

Holborn and St Pancras by-election: Record low turnout exposes mass disaffection with both Labour and the Greens

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9 October 2026

The candidate of the ruling Labour government, Sagal Abdi-Wali, won Thursday's Holborn and St Pancras by-election with 12,292 votes (45.1 percent). She took a majority of 3,364 over Green Party leader Zack Polanski, who polled 8,928 votes (32.8 percent).

The by-election, called after former prime minister Keir Starmer resigned as an MP last month, confirmed mass popular disaffection with Labour and the fragility of the Green Party's revival under Polanski, who became leader in September 2025.

Labour proclaimed it proof of a continuing "Burnham bounce" for Prime Minister Andy Burnham—who replaced Starmer in July. The *Financial Times* declared Labour's win "evidence that the party has stemmed the flow of voters on the left who had been drifting to the Greens."

The Greens countered that their vote share had tripled since the general election in July 2024 when it won 10.4 percent. But Andrew Feinstein, the "left" independent who took 19 percent in that election, promoting a new Corbyn-led party, did not stand this time and backed the Greens. Polanski's 8,928 votes compare with nearly 11,350 combined votes for the Greens and Feinstein in 2024—a rise of just 3 points.

Largely absent from commentary was the significance of a turnout of just 38.7 percent—the lowest for any by-election held in England this parliament and 15.4 points down on the 2024 general election. This contrasts to February's Gorton and Denton by-election—hailed as the measure of a Green revival—where Hannah Spencer defeated Labour on a high turnout with a 26.5-point swing. In Holborn and St Pancras, the Labour-to-Green swing since 2024 was 13.1 points—less than half.

Despite being such a high-profile election, turnout was so low because no genuine alternative to the status quo was on offer.

Burnham's populist rhetoric could not significantly renew popular support because his government is a continuation of

everything that Starmer represented and cannot convincingly be portrayed as a shift to the left.

Above all, Burnham's Labour government is escalating NATO's war against Russia, with Britain supplying long-range missiles and backing drone attacks on Moscow and committing to rearmament at a cost of tens and hundreds of billions over the next decade. It has continued support, with occasional handwringing, for Israel's genocide in Gaza and the West Bank and to enforcing austerity, with Chancellor John Healey preparing a "tough Budget" this month amid a "really challenging" fiscal situation.

Polanski came to national prominence primarily for denouncing Israel's genocide. But those who believed his left rhetoric represented any alternative voted for a party whose campaign advanced the Greens as Labour's possible future coalition partner.

With Labour at record lows in the polls, Burnham came to office refusing to rule out a future Labour-Green coalition while Polanski had told the *Financial Times* in December last year, "I could see the potential to work with Andy Burnham to stop Reform and to challenge the rise of the far right. I wouldn't rule it out."

Polanski's appeal was for a Green vote to pressure the Burnham government to adopt more left-wing positions. His speech at the Green Party conference urged, "Vote Green and watch Labour move". His aim, he declared in Holborn and St Pancras, was to "keep the existing prime minister honest" and to implement policies Labour had appropriated from the Greens.

The choice therefore was to vote for Labour or for a party whose fondest wish was to form a coalition with Labour at the next general election.

On all fundamentals, the Greens are indistinguishable from Labour. They are a capitalist party that supports NATO, backs immigration controls, and whose leaders in local government enforce austerity. Polanski is a vocal proponent of the proxy NATO war on Russia in Ukraine and proposes

“an alternative alliance, based on working with our [equally war-crazed] European neighbours”.

To secure popular support in Holborn and St Pancras, Polanski denounced the genocide and described himself as an “anti-Zionist”. But on September 14, Polanski had insisted that two amendments be added to a motion going before the Greens annual conference declaring “Zionism is racism”—one “safeguarding Jewish people”, the other deleting its call for a single Palestinian state.

On Sunday, Green members in Brighton passed the motion rejecting both amendments. Polanski absented himself, campaigning in the constituency instead.

Asked by Sky News his position on the motion, Polanski said, “I would have supported the motion as amended. It wasn’t amended, so no”.

It seems unlikely that this instant capitulation will save him. A right-wing witch-hunt has sped into action, denouncing the Greens as “antisemitic” and demanding Polanski’s resignation. Burnham has denounced the motion as “terrible judgment”. The Trump administration’s antisemitism envoy, Rabbi Yehuda Kaploun, announced, “We will be making some representations [to the UK government] on the issue.”

Former Greens leader Caroline Lucas was asked on BBC *Newsnight* if Polanski should stand down, and replied, “let’s just see what happens in the coming days and weeks.”

Zionist group, the Campaign Against Antisemitism, has reported the Greens to the Equality and Human Rights Commission. This is the same process used to drive Corbyn and his supporters out of the Labour Party.

Stalinist George Galloway’s attempt to pose as an alternative in the by-election failed. The Workers Party of Britain leader won just 1.1 percent and lost his deposit—his worst performance in a Westminster election since 2005. His demagogic opposition to war in Ukraine and NATO cannot conceal a noxious pro-Brexit agenda of right-wing nationalism.

Responsibility for this debacle rests with Britain’s pseudo-left tendencies, which have boosted Polanski and the Greens following the wreckage of Corbyn’s Your Party as the latest reformist alternative to Labour. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Socialist Party and Revolutionary Communist Party presented Polanski’s rhetoric as evidence of a turn to “green socialism”—with the SWP even forming an electoral pact with the Greens in May’s council elections.

No-one reading the SWP’s Friday commentary on the by-election would conclude anything other than that they share the goal of a Burnham government in an electoral pact with Polanski’s Greens.

Socialist Worker was clear that “Burnham has pitched leftwards ... as he promises ‘the biggest changes in 40 years’

and slams Margaret Thatcher’s legacy, it chimes with working class voters.” In addition, Burnham’s government “has significantly shifted its tone on Palestine” as “Foreign secretary Ed Miliband has declared, ‘You were right,’ to the “millions of people who have been moved and outraged by the plight of the Palestinian people”.

To the possibility of a future “Burnham betrayal”, the SWP note that Polanski “was already pitching the Greens as a ginger group to Burnham’s Labour—and equivocated [!] over the [Zionism is racism] motion in interviews on Friday morning”.

They then conclude with an appeal that “Wouldn’t it be powerful if Polanski now called on his 9,000 voters to join the Palestine demonstration in London on Saturday as a next step?”

A next step to what is not explained. But the message is made clear in all that the SWP writes: pressure Labour to the left so as to hopefully prevent a general election victory by the far-right Reform UK.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in our by-election statement the urgent need “for the working class to formulate a socialist response to the pro-war, pro-austerity, anti-immigrant and authoritarian programme of the Burnham Labour government.” The by-election was being held “under the shadow of an escalating war against Russia by the NATO powers” as part of “an expanding world war”.

We warned, “Neither a victory for Burnham’s Labour Party nor the Greens will advance the interests of the working class a single inch.”

That assessment rested on a record aimed at mobilising workers and youth to build their own party based on socialist internationalism. This included standing assistant national secretary Tom Scripps as a candidate in Holborn and St Pancras at the 2024 general election, where he opposed Feinstein and the pseudo-left’s push to beg Corbyn to found a new reformist party.

The lessons of the last two years reaffirm the urgency of our call in 2024. “The building of a new and genuinely socialist leadership must begin now. We advance the socialist and internationalist programme on which this new leadership must be built.”



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