Burnham promises Labour's "last chance for change" he can't deliver

Chris Marsden
17 July 2026

The Labour Party went through the formality Friday of "electing" Andy Burnham as its new leader. He took office unopposed, receiving the support of a large majority of Labour's affiliated trade unions and societies and 379 out of 403 MPs.

His leadership was launched at a gathering of invited party activists and grandees, including three he later named as personal inspirations: David Blunkett, Dame Margaret Beckett and Lord Neil Kinnock—the former leader infamous for his betrayal of the 1984-5 miners' strike and witch-hunt of the Militant Tendency out of the Labour Party. Burnham said he "would not have joined" Labour had it not been for this "legend".

He began his speech by reassuring the Blairite right-wing of his respect and admiration. Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood, whose latest vicious anti-migrant legislation was backed by Burnham earlier this week, was charged with introducing Labour's prime minister to be. She could barely contain her excitement, amid reports that she is the favoured candidate for chancellor in Burnham's yet-to-be announced Cabinet.

Burnham then sang the praises of Keir Starmer's time as Labour leader, especially his returning the party to power after electoral defeat—a calibrated dig at the party's Corbynite left—and his supposed restoration of Britain's reputation "on the world stage". He praised Labour's despised health secretary Wes Streeting, who is also anticipating a key Cabinet position.

This sweetened the pill of earlier and politically necessary criticism of Starmer's backing for the Gaza genocide, made as Burnham solidarised himself with every other element of Labour's foreign policy, including its commitment to NATO, alliance with Washington and support for the ramping up of military spending and production.

This done, Burnham had to make a step change, offering himself as the Labour Party's saviour and telling the audience, "But let's be honest, everybody: this is a last chance to change, and we must take it together, united together."

The bulk of Burnham's speech from hereon in consisted of empty rhetoric based around five "changes". This was his pitch to a popular audience, and especially Labour's activist base and what passes for its "left" and "soft-left"—an attempt to restore some measure of popular support to a widely despised government and party.

It began with a pledge to reunite the party and change its culture. Burnham would end "infighting and pulling in different directions" and reforge "a united Labour Party and labour movement," including "not seeking to suspend or punish members who have principled views that may be different from mine, but building unity by respecting all shades of opinion."

Of course, this does not extend to the expelled former party leader Jeremy Corbyn, whose shadow chancellor John McDonnell had earlier politely suggested readmitting Corbyn's shadow home secretary Diane Abbott. It will take as little as that, or less, to secure the fulsome backing of the Labour "left".

Addressing his second pledge of working to "build a new politics," Burnham spoke of putting out a positive message rather than criticisms of others so that "political discourse in this country becomes that little bit less toxic."

He then promised a "political direction" that was "distinctively Labour": "We won't try to out Green the Greens, or out Reform Reform, or do what we've done in the past… wear too many Tory clothes." The jabs at the Greens and Reform were well received, though many in the audience appeared unhappy with his making the obvious comparisons between current Labour and Conservative Party policy.

They were no less nonplussed by his carefully moderated critique of "a series of wrong turns in the 1980s," alluding to Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's monetarist policy and privatisations, as the source of all contemporary ills. This without Burnham addressing at all the 1990s when Tony Blair's Labour Party extended Thatcher's agenda—moving her to name New Labour as her greatest achievement.

© World Socialist Web Site

Burnham promised to reverse these 40 years of destructive policies through a combination of devolution, selective public control of infrastructure and a never-specified "reindustrialisation" of a list of former Labour strongholds that unintentionally read like a catalogue of political betrayals and social catastrophe.

Even here, he made clear that this was not old school Labourism, but a renewed Blairite alliance between the state and big business—epitomised by the infamous public-private partnerships of the 1990s and 2000s. "And make no mistake, everybody, I will be a pro-business leader of the Labour Party, as I was a pro-business mayor of Greater Manchester. We turn places round together".

The British Chambers of Commerce, congratulating Burnham on his election as Labour leader, declared itself "ready to work in partnership with his new government" and added that "Firms will want to see swift action that shows the new government understands the cost pressures they face and is willing to work with them to cut that burden."

Burnham did not raise the point in this speech, which served other purposes, but two weeks earlier wrote a piece for the *Times* making clear that his talk of economic renewal is intimately connected to a programme of rearmament and meeting up to the bourgeoisie's demand for a "whole of society" preparation for war:

"As prime minister, my priority will be protecting the UK by boosting defence spending, reviving local industry and strengthening our alliances," he wrote. "We face an increasingly dangerous world, with growing Russian aggression, conflict in the Middle East, climate and energy insecurity, and technology rapidly changing the nature of war abroad and our security at home… We can simultaneously defend our national security, protect and grow our economy and make our nation stronger."

This pledge was backed by a promise that "Our commitment to NATO and the UK's nuclear deterrent will remain absolute. Our relationship with the US will remain critical… And Britain's support for Ukraine will not waver."

Such is the desperation to breathe some life into the Labour government that this sweeping collection of buzzwords and soundbites was greeted in some quarters as a stroke of genius. The *Guardian*'s Andrew Sparrow rejected criticisms that Burnham was short on detail and long on "vibes" with the retort that "it's a ghastly term because it's pejorative and sneery, and it misses what politics is about." Burnham's "vibes masterclass" had offered "hope", which "is always a good starting point".

Politics, however, is not a game of wishful thinking, especially when carried out by the political pundits of Britain's ruling class.

Burnham's path to party leadership was laid down because Britain's ruling class had determined that Starmer failed to fully implement its dictates. In particular, he had balked before the savage cuts to social spending required to ramp up military expenditure and pursue Britain's predatory war aims.

Burnham has promised to do precisely that, while also claiming that he can deliver "growth in every postcode" and address the mounting social problems faced by millions of working people through a combination of devolution and partnerships with private capital. Such claims will not withstand their first encounter with economic and political realities.

Britain's military spending plans will leave it with an additional £386 billion to find between 2030 and 2035, over £77 billion a year, plus tens of billions more on planned nuclear weapons systems. Moreover, nowhere in Burnham's plans is the global economic damage of an escalated war in Ukraine or Iran factored in, or the impact of any of the new wars being prepared by the surge of militarism, or the real possibility of a global recession.

Burnham has in any event repeatedly stated his commitment to the finance capital-directed "fiscal rules" for government spending drawn up by Starmer's chancellor Rachel Reeves.

Not only will Burnham continue in all fundamentals Starmer's agenda of austerity and war, he will escalate it. Whatever temporary reprieve he may or may not bring to the government, the next period will see a further alienation of broad masses of workers and young people from Labour.

Required now is the development of a new socialist political leadership of the working class, prepared for escalating class struggles between workers and the oligarchy which Labour serves just as surely under Burnham as Starmer. It is to the task of building this leadership and equipping it with a socialist internationalist programme that the Socialist Equality Party is dedicated.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site