

Britain: Why the left should not run with Burnham - What should the Labour left be doing?

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Is Andy Burnham a potential leader the left can get behind? [Dave Kellaway](#) argues probably not.

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Support from the large minority ethnic electorate may enable the party to hold the Batley and Spen seat and “Starmer to hang on as Labour leader. But if Labour loses again, it must surely be curtains for him. And then it may be that Andy Burnham’s time will have come”. Diane Abbott ends [her recent article](#) in the Guardian with these words.

The title of her article: *Manchester’s mayor has come a long way from his past as an identikit New Labour apparatchik* reflects the drift of her argument; that somehow Burnham has been reborn as someone the left should work with.

Everyone on the left inside and outside Labour has enormous respect for Diane. She was the first black women MP in 1987 and she has paid in person for that with vitriolic racist and sexist abuse to this day. She easily holds the record for the MP who receives the most personal attacks in print and on social media.

She has always worked in a non-sectarian way with the left inside and outside the Labour party. She has stood on countless platforms campaigning against racism, for women’s rights, defending trade unionists and most recently she has been in the lead in standing up for the Palestinians. On Brexit she was in favour of a critical remain position, she understood the racist project behind the ending of free movement and all the anti-European rhetoric. As a member of her local constituency party, I see the great love and affection towards her not just from Labour members but from local people way beyond that.

However since her position on Burnham may reