

# Shuffling the deckchairs on Labour's sinking ship

Chris Marsden

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Keir Starmer announced his resignation as British prime minister and Labour Party leader on Monday, opening the way for Andy Burnham, the mayor of Greater Manchester, to succeed him.

Starmer's resignation was demanded by Britain's ruling class to save his Labour government from collapse, so that its right-wing programme of austerity and war can be continued and accelerated.

Starmer's failed premiership will cause consternation throughout the governments of Europe and internationally. Neither Emmanuel Macron in France nor Friedrich Merz in Germany enjoys any greater degree of popular support, yet they are tasked with pursuing the same agenda regardless.

However, what sealed Starmer's fate was not his unpopularity but a calculation by the ruling class that he could no longer be relied on to realise its strategic aims.

Starmer is the UK's sixth prime minister in the past decade. The backing given to Starmer and the Labour Party by most of the ruling class in the 2024 election was supposed to provide a resolution for problems which had wracked British capitalism since its exit from the European Union in 2016.

After David Cameron's resignation in the wake of the "Brexit" referendum, the ruling Conservative Party went into a worsening meltdown, burning through first Theresa May, then Boris Johnson, Lizz Truss (the shortest-serving prime minister in British history) and finally Rishi Sunak. Declining economic fortunes coupled with fractious trade and diplomatic relations soured the attitudes of big business towards their traditional representatives.

Unable to provide stability for the banks and the corporations, the Tories were also inflaming popular opposition—which erupted in a major strike wave in 2022-23. The government was despised for its destruction of living standards, naked corruption that reached its most grotesque forms during the COVID pandemic, the socially murderous policy of herd immunity during that pandemic and for backing Israel's genocide in Gaza.

But the only viable alternative, the Labour Party, was in the hands of Jeremy Corbyn from 2015-2020: an unacceptable prime minister for the ruling class due to the danger that his mild protestations over imperialism and social inequality might arouse popular expectations in the working class he would be unable to control.

Starmer was put forward as the solution, having completed the rout of the "left" thanks to the total capitulation of Corbyn and his allies, then established a Labour platform indistinguishable from that of the crisis-ridden Tories they would be brought in to replace.

Most crucially, he was tasked with pushing forward Britain's role in the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and restoring frayed US-UK relations following the election of Donald Trump. He went into the

2024 election declaring Labour the "party of NATO" and of Zionism, whipping up anti-Russian sentiment, promising to fix relations with Trump, backing Israel's genocide in Gaza and pledging fiscal responsibility—safeguarded by his "Iron Chancellor" Rachel Reeves.

Starmer alluded to this record in his resignation speech, boasting of having "inherited a Labour Party that was politically, financially and morally bankrupt" and then "Ripping out the poison of antisemitism, restoring trust on the economy, defence, and national security. And becoming a party that, once again, stood proudly with, not against, our national flag."

But Starmer has proved incapable of meeting the demands of the bourgeoisie while maintaining Labour's ability to govern. Though elected with a massive majority, thanks almost entirely to a collapse in support for the Conservatives, Labour in fact won the lowest share of the vote of any majority government in British history. However hard Starmer tried, he continually disappointed his bourgeois paymasters while suffering a historic decline in popularity that in the longer term would have threatened his government's survival.

Efforts to placate Trump led to political disaster, especially his appointment of Peter Mandelson as US Ambassador, directly involving his government in the Epstein scandal. Moreover, as tensions between the US and Europe mounted, Starmer failed to secure a significant trade deal with the US while alienating potential allies on the continent. As Britain's economic problems mounted, he repeatedly balked before cuts to welfare and demands for ramping up military spending to 3.5 percent of GDP before 2035.

Starmer's downfall was brought about by opposition from the right rather than the left.

A massive campaign, funded in large measure by oligarchs such as Elon Musk, and backed by the Trump administration, meant that Nigel Farage's Reform UK emerged as the main challenger to the Labour government and the locus of a broader far-right movement—all fuelled by Labour's own nationalist, anti-migrant agenda. This saw Labour suffer major local election defeats this May, primarily at the hands of Reform.

Senior members of the armed forces, backed by large sections of the media, meanwhile launched repeated broadsides against Starmer for failing to raise military spending fast enough.

