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# CHANGING THE GUARD

## *From Starmer to Burnham: Labour in Office*

On 20 July 2026, Labour's Andrew Burnham became Britain's sixth prime minister in ten years, following Cameron's resignation after losing the Brexit referendum in 2016. By contrast, the previous six—Callaghan, Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown, Cameron—had collectively governed for a good forty years. Defenders of the Westminster parliamentary model—elections on a first-past-the-post, single-member constituency basis, managed since the First World War by the Conservative–Labour duopoly—have traditionally claimed that, however unrepresentative its results compared to more proportional continental forms, it had the great advantage of *stability*. Unlike the intemperate Latins or autocracy-inclined Teutons and Slavs, the Great British public could at least count on experienced rulers prepared to stay the course, keeping a steady prime-ministerial hand on the tiller through the turbulence of world political and economic affairs. Something had clearly gone awry.

Moreover, the high turnover of leaders suggests that a restless dissatisfaction—or timorous insecurity—has infected the two-party system itself. Only one of the past six prime ministers entered Number Ten through the traditional route—that is, by winning a general election. Instead, after Cameron resigned, Theresa May was chosen to fill his shoes in September 2016 by Tory Party members, from a shortlist of two selected by Conservative MPs. When she bowed out, broken by her backbenchers' intransigence during the Brexit negotiations, Tory members chose Boris Johnson by the same process in July 2019. When he fell foul of Whitehall chiefs, the media, the opinion polls and his own MPs after partying during Covid, Liz Truss was picked by the same method

in September 2022; as was Rishi Sunak in October 2022, when Truss resigned after a rebellion by bond markets and, once again, Tory MPs.

Starmer promised to break this pattern. He entered office in July 2024 on the back of a general-election landslide, Labour winning 411 of the House of Commons' 650 seats, promising 'change'—he would restore stability by way of level-headed competence. As proof of concept he could point to the harsh discipline that he and his Labour Together team, under chief of staff Morgan McSweeney, had already meted out to purge their party of Corbynistas and supporters of Palestinian rights.[1] Yet within a year, this supposedly exemplary government had plunged to 23 per cent in the polls and was facing a backbench rebellion. U-turns and apologies followed, amid damaging scandals. By May 2026 Labour was down to 17 per cent, tied with the Tories and Greens, while Reform took 26 per cent in the local elections. Tendering his resignation on 22 June, Starmer became the shortest-lived Labour prime minister since Ramsay MacDonald in 1924. It's worth examining the reasons for his decline and fall—political, social, ideological and economic—for the light they can shed on the systemic problems afflicting British politics, and on Burnham's chances of avoiding a similar fate.

## *The anti-Corbyn*

Starmer's resignation speech, delivered on 22 June in his customary drone from outside Number Ten, largely consisted in the boiler-plate list of self-congratulations expected of any politician. But the outgoing Prime Minister put surprising emphasis on his role in wrenching Labour back to the right:

> I was told time and time again that my party was finished, that we were consigned to history, that a majority at the general election, let alone a landslide majority, was impossible. But we proved those people wrong because we

[1] On Labour Together's role in Starmer's leadership of the Labour Party, see Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Pogrund, *Get In: The Inside Story of Labour under Starmer*, London 2025; henceforth, GI. Morgan McSweeney, born in 1977 to a Fine Gael family in Cork, left school at seventeen to move to London. After a sojourn in Israel, he took a degree at Middlesex University. He was hired as an intern at Labour's Millbank headquarters in 2001 and worked his way up through a series of contacts on the right of the Party before being appointed director of Labour Together in 2017. See GI, *passim*.

> changed our party, ripping out the poison of anti-semitism, restoring trust on the economy, defence and national security . . .[2]

By 'ripping out the poison' he meant expelling hundreds of Labour Party members, many of them Jews, for criticizing Israel. He sacked Rebecca Long-Bailey from the Shadow Cabinet for re-tweeting a post critical of the Israeli secret services. The zenith was the suspension of the anti-Zionist Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi, the only Jew elected to Labour's National Executive Committee. Expulsions were not needed for the 200,000-plus members who left the Party of their own accord under Starmer (325,000 having joined when Corbyn was in charge).[3]

Starmer's farewell went on to claim that he left a stronger economy, growing faster than its peers—in fact, lagging Ireland and Spain, with an average growth rate of 0.3 per cent per quarter while he'd been in charge, with regional inequality all the more deeply entrenched—and 'half a million children being lifted out of poverty'. This echoed a claim made by Blair's defenders, for he too, apparently, had 'lifted' the same number; perhaps the Tories had put them back.[4] Yet if half a million are moving in and out of poverty with every new government, it sounds more like a statistical tweak than a true structural reform, which would rule out a return to the past. But for that a plan is needed, and a strategy for implementing it; something Starmer never had. The ten cloudy 'pledges' on which he ran as Labour leader in 2020—'Put the Green New Deal at the heart of everything we do', 'No more illegal wars', 'An immigration system based on compassion and dignity'—crafted by his team to ensure enough support from Labour members to get their candidate into office, were binned soon after on the grounds that the situation had changed.[5]

What Starmer failed to address was why, given his huge majority, he had led the Party to such a shambles, achieved so little and become so unpopular that he had to resign not yet halfway through his term; and why

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[2] 'Keir Starmer's Resignation Speech in Full', *Labour List*, 22 June 2026.

[3] Monica Poletti, Tim Bale and Paul Webb, 'Explaining the Pro-Corbyn Surge in Labour's Membership', LSE Blogs, 16 November 2016.

[4] For a sceptical view see Stewart Lansley, *The Richer, The Poorer: How Britain Enriched the Few and Failed the Poor. A 200-Year History*, Bristol 2021.

[5] See Nader Elhefnawy, 'Keir Starmer's Ten Pledges and the Labour Party's 2024 General Election Manifesto', SSRN, 27 June 2024.

Labour was now running at barely half the 32 per cent it had achieved under Corbyn in 2019. In a recent interview, McSweeney let the cat out of the bag: 'We hadn't done enough to prepare for government'—'there weren't enough conversations at the top of the party about how to prepare for it'. Why was that? Starmer's team had assumed it would take two electoral cycles to recover from Labour's 'crushing defeat' under Corbyn, McSweeney said.[6] In fact, Labour's popular vote *fell* in 2024, dropping to 9.7 million from the 10.3 million Corbyn had achieved in 2019. Starmer's 'landslide' was a result of Reform and the Conservatives splitting the right-wing vote, allowing Labour to gain a plurality in hundreds of seats.[7]

But McSweeney's admission was telling. The impetus for the Starmer project came from the Labour right's fightback against Corbyn's surprise capture of the Party leadership in 2015. At first the British establishment had assumed he would be swept away in a Michael Foot-style washout at the next election; the record-breaking popular vote Corbyn won for Labour in 2017, its highest since 1997, came as a nasty shock and galvanized a more determined counter-offensive from the Labour right. Amid a plethora of Blairite, Blue Labour and Opus Dei factional hubs, the outfit innocuously named Labour Together, directed from 2017 by McSweeney, and chiefly funded by Martin Taylor and Trevor Chinn, proved the most driven and energetic.[8] At Labour Together's weekly kitchen-cabinet meetings, ambitious young figures of the Labour right like Wes Streeting, Rachel Reeves and Shabana Mahmood could imbibe the advice of older Blairites, share gossip and seed attacks on the Corbyn leadership.[9]

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[6] McSweeney interview with Nick Robinson, 'Talking Politics', *BBC*, 2 July 2026.

[7] See Tom Hazeldine, 'Neo-Labourism in the Saddle', NLR 148, July–Aug 2024. Labour won 63 per cent of constituencies with just 34 per cent of the vote. Labour's slightly higher percentage of the vote was an arithmetical function of the lower turnout, down from 67.3 per cent in 2019 to 59.8 per cent in 2024, mainly due to Conservative abstentions.

[8] Martin Taylor: hedge-fund director and self-described tribally loyal member of the Labour right; Trevor Chinn: according to *Jewish News*, a multi-millionaire grandee of the UK Jewish community, president of the Reform Judaism movement; Chinn spent his career at the Royal Automobile Club, rising to CEO and chairman, winning a windfall when its breakdown service was sold off in 1999. See respectively: GI, 29; Stephen Orysczcuk, 'Reform Judaism Appoints Sir Trevor Chinn as New President', *Jewish News*, 28 June 2016.

[9] From 2017, the Labour Together group met at the Camden home of Blairite MPs Jenny Chapman and Nick Smith. Once Starmer was installed as Labour leader in 2020, the group shifted to Sunday night suppers at Roger Liddle's, a former Blair

Keir Starmer was exactly the type of candidate the Labour right needed: one of them, politically and temperamentally, but a newcomer to Parliament, with no track record that could alienate the soft-left Party membership, which had rejected every Labour-right candidate since 2015.[10] Starmer took the position as Corbyn's Shadow Brexit Secretary, refraining from public criticism while making sure to block any soft-Brexit deal that might have neutralized the issue—a toxic one for many of Labour's northern voters. The Labour Together clique had few illusions about Starmer, who notably combined a covetous eye for high office with a distinct lack of the normal political gifts. To Blair's damningly faint praise and Mandelson's raised eyebrow, McSweeney replied defensively: 'He's a good performer, a good learner, and doesn't repeat mistakes.'[11] According to one Labour Shadow Cabinet Minister, 'Gordon, Tony, Jeremy, Ed, they basically just wanted to talk politics the whole time', but '[Keir] was more bored with the detail of politics than any previous leader of the Labour Party I've ever seen'.[12]

Starmer was happy, however, to oblige his backers and advisers in declaring war on the Labour left—a contrast to Blair and Brown, who were quite unbothered by it—and, above all, on any hint of sympathy with the Palestinian cause. Within months of becoming Labour leader in April 2020, he expelled Corbyn from the Parliamentary Labour Party and began the purge of anyone suspected of criticizing Israel. Former Labour-left leaders like John McDonnell, Corbyn's Shadow Chancellor, cowered in fear. After October 7, Starmer famously asserted Israel's 'right' to cut off Gaza's fuel and water, suspended MPs and Labour candidates

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and Mandelson adviser: GI, 29, 78. An aide in the smear campaign against Corbyn was Josh Simons, a young snoop who had spent a few months as a semi-intern in the Leader of the Opposition's office; Simons would succeed McSweeney as director of Labour Together in 2023. On the smear campaign, see Jamie Stern-Weiner, ed., *Antisemitism and the Labour Party*, London and New York 2019.

[10] Born in 1962, from a difficult lower-middle-class family background in the Southeast, Starmer was obsessive about order, thin-skinned, but insensitive to others. He studied law at Leeds and became a barrister in 1987; service on the Northern Ireland Policing Board offered the chance of a rapid ascent through the judicial arm of the UK state. As Director of Public Prosecutions from 2008–13, he was known for his harsh sentencing calls on the 2011 rioters. Ed Miliband helped him into a safe Labour seat when he decided to enter Parliament in 2015, but was sidelined once Starmer became PM. See Oliver Eagleton, *The Starmer Project: A Journey to the Right*, London and New York 2023.

[11] GI, 151.

[12] GI, 220.

who described the war as a genocide and sacked eight shadow ministers for supporting a ceasefire motion—which, he sneered, could only benefit Hamas. Beyond this, Starmer's team was solely concerned with the 2024 election campaign and parachuting Labour Together staffers—Josh Simons, Hamish Falconer, Chris Curtis, Gordon McKee—into safe Labour seats.

## *National malaise*

In other words, it is quite credible, as McSweeney suggests, that the Starmer team were so obsessively focused on purging the left and fighting the election that they did little more than go through the motions of preparing the Shadow Cabinet for office, no doubt assuming the civil servants would tell them what to do. As a result, the incoming Labour government entered office equipped with the same authoritarian mindset that it had honed in the fight against the left, combined with default obedience to the Treasury's austerity nostrums.

The first—economic—reason for Starmer's downfall lay here. At a time when real wages had been sharply eroded by persistent food and fuel inflation, Labour introduced a series of highly unpopular austerity measures—means testing pensioners' winter-fuel allowance, extending the Tories' cap on child benefits, cutting PIP disability payments. A subsidiary aim was to provide a public show of discipline over Labour MPs, a message drummed home by expelling seven of them from the PLP for voting against the cap on child benefits, seen as punishing poor families. This draconian stance defined the government's first year, dispelling any good will that might have greeted Labour's return after fourteen years of Tory rule.

At the same time, in terms of social inequality—and here lay a second reason—Starmer, his wife and sundry Labour Cabinet ministers were accepting 'gifts' worth hundreds of thousands of pounds: designer clothes and glasses, top-tier tickets to football matches or a Taylor Swift concert, in exchange for, among other things, the use of the Downing Street garden for a private party.[13] The Mother of Parliaments is no stranger to the exchange of gifts for favours, but the scandal was handled with particular crassness by Number Ten. In an echo of Blair, Starmer laughingly

[13] Charles Hymas and Amy Gibbons, 'Starmer's Biggest Personal Donor Had Downing Street Pass, Admits Pat McFadden', *Telegraph*, 25 August 2024.

dismissed the story, but then vindictively sacked a junior minister, Louise Haigh, for a minor misdemeanour committed ten years before, to show that such a high-minded prime minister as himself would not tolerate such a thing. In another measure of the government's—and the state's—corruption, the appointment of Mandelson, McSweeney's mentor, as British Ambassador to Washington was announced in December 2024, before his security vetting; after he failed it, in January 2025, senior Foreign Office figures lost little time in bowing to pressure from McSweeney and his ilk to expedite His Excellency's clearance, so he could attend Trump's inauguration.[14]

Third, Starmer and his team were ideologically fixated on winning back voters from Farage, which they imagined could only be achieved by outdoing him on anti-immigrant rhetoric, rather than attending to their socio-economic problems. In this mode, Labour announced a series of authoritarian measures: digital identity cards, to oblige people to prove they had a right to work in Britain; years-long prison sentences for (some) rioters; the criminalization of Palestine Action as a terrorist group. Starmer gave a speech ominously declaring that without tougher immigration rules, Britain risked turning the country into 'an island of strangers'.[15] This rightist orientation ignored the growing political vacuum to Labour's left—or else calculated that this half of the political spectrum had no choice but to vote Labour. But, unlike in the Blairite period, a distinct constituency for some sort of left or social-democratic solution to Britain's malaise had emerged in the 2010s, as Corbyn had shown; it reacted passionately against the horrors Labour was backing in Gaza. Under a more energetic new leader, the Greens began to appeal to this layer and were soon reaching double-digits in the polls.[16]

The fourth cause of Starmer's fall was political, lying in the very scale of his parliamentary majority. From 2024, the House of Commons was dominated, nearly two-to-one, by his 400-plus MPs. Many of them were northern neophytes handpicked by the Labour Together staff and so expected to show loyalty to the leader's office. But such a large body was hard to manage by the usual methods, above all, by dangling prospects

[14] Paul Lewis, Henry Dyer, Pippa Crerar, 'Revealed: Mandelson Failed Vetting but Foreign Office Overruled decision', *Guardian*, 16 April 2026.
[15] 'PM Remarks at Immigration White Paper Press Conference: 12 May 2025', Gov.uk.
[16] In the May 2026 local elections, Labour lost more votes to the Greens than to Reform: Dan Iley-Williamson, 'Voters Are Punishing Labour for Gaza', *Tribune*, 9 June 2026.

of promotion to government positions, since these had largely been filled by McSweeney's favourites. Besides, many of the new MPs were keenly aware of their precarious position in their own constituencies, where Tory and Reform supporters put together often formed a majority, and where their own voters were angered by Labour's attacks on pensioners, poor families and the disabled. As MPs grew more fearful of their constituents than of the government whips—or at least felt more answerable to them—the Westminster system itself started to buckle.

## *Weakest link*

Of these four factors, it was the last that proved the Starmer government's weakest link. In July 2025, a 120-strong Labour backbench rebellion against welfare cuts, organized by MPs who had fallen foul of Starmer or McSweeney, forced a government retreat.[17] Now began Starmer's sequence of U-turns: winter-fuel payments were largely restored, disability cuts abandoned, the child-benefit cap lifted, farmers' inheritance tax rolled back, Labour's position on banning social media for under-16s reversed.[18] To no avail: by the autumn, Labour had plunged below 20 per cent in the polls, with the Green Party just 5 points behind. In September 2025, a newly released tranche of the Jeffrey Epstein files revealed Mandelson's gushing letters to him ('my best pal') on his 2008 conviction for soliciting prostitution from a minor. Mandelson lost his post, but no one took responsibility: the Foreign Office described this as 'new information', not known at the time of Mandelson's appointment; Starmer assured the House of Commons that 'full due process was gone through' in his vetting.[19]

Downing Street tried to circle the wagons. On 25 January 2026, the Labour NEC blocked an attempt by Burnham, Starmer's most dangerous

[17] Kiran Stacey, 'The Starmtrooper Rebellion: Welfare Bill Showed Labour's New MPs Have Minds of Their Own', *Guardian*, 3 July 2025. On the role of Louise Haigh and Anneliese Midgeley in orchestrating the rebellion, see Ailbhe Rea, 'Meet Andy Burnham's Northern Queens', *New Statesman*, 10 June 2026.

[18] For a list of Starmer's U-turns, see Noah Keate, 'All Keir Starmer's Government U-turns in One Place', *Politico*, 9 January 2026. No Starmer U-turn was expected on the decision to proscribe Palestine Action as a terrorist organization, nor any backbench rebellion; it passed with the dishonourable support of 385 MPs, only 26 voting against—a further step towards an authoritarian UK, where over 3,000 people have been arrested for peacefully holding up signs in support of the banned group.

[19] 'UK Fires Ambassador to US Peter Mandelson over Links to Epstein', *Al Jazeera*, 11 September 2025.

rival, to return to Parliament after a nine-year stint as Mayor of Greater Manchester via a by-election in Gorton and Denton, further stoking backbench anger; MPs who had been bullied, sacked or humiliated by Starmer and McSweeney rallied to Burnham's cause. Five days later, the US Department of Justice released another three million pages of Epstein documents, revealing that Mandelson had received money from Epstein and passed him 'market-sensitive' government information while he was Brown's Business Secretary in 2009. The police launched a criminal investigation into his 'suspected misconduct in public office', an offence that carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

Getting ahead of the hounds, McSweeney resigned on 8 February 2026, saying he'd been wrong to advise Starmer to appoint Mandelson.[20] Less than a fortnight later, the *Guardian* revealed that, in late 2023, Labour Together's Josh Simons, now a minister in the Cabinet Office, had hired a 'strategic communications' firm, APCO, which also handled PR for the Israeli arms company Elbit, to ready a smear campaign against two *Sunday Times* reporters, Gabriel Pogrund and Harry Yorke, who'd investigated Labour Together's failure to report some £730,000 in donations during the 2017–23 period, when McSweeney had been in charge. Simons wanted the British secret service to accuse the journalists of election meddling on Putin's behalf.[21] Adept at getting others to resign on his behalf, Starmer, the main beneficiary of the donations, set up a Cabinet Office ethics and propriety investigation into Simons, who duly forfeited his ministerial posts. That same week, the Greens triumphed in the Gorton and Denton by-election; Labour lost the seat by 15 points, coming third behind Reform.[22]

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[20] Questioned by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee in April 2026 on his role in pushing for Mandelson's appointment, McSweeney explained that he was 'a confidant' who offered advice on candidates and reshuffles: Pippa Crerar and Jessica Elgot, 'What Did Morgan McSweeney and Philip Barton Tell MPs about Mandelson's Vetting?', *Guardian*, 28 April 2026.

[21] Henry Dyer and Dan Sabbagh, 'Labour Minister Falsely Linked Journalists to Pro-Kremlin Network in Emails to GCHQ', *Guardian*, 20 February 2026. For the original revelations about Labour Together funding, see Gabriel Pogrund and Harry Yorke, 'The Secretive Guru Who Plotted Keir Starmer's Path to Power with Undeclared Cash', *Sunday Times*, 12 November 2023, which also credits Paul Holden, author of *The Fraud*, New York 2025.

[22] This embattled domestic situation was the backdrop to Starmer's initial dithering over allowing US forces to use the nominally British bases on Diego Garcia and in Fairford, Glos., for the US–Israeli war against Iran, launched on 28 February 2026; he bowed to Trump's pressure on 1 March.

