If he makes it to No.10, Burnham is likely to bring with him - or at least rely on - a number of trusted advisers. Notable figures include:

Kevin Lee, political adviser: Burnham's most trusted and long-standing adviser who served as Chief of Staff at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. He has accompanied Burnham for much of his political career, having run Burnham's unsuccessful Labour leadership campaign and previously served as director of the North West Labour Party alongside a number of other organising roles within Labour through the New Labour years.

Tom Whitney, former policy adviser: Advised Burnham during his time as Shadow Health Secretary and later joined him at GMCA as head of policy. Currently a Special Adviser to Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander.

John Wrathmell, strategy lead at GMCA: Worked at GMCA since Burnham's election in 2017 and is now Group Director of Strategy. His background spans civil service and party policy. Spent the final five years of the last Labour government at the Treasury and later served as Labour's head of economic policy under Ed Miliband. He is seen as one of the architects of the thinking behind "Manchesterism."

Josh Simons, the former Makerfield MP and Starmerite think-tank chief whose resignation from Parliament created the by-election is seen as a likely influential policy and strategy figure in a Burnham Downing Street.

Kate Green, Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester: Burnham's deputy with responsibility for policing, Green has played an important role in liaising with Westminster MPs. The former MP for Stretford and Urmston left Parliament in 2022 to join Burnham's team as he sought to turn around Greater Manchester Police.

Sue Gray, Whitehall veteran: Now a peer, Gray is a senior former civil servant best known for top roles in Whitehall, including as Second Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office, and for leading the Partygate inquiry. She later moved into party politics as Keir Starmer's Chief of Staff in 2023. According to media reports, Burnham has consulted her on the practicalities of any transition of power, which we can now expect to be put into effect following his win in Makerfield.



Neal Lawson, founder of Compass: Lawson founded the soft-left think tank Compass and the Labour-aligned network Mainstream, one of the main organising bodies behind the Burnham campaign. While there is some pushback on the extent of Lawson's involvement in Burnham's camp, Lawson and Burnham have previously aligned on issues like electoral reform, and will no doubt be one of the many influencers competing for Burnham's ear in government.

Miatta Fahnbulleh, former minister: An economist by background, Fahnbulleh entered government after winning Peckham for Labour in 2024. She became the first minister to resign following Labour's poor local election results in May and called for the Prime Minister's resignation. One of the rising stars on the soft left, she served in government as Minister for Energy Consumers and Minister for Communities. Prior to entering politics, she worked in government at the Cabinet Office, before taking up roles with the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and later the New Economics Foundation.

Will all these competing factions cohere? Will Burnham embrace the most talented parliamentarians who are not in his camp, who have remained loyal to Starmer, or who have backed Streeting? Will Streeting have a senior role under Burnham?

This will be Burnham's challenge, to give Labour's competing factions the clarity of purpose to knit them back together into a coherent governing force that can secure greater popular support amongst voters than Starmer's Labour.

To succeed, Burnham will need to build a Downing Street operation that is both more coherent and more effective than Starmer's. He has done it in Manchester, where his popularity is genuinely substantial. To succeed as PM is harder. Burnham knows this.

And that the biggest challenge isn't against Starmer.

It's versus Farage at the next general election.