

# Who is prospective Labour Party leader and prime minister, Andy Burnham?—Part One

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4 June 2026

*This is the first of a two-part series.*

## Thatcher’s “greatest achievement”

In late 2002, Margaret Thatcher was asked at a dinner in Hampshire what her greatest achievement had been. The hated former Conservative prime minister’s answer was unambiguous: “Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds.”

Her statement should stand as the epigraph for the Labour Party leadership bid of Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham.

After a decade as mayor, Burnham is attempting to return to parliament in a by-election in Makerfield, Wigan, in Greater Manchester—a move denied him in January, by Labour’s National Executive Committee controlled by supporters of Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

Labour is presiding over a social catastrophe, including the deepest levels of poverty in 30 years, and trailing the far-right Reform, the Conservatives and the Greens in general election polls. If he successfully becomes an MP, Burnham is expected to challenge Starmer for the Labour leadership and to replace him in Downing Street.

The WSWS has noted that whether Burnham, “a run-of-the-mill, right-wing social democrat succeeds or not will make no difference to the working class or the fate of the Labour Party. Burnham’s sole qualification is having the good fortune to have spent the last decade in the north of England, away from the taint of too-obvious association with Starmer and his acolytes.”

However, Burnham’s bid for leadership is centred on his claim to be the antidote to decades of Thatcherite politics. Speaking at a Great North Investment Summit in Leeds, he said, “Britain, if you look at the last 40 years... has been on the wrong path... a path that has damaged communities across the north.”

But Burnham’s entire political career, as a loyal Blairite MP through to the private-sector bonanza he presided over in Greater Manchester, is proof of Thatcher’s boast.

## A creature of New Labour

Burnham, while born in Liverpool, was brought up in Culcheth, an affluent village in Cheshire. He joined the Labour Party aged 14.

Far from the “outsider” and opponent of establishment politics he claims to be, Burnham studied at Cambridge University before being fast-tracked into the highest echelons of Blair’s New Labour machinery.

From 1994-97, he worked as a researcher for Labour MP Tessa Jowell, who reportedly said on one occasion she would “jump under a bus” for Blair. From 1998–2001, Burnham served as a special adviser to Culture Secretary Chris Smith. In 2001, he was elected as Labour Member of Parliament (MP) for Leigh.

Throughout his period as an MP, under Blair until 2007 and then Gordon Brown until 2010, Burnham remained utterly loyal to the New Labour project. Such was his idolisation of Blair that Burnham pledged he would be a “Blairite for Brown” when the latter took over as prime minister.

Burnham backed and repeatedly defended the 2003 illegal invasion of Iraq, which led to the deaths of a million people, and voted to block any investigation of that war crime.

As Health Secretary from 2009, he pushed through privatisation measures in the National Health Service, laying the groundwork for the privatisation of the UK’s first NHS hospital at Hinchingsbrooke.

He endorsed the austerity offensive launched by Brown following the 2008 global crash.

Last week, Blair made a pointed intervention into Labour’s crisis, issuing a 5,600-word tract insisting there

could be no reforms to alleviate social inequality. He asked, “How do we justify adding to the welfare bill when it is already ballooning, taxes are high and getting higher, and we’re told we have to increase defence spending to prepare for the possibility of war?”

His intervention was prompted by Burnham’s token criticisms of the policies of the Blair government, but Blair punctured this with a reminder that “Andy Burnham was an outstanding member of my government.”

## A Blair loyalist

With the Blairites widely hated, and the Labour Party forced to hold a leadership contest after the crushing defeat of Brown in the 2010 election, Burnham stood as a “soft-left” candidate while stressing, “I’m proud to have served under Tony Blair, and proud to have served under Gordon Brown. I don’t think you could find anybody who was more loyal to both than me; I was utterly loyal to Tony and utterly loyal to Gordon, and my record backs that up.”

In the Blair government Burnham had been a parliamentary undersecretary of state for immigration, citizenship and nationality at the Home Office (2005-06), junior health minister (2006-07), and chief secretary to the Treasury (2007-08). A *Guardian* profile noted that his time at the Home Office “earned him the nickname ‘Flog ‘em Burnham’ in a nod to his tough stance on law and order.” This included backing plans to detain terrorism suspects for 42 days.

In the 2010 leadership contest Burnham combined these right-wing policies with the statement that he was “never relaxed about people getting extremely rich”. With social inequality having soared under the Blair-Brown governments, and as Brown forced through austerity policies prior to losing office, this was an attempt by Burnham—an MP for a northern working class constituency—to put some distance between himself and New Labour.

But given his record, no-one believed Burnham and he finished fourth out of five candidates—taking just 10.4 percent of the vote in the first round and crashing out—with Ed Miliband winning the leadership.

## Austerity, welfare cuts and another mass rejection

With Miliband’s defeat to the Conservatives in the 2015

general election, Burnham again stood as the “soft-left” candidate, this time against the Socialist Campaign Group’s Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership election later that year.

Anything associated with New Labour and its backing of illegal wars was now anathema to millions of workers, youth and Labour members.

Yet Burnham made clear in his campaign that he would resign from any cabinet that questioned British membership of NATO or scrap the UK Trident nuclear weapons arsenal. His other priorities were “Number one: economic credibility. We have to get that back. Number two: our relationship with business. We must be a pro-business party.”

The move that contributed most to his routing by Corbyn was Burnham’s abstention—during the hustings period—alongside other candidates and Blairite darlings Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall, on the Tories’ Welfare Reform and Work Bill. The bill would strip 3.2 million people of an average of £1,350 a year. Everyone knew that abstaining meant backing the brutal legislation, with only Corbyn of all the candidates voting against.

Burnham justified his abstention with support for an amendment from Labour’s interim leadership that, as the WSWS noted, “ceded almost everything to the Tory cuts agenda, supporting ‘controls on and reforms to the overall costs of social security’ and ‘necessary changes to the welfare system.’”

Burnham cynically declared he was “firing the starting gun on Labour’s opposition to this bill”—opposition that of course never materialised. He took just 20 percent of the vote in the Labour leadership contest to Corbyn’s almost 60 percent, and he sought pastures new as Greater Manchester Mayor.

*To be continued.*



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