Starmer now began the sequence of apologies that signals a prime minister is on the ropes.[23] This is something of a novelty in British politics. Earlier leaders tended to apologize for what others had done: Thatcher for the 1938 Munich agreement; Blair for the 1840s Irish potato famine and for Britain's role in the slave trade, which he described as 'entirely unacceptable'—hardly a controversial assertion, since it had been abolished in 1807. Starmer apologized for appointing Mandelson as ambassador, then apologized to Epstein's victims 'for having believed Mandelson's lies' and apologized to them once again when the story broke that Downing Street had pushed for Mandelson's appointment after he had failed his vetting. [24] He had already apologized for his 'island of strangers' speech, explaining that he wouldn't have used those words if he had known they were an echo of Enoch Powell: 'I had no idea—and my speechwriters didn't know either.'[25] By this point, Starmer was spending most of his time on the world stage, often visiting three or four countries a month; above all France and Germany, where he laboured with Merz and Macron to prevent any Trumpian peace deal on Ukraine.

Contenders for the leadership—Burnham, Streeting, Angela Rayner—were busy canvassing MPs' support, but the assault on Starmer was delayed until after the May 2026 English local elections and the Scottish and Welsh devolved-parliament votes, to ensure he took the blame for what polls showed would be dire results for Labour.[26] In their aftermath, Burnham's backers went into action: a series of ministers—in fact, anyone who wanted a job in the new government—gravely advised Starmer to set out a timetable for departure. The disgraced Josh Simons was persuaded to offer his seat in Makerfield, Greater Manchester, to the pretender. Burnham's sweeping by-election victory on 18 June was due

[23] For a comparison of Starmer's apologies with those of Johnson, Truss and Sunak, see Rachel Rees and Anna Gross, 'Keir Starmer's Growing List of Apologies', *FT*, 22 April 2026.

[24] When the *Guardian* revealed the story of Mandelson's failed vetting, Starmer's response was to sack the chief of the Foreign Office, who lost no time in going to the press: Tom Hazeldine, 'Starmer Stricken', NLR–*Sidecar*, 12 May 2026.

[25] Rees and Gross, 'Keir Starmer's Growing List of Apologies'. Needless to say, such remarks would have sounded xenophobic if Powell had never existed. Notably, when Powell delivered his anti-immigrant 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968, Heath immediately sacked him from the Cabinet.

[26] The May 2026 English local elections were another indicator of the Lab-Con duopoly's collapse: Reform got 26 per cent; the Greens, 18 per cent; Labour and the Tories tied third, on 17 per cent, with the Lib Dems on 16 per cent.

not to his policies—he was careful not to mention any significant issues, apart from devolution—nor to his charisma, not much greater than Starmer's, but to a winning combination of factors: voting Burnham was both the surest way of stopping Reform and the surest way of getting rid of Starmer. Back at Westminster, his leadership bid had the backing of 379 of Labour's 400-plus MPs. He was elected unopposed on 17 July and entered Downing Street three days later.

## *A new messiah*

A desperate Labour Party resorted to what might be called the Messiah complex: the hope that a new leader, uncontaminated by past mistakes, will put everything right. The desire for a Messiah is linked to the increasing personalization of politics, just as government becomes more complex than ever; beyond the capabilities of a single person. The idea that simply replacing Starmer with Burnham will transform the electoral chances of the Labour Party is naïve. Burnham may be a better performer than Starmer—not a difficult task—but there were good reasons why he was trounced in previous Labour leadership elections, coming fourth in 2010 and a very poor second in 2015, with only 19 per cent against 59 per cent for Corbyn. So, this is a loser who won an uncontested race against the extremely unpopular Starmer.

Ideologically, Burnham positioned himself a fraction to the left of Starmer during his leadership campaign; but this was largely a measure of how far right Starmer—and the whole field of British politics—are now located. But Burnham, too, is a creature of the Labour right. His political career began as a parliamentary researcher for the hardline Blairite Tessa Jowell, whose husband, a legal advisor to Berlusconi, was convicted of taking bribes to produce false evidence for one of the Italian Premier's many trials.[27] He entered Parliament as MP for Leigh, Greater Manchester, in 2001 and was a full-throated supporter of the Iraq War. Working his way up through alliances on the right of the Party, notably with David Blunkett, though friendly to all, he served as Brown's Health Secretary in 2009–10. After seven years on the opposition front benches he left for Manchester, where his much-touted mayoralty was marked

[27] Born in 1970, to a middle-class Catholic family, Burnham was brought up in a suburbanized Cheshire village and joined Kinnock's Labour Party at the age of fifteen. After reading English at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, he worked from 1991–94 as a journalist for a commercial shipping magazine.

by a rash of city-centre skyscrapers, thrown up on the model of combining public land with private capital to produce luxury flats, rising rents and highly uneven development—a mini-boom in Manchester and Salford, stagnation in Stockport and Oldham, ongoing deindustrialization and decline in Trafford and Bury; a regional replica of the national plight.[28] His record on corruption is par for the course. As Health Secretary he initiated the disastrous privatization of Hinchingbrooke Hospital in Cambridgeshire, which landed taxpayers with a £10 million bill, and showered contracts on a debt-laden construction company, Carillion, which collapsed some years later leaving the Royal Liverpool Hospital half-rebuilt. Much of the funding for the luxury apartment blocks in Manchester has been channelled to another dubious property company, Renaker.[29]