High-profile cabinet resignations—beginning with Health Secretary Wes Streeting and then Defence Secretary John Healy—set the stage for a leadership contest. But few within ruling circles wanted the whole Labour government to fall. Reform UK is not trusted politically. It shares with the Tories a vociferously pro-Brexit agenda increasingly seen as detrimental to British imperialism's strategic interests. A recent study suggests Britain's economy has been left 6-8

percent smaller after leaving the European Union than would otherwise have been the case, amid trade and military conflicts which have savaged its vital relationship with the US and made the UK more dependent on European markets and military alliances.

In a final effort to humiliate Starmer, Trump posted last night, “Keir Starmer will resign as Prime Minister of The United Kingdom. He failed badly on two very important subjects—IMMIGRATION AND ENERGY (OPEN NORTH SEA OIL!). I wish him well!”

What the ruling class considers necessary at this point is not a new government but a new prime minister. No one outside of the party’s most unabashed Blairite right believed Streeting could replace Starmer, given his attacks on the NHS and close association with Mandelson. A campaign therefore began to bring Mayor of Manchester Andy Burnham back into parliament: someone with an impeccable Blairite record—coming a distant second to Corbyn in the 2015 Labour leadership contest—but away from Westminster since 2017.

When Burnham secured a runaway victory in the Makerfield by-election Friday morning, Starmer’s number was up. Streeting read the room, announcing that he would not challenge Burnham and was “convinced that there is a place” for his ideas “under his leadership.” This paves the way for Burnham’s anointment as early as July, avoiding a leadership contest. What passes for the Labour left has signed off on the coronation, making clear earlier that it would not field a candidate.

As in every country, the key role in facilitating the manoeuvres of the ruling class is played by the official “left” which keeps the struggles of the working class in check. In the UK, the Corbynites and the trade union bureaucracy, which suppressed and betrayed the major strikes which erupted against the Tory government, have sought to block the development of a working class, socialist opposition to Starmer’s Labour.

Most Corbynite MPs remained faithful to Labour, while Corbyn following his expulsion refused all attempts to form a new left-wing party. Once demands for an alternative became impossible to ignore, Corbyn agreed to lead Your Party and was endorsed by the pseudo-left, only to systematically demobilise its original 800,000 supporters to the point where the organisation now exists in name only.

Burnham’s campaign for the seat in Makerfield was joined by almost every Labour MP, had the de facto backing of the pseudo-left who campaigned against a Reform vote, and the assistance of Zack Polanski’s Green Party which mounted no real campaign and supplied their voters to Labour.

Whatever criticisms these forces made of Burnham, they performed the invaluable service of presenting him as a step to the left by Labour supposedly made under popular pressure. This continues, with Corbyn’s key ally John McDonnell immediately urging Burnham to allow him back into the Labour Party.

Any illusions in Burnham will be quickly exposed. Even before taking office, Burnham made clear that he is not only a continuity Starmer candidate but one prepared to respond to every criticism of Starmer made from the right.

His campaign pledges to end 40 years of neoliberal consensus were junked as he declared himself “not squeamish” about cutting welfare, signalled his willingness to spend more on defence and told the BBC of immigration: “I do agree with what Farage is saying; what we’ve got to do is get back to a sense of order.”

In a May 14 perspective article, the Socialist Equality Party explained that the Starmer government “has been capsized by the

shock waves of the war in Iran and President Donald Trump’s detonation of the ‘special relationship’ between the US and the UK,” “caught in a tightening vice” between the demands for a massive rearmament drive and a “brutal price shock ... squeezing working class families and battering industry.”

We warned, “Once again, amid deepening popular hatred of Starmer’s government and its rapid electoral collapse, the Labour ‘left’ is playing the decisive role in clearing the ground for the crisis to be settled entirely among a gang of right-wing Blairites in disarray.”

Thanks to them and their apologists, “In every crisis of rule suffered by the British capitalist class, as its global position has weakened, the dictates of international finance and the requirements of militarism have asserted themselves ever more directly and nakedly.”

We insisted:

The Labour Party is not merely pressured by these forces. Having severed any remaining connection to its former working class constituency, it is a political instrument of the corporate and financial oligarchy—body and soul...

In less than two years, the Starmer-led Labour government has fully confirmed the Socialist Equality Party’s assessment on the day of his election: that a “new reactionary monster” had been installed “at the head of a Labour government on a collision course with the British working class.”

That collision is coming, despite Starmer’s imminent replacement by Burnham. The fundamental issue confronting the working class is the fight to develop a new, socialist political leadership opposed to the entire Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy, “left” and right. Only this can answer the descent into war, the destruction of living standards and the growth of the far right.



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