Burnham’s UK Labour conference speech: cynical promises of reforms after next election, but more pain now

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Prime Minister Andy Burnham spoke at Labour’s annual conference this week in front of a backdrop reading “Hope Again”. But his speech and those of Defence Minister Wes Streeting, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood and Chancellor John Healey were united by pledges of continued austerity today, ramped up military spending, repression and the promise of some social reforms to be enacted only after the next general election, scheduled for August 2029.

In the meantime, the message was “It’s pain today, as the money is not there.”

Burnham’s keynote speech Tuesday announced his intention to set up a National Care Service as the centrepiece of a ten-year plan for government to be published later this year. The scheme, uncosted and bereft of detail, would offer the elderly a “high-quality care service that starts in the home”, “free at the point of use and no care charges paid out of your basic state pension.” This would be introduced “in the next Parliament”—meaning it could be up to eight years away.

The scheme “will be fully funded, and not through borrowing” he reassured the ruling class. Sir Andrew Dilnot, who chaired David Cameron’s Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government’s social care commission, warned that an NHS-style care service would cost “well in excess of £18 billion” a year.

To pay for it, Burnham declared, “someone has to go through the pain barrier and rip the plaster off.” But only millions of pensioners were identified, who will lose the full protection of the “triple lock” from April 2030, when its link to earnings is scrapped, as planned by Burnham. Based on the increase set for next April, the state pension will rise by almost £500 a year. Ending the triple lock will slash any subsequent rise by at least £170 a year from 2030.

The triple lock was introduced in 2011 by the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition to shore up a vital part of the Tories’ always elderly electoral base as they rolled out savage austerity against the working class to bailout out the banks and corporations after the 2008-09 global financial collapse. As a result, official figures saw the number of pensioners in relative poverty halve after housing costs—at 14 percent in 2024-25, against 29 percent in the late 1990s.

Before taking power, Burnham told the *Times* in June he was “not squeamish” about cutting welfare to pay for military spending. He is true to his word. Pensions are by far the largest component of the welfare bill, at £154 billion this year. Due to being linked to rising average earnings, the new state pension will for the first time reach around £13,000 from next April—the most miserable in any advanced economy as a portion of wages. In the weeks before the conference, commentators across the political spectrum declared that this princely sum of less than £1,100 a month was untenable.

Burnham’s other set-piece announcements were just as evasive as his elderly care pledge. He repeated his electioneering declaration that “Britain has been on the wrong path for a long time. Deindustrialisation. Deregulation. Privatisation. Austerity. Brexit”, pledging to “make a break with the direction of the past 40 years and put Britain on a new path.”

From the 1980s, “Homes. Water. Energy. Transport. Care” were “Broken up and sold off”, he added, without mentioning that Thatcher’s Conservative Party agenda was continued by the 1997-2007 Blair/Brown Labour governments in which he was a leading figure.

He would “present a strengthened Water Bill to Parliament”, with “the repeal of Margaret Thatcher’s ideological ban on public ownership of water companies”

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at its centre. This would, he said, "start a 10-year journey to a very different water system." However, private monopolies would still control the water supply, but with regional city mayors given "new powers to hold water companies to account."

For added reassurance of big business, he promised, "Where private companies serve the public interest, we will support them… When people hear the phrase public control, I am sure some think it's anti-business. It's the opposite."

Labour would in fact change "government procurement so that it backs British business, as our trade unions have rightly pushed us to do."

On housing, Burnham rehearsed his vague pledge to start the "biggest council house building programme since the post-war era", without promising a penny but with councils given more powers to build on unused public land. A few threats were issued to slum landlords "who rent out the worst quality homes", garnering one of the many mindless standing ovations that peppered his speech. They would "be given warnings", and he would "legislate", but only "if necessary".

On a cost-of-living crisis worsening by the day, Burnham could only offer policies announced 10 weeks ago when he entered Downing Street: a £2 cap on single bus fares in England through 2027, and no VAT on electricity bills from October, but for six months only. The government puts the energy bill saving at just £45 a year for an average household. When a Labour MP claimed after the speech on Sky News that Burnham was giving people "breathing space", political editor Beth Rigby replied, "I'm sceptical about that as [household] bills about to go up by maybe two and a half grand."

Appealing to the forces who make up Reform UK's electoral base, with the far-right party second in some national polls but edging back to first place in one, Burnham stated, "We've lost some of our control over immigration… So I understand the anger about what is happening in the Channel."

Raising the spectre of continued economic and political instability, Burnham stated, "It is always in my mind that I'm the seventh Prime Minister in 10 years." Chiming with growing sentiment in Britain's boardrooms amid escalation global tensions and a tariff war led by Donald Trump, he stressed that Brexit "hasn't given us control." A UK-EU summit later this year will discuss "how we best work together on immigration", and he will then set out "the different options" for Britain's broader "long-term relationship with our European partners."

Puncturing the strenuous efforts by various pseudo-left forces to claim that he is amenable to be shift to the left, and the cultivation of illusions to this effect among workers that have led to the "Burnham bounce"—an uptick in Labour's polling, Burnham noted that his grandmother's "modest savings she had built up through her life, starting from the house where I was born" were "all taken" to pay for her elderly care. He had vowed then, as a new Blairite MP, to fight for something better. But "here we are 25 years later. If anything, it's worse today than it was then. What an indictment of my generation of politicians, myself included."

This mixture of contrition and self-promotion is meant to conceal the fact that with British imperialism facing debt interest payments of around £110 billion a year and plans to ramp up war against Russia, along with deeper involvement in Middle East conflicts, Labour today has even less possibility of increasing social spending than Blair. Hence his repeated pledges to "stick to" the finance capital-demanded strict fiscal rules enacted by Starmer's former Chancellor Rachel Reeves.

His own chancellor, John Healey, made this apparent when he declared the previous day, "I have to level with you, Conference. The money New Labour had in the nineties is simply not there now."

Except, of course, when it comes to waging war, with Defence Secretary Streeting giving a "cast iron guarantee" that core defence spending would reach the NATO-demanded 3.5 percent of GDP by 2035. Healey also announced £6 billion for three floating docks at Faslane in Scotland, home to Britain's nuclear-armed submarines, part of a £15 billion upgrade over the next decade.

Burnham followed suit, pledging that "I will be steadfast in my support for Ukraine and stand up to threats wherever they come from. Whether Russia, Iran or anywhere."

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