Burnham's trademark as a politician has been a sharp eye for cheap, crowd-pleasing issues; he campaigned successfully for new inquiries into the Hillsborough football-stadium disaster and an infected-plasma scandal. A cheery wave and a thumbs-up to the voters come naturally to him. He is less good at modelling the way forward for the nation, as a British prime minister is supposed to do; whenever he has to put on a serious face and deliver bad news, he looks weak and unconvincing. Temperamentally more ecumenical than Starmer, he understands, as Starmer did not, that Labourism operates by giving the soft left the few—the very few—crumbs of hope they need in order to stay on board in a party that, since the days of Sidney Webb and Bernard Shaw, has been overwhelmingly driven from the right: geared first, under Ramsay MacDonald and Clement Attlee, to the perpetuation of a declining empire, shifting, it was hoped, from formal to informal rule; and then, under Blair and Brown, running the UK as a financially deregulated aide to Washington's military hegemony. The Labour leadership's roll-call in the first period: recruiting sergeant for the Great War; missing in action during the General Strike; cutter of unemployment benefit in 1931; overseer of the Partition of India and the Palestinian Nakba; director of counter-insurgency terror against the independence struggles in Kenya and Malaysia; slasher of NHS funds to pay for the atom bomb and Korean War. In the second phase: eager military and ideological support

[28] Isaac Rose, 'Manchesterism Is Not Socialism: Andy Burnham's City Is a Neoliberal Metropolis', *New Statesman*, 15 June 2026.

[29] Melissa Lawford, 'Burnham Faces Supreme Court Threat over £140 Million Manchester Skyscraper Loans', *Telegraph*, 29 June 2026.

for the expansion of NATO and the wars on Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Gaza and, by proxy, Russia.

The Labour Party's soft-left membership and sections of its wider electoral base have been passionately opposed to many of these policies, on welfare-versus-warfare if not Quaker-pacifist grounds. They have always needed the consolation of small wins elsewhere and the assurance that, at heart, Labour was on their side. Hence Burnham's reassuring video message in early July, apologizing that Labour 'didn't get it right' on Gaza under Starmer and needed 'to do better', without saying what its policy would be.[30] On Israel–Palestine, however, as on many other issues, Burnham—in the words of a Manchester Labour voter—'flops about like a fish on the side of a canal.'[31] He has declared that the country should not be in hock to the bond markets, but also announced that he would stick to the fiscal rules. He backed staying in the EU but, when campaigning in Makerfield, explained that the question was so very divisive—Makerfield voted Leave in 2016—that it would be better not to reopen it. On Palestine he has flip-flopped relentlessly and will no doubt continue to do so. In 2015, aspiring to the Party leadership, he joined Labour Friends of Israel, called the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign 'spiteful', the Balfour Declaration 'an example of British values in action', praised Israel's 'long history of protecting minorities and promoting civil rights' and declared that, as leader of the Labour Party, it would be the first foreign country he would visit.[32] But Burnham knows which way the wind blows and currently takes a cooler view.[33]

Yet as Ralph Miliband noted of Harold Wilson, Burnham's premiership should be judged in the first instance not by his policy statements, which are little more than mood music, but by his appointments.[34] His first Cabinet is overwhelmingly staffed by the Labour right. His chief of staff,

[30] James Gregory, 'Burnham Apologizes for Labour's Initial Response to Gaza War', *BBC*, 9 July 2026.
[31] Stephen Bush and Jennifer Williams, 'The Joke that Deepened Keir Starmer and Andy Burnham's Toxic Rift', *FT*, 12 June 2026.
[32] Imran Mulla, 'How Andy Burnham Stood up to Starmer over Israel and Could Now Reshape UK Foreign Policy', *Middle East Eye*, 19 June 2026.
[33] In Gaza, the wind has been blowing for a long time now; most Palestinians there are now squeezed into less than 40 per cent of the Strip, which was already unbelievably crowded when they had access to all of it, living in tents amidst the rubble, lacking basic medical aid. Gaza now has the highest level of child amputees in the world.
[34] Ralph Miliband, 'If Labour Wins . . .', NLR 142, July–August 2023 [1963].

James Purnell, is a dyed-in-the-wool Blairite.[35] John Healey, Starmer's attack-dog at Defence, was promoted to the role of Chancellor of the Exchequer, and swiftly reversed his view that the principle of increased arms spending was a resigning matter, submitting to the wisdom of the Treasury mandarins, as all his predecessors have done; he apparently leaves Defence as 'one of the most notoriously dysfunctional Whitehall departments'.[36] Burnham has retained the Labour Together *alumna* Shabana Mahmood as Home Secretary, allowing her to pursue the persecution of pro-Palestinian activists, crackdown on 'irregular' immigration, restriction of protections for asylum seekers and tightening of the 'indefinite leave to remain' rule, with retrospective effect, begun under Starmer.[37] Other Labour-right holdovers from Starmer's Cabinet include Wes Streeting at Defence, Yvette Cooper as Health Secretary, Pat McFadden at Work and Pensions and Lisa Nandy as Culture Secretary. The sole representative of the soft left in a senior position is Ed Miliband, at the Foreign Office; Angela Rayner, as Housing Secretary, and Lousia Haigh, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, occupy the swamp that stretches between soft left and Labour right. The chief criterion for inclusion is loyalty to the new leader, rather than talent or experience; fifteen Cabinet ministers who failed to call upon Starmer to set out his departure timetable were summarily sacked.

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[35] Purnell interned at Blair's office in 1989–92 while reading PPE at Balliol. A Downing Street special advisor from 1997–2001, when he entered Parliament as MP for Stalybridge, his career has encompassed heading the Private Equity and Venture Capital parliamentary group, chairing Labour Friends of Israel, a stint at the Work and Pensions Department where he imposed harsh workfare measures on claimants and—since quitting Parliament ahead of the 2010 election—a revolving door between management positions at the BBC and various business consultancies.

[36] Healey resigned as Secretary of Defence in June 2026, claiming that even Starmer's defence-spending plans fell 'well short of what is required', given that 'NATO has now said we must prepare for war with Russia within the next five years': Personal Statement, *Hansard*, 16 June 2026. Less than a year before, Healey apparently thought the UK defence budget sufficient to take on China: see Allegra Mendelson, 'Britain "Ready to Fight" over Taiwan, Defence Secretary Suggests', *Telegraph*, 27 July 2025. On the dysfunctional state of the Department of Defence, see Lucy Fisher and Charles Clover, 'John Healey: The Ex-Trade Unionist Who Privately Battled the Treasury', *FT*, 11 June 2026.

[37] Mahmood's record as Home Secretary has been condemned by human-rights groups but warmly supported by Farage and by Blue Labour ideologue Maurice Glasman, who thought her 'fantastic': see Jon Bloomfield and David Edgar, 'Imitating the Populist Right: The Politics of Shabana Mahmood', *Byline Times*, 8 December 2025.

How far the Burnham coup will resolve the Labour government's problems remains to be seen. On the political front, for now, it can fairly claim to be doing at least as well as other former social-democratic parties elsewhere—running at 28 per cent in the polls, up from 17 per cent under Starmer, and currently besting PSOE's 26 per cent in Spain and Socialdemokratiet's 21 per cent in Denmark; let alone the German SPD's 13 per cent or the French Socialists' 11 per cent. Labour backbenchers will be reassured by the bounce in the polls, although discontent remains—the victims of the Burnham–Purnell Cabinet putsch are said to be seething.[38]

## *A cure?*

In contrast to Starmer, Burnham's team acknowledges the Westminster model's crisis of representation and is floating two solutions. The centrepiece is greater regional devolution, starting with a Manchester outpost of Downing Street, 'Number Ten North', which in practice means that an office has been set up for Burnham in Heron House, on Albert Square; already security-equipped since it currently houses GCHQ. Virtually every British government, Conservatives included, promises to redistribute power and wealth to the regions, viz. Cameron's 'Northern Powerhouse' or Johnson and Sunak's 'levelling up'. It is not clear yet whether Burnham's will be a devolution of power—making central government weaker—or a devolution of resources: getting the richer regions to pay for the poorer ones. London and the Southeast may be the richer regions, but London also has a very high level of relative poverty. While the UK is even more centralized than France, devolution could even increase inequalities if some regions are less able to make use of new powers. Number Ten North has all the hallmarks of a costly Burnham gimmick, but few inside Labour criticized it.[39]

Burnham's second proposal is for electoral reform, further down the line. Liberal Democrats have been pushing for decades for a form of proportional representation and Labour's slow switch in favour represents a significant shift. Burnham may give government backing to a commission charged with investigating different options, to be put to the

[38] Ailbhe Rea, 'What Will Labour's Newly Dispossessed Do Next?', *New Statesman*, 30 July 2026.
[39] Jim Pickard and Chris Smyth, 'Labour MPs Jostling for Jobs under Andy Burnham Discover Fresh Passion for Devolution', *FT*, 3 July 2026.

country in Labour's next election manifesto. The question is whether a new system will be genuinely representative of the multi-party vote, as is the German model—although 5 per cent is a high bar—or whether it will be some version of a D'Hondt, transferable or second-vote method, along the lines that Burnham introduced in Greater Manchester, which essentially serves as a prop for the declining 'centre'. British voters roundly rejected a version of the latter in the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum, correctly intuiting that politicians were only looking out for themselves.

Above all, Labour has no cure for Britain's economic malaise, the root cause of its political discontents. The scale of the problem leaps out in comparative and historical perspective. Elsewhere in Europe, the long period of postwar reconstruction is celebrated as the *Wirtschaftswunder*, *il miracolo economico* or *les trente glorieuses*.[40] Helped by the expansion of the birthrate, state intervention in the economy, the low cost of energy, technical progress and a prolonged period of peace in Europe, growth rates averaged an annual 5.6 per cent in Germany and Italy, and 5 per cent in France, not to speak of 9.3 per cent in Japan. In Britain, they were only 2.9 per cent.[41] During the 1990s and 2000s, powered by an expanding financial sector, British GDP growth caught up with declining French and German levels. But since the 2008 crash, it has done worse on almost every metric than its peers. Annual UK labour productivity growth has run at less than half the OECD rate—at 0.4 per cent, compared to a 0.9 per cent average—and the UK productivity gap with Germany, France and the US has doubled since 2008. Real wages have flatlined or turned negative; cumulatively, the past fifteen years of lost wage growth are estimated to have cost the average UK waged worker £10,700 a year. Middle-income UK households are now 20 per cent poorer than their German peers, and 9 per cent poorer than the French; lower-income households are 27 per cent poorer than in France. Meanwhile, public debt has risen from 36 to 100 per cent of GDP, and debt-interest payments alone cost 3.6 per cent of GDP—a higher rate than France.[42]

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[40] The latter coined by the French economist Jean Fourastié in his *Les Trente Glorieuses: Ou la révolution de 1946 à 1975*, Paris 1979.

[41] Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*, Paris 2003, p. 260.

[42] Torsten Bell, Tom Clark, Emily Fry, Gavin Kelly and Greg Thwaites, *Ending Stagnation: A New Economic Strategy for Britain*, Resolution Foundation, December 2023, pp. 7–8, 18; Thomas Mayer, 'A Tale of Two Debts in France and the UK', OMFIF, 13 November 2025.

These poor outcomes, the result of sluggish growth combined with high inequality, have been worsened by the serial shocks of the past seven years: the pandemic—whose fiscal blowout is now being clawed back from benefit claimants—followed by the inflation spikes caused by rising geopolitical tensions, with soaring energy, food and housing costs also driving a rise in homelessness. British household incomes have yet to regain the levels of 2019.[43] 'We need a new determination to raise living standards', Burnham declared in his leadership pitch.[44] But he has also promised 'sound public finances', on the basis of Reeves's fiscal rules, and pledged to support Ukraine 'for as long as it takes'. In the Autumn Budget, the Treasury will once again be pushing for cuts in child benefits, pensioners' fuel allowance and disability payments.

## *Party and system*

An ironic commentator once said of the British political system that it consisted of a Nasty Party and a Stupid Party, with a third option, the Liberals, provided for those who disliked the other two. Once the masochistic electorate tires of the Conservatives—the nasty party—it switches, but not for long, to Labour, the stupid one. John Stuart Mill, however, writing in 1861 thought that the Conservative Party was, 'by the law of its existence, the stupidest party', given 'how little the Conservative leaders understand Conservative principles'. Well would it be for England, he added, 'if Conservatives voted consistently for everything conservative, and Liberals for everything liberal'.[45] In fact, the Tory Party has done very well by revising its principles whenever threatened by another party. In the nineteenth century it transformed itself from a party of agrarian interests into an overtly pro-capitalist one. In the twentieth, it accepted the need for welfare-state reforms, as these were enacted by the 1900s Liberal governments and Labour after 1945. By the 1970s, it was embracing neo-liberalism.

The problem rather is that the main political parties have marched side by side, Labour also abandoning Keynesianism for neoliberalism. In addition, their direction of march has been changing. An acclaimed

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[43] Bell et al., *Ending Stagnation*, p. 6.

[44] Pippa Crerar, 'Burnham sets out vision to transform Britain and fix "broken" system', *Guardian*, 29 June 2026.

[45] John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, Chapter VII, 'Of True and False Democracy', footnote 3.

feature of the two-party system dominant in England is its supposed pressure on both parties to compete for voters in the centre ground. But this is precisely what is changing. Facing a growing threat from Reform, the Conservatives have been moving right. But Labour has also moved right, as it too has chased Reform, raising suspicions that it is both a stupid and a nasty party. Burnham has indicated a rhetorical course correction, hoping to recapture Muslim and left votes from the Greens. But he has also kept Mahmood as Home Secretary and signalled broad continuity with Starmer's positions on foreign affairs.

Labour has always been weak on ideas. It emerged late, compared to other European social democracies, forming as the Labour Representation Committee only in 1900, and strongly influenced by the Fabian Society, whose ideology was a mishmash of liberalism, social reformism, eugenics and pro-colonialism, but which at the same time was better organized and resourced than the other LRC 'groupuscules', such as the Independent Labour Party and the Social Democratic Federation. Compared to the main thinkers of the continental socialist parties, most of whom had metabolized some elements of Marxism, Labour leaders tended to take quite reactionary figures like Ruskin and Carlyle as their inspirations, along with the Bible. In office in the aftermath of the Crash of 1929, Labour was completely devoid of ideas and simply followed the *laissez-faire* Treasury, which suggested nothing could be done. There were of course other options, including those of Liberals like Keynes who proposed an injection of cash into the economy. This was disregarded because the Labour leadership decided that its reputation for economic responsibility entailed following the 'Treasury view'.[46]

Burnham is the inheritor of this tradition. As with Starmer, 'change' was the watchword of his pitch to the country, promising 'a dramatic change in how Britain is governed', a 'new direction'—'People can't wait forever for change'—'We need to change politics and we need to do it now.'[47] British voters may be forgiven for thinking: *plus ça change* . . .

[46] Robert Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929–1931*, London 1967, p. 43. In the postwar period, if it still lacked ideas of its own, Labour did at least have the sense to implement those of other people, notably the Tory-commissioned, Liberal-drafted Beveridge Report, blueprint for the welfare state.
[47] Crerar, 'Burnham sets out vision to transform Britain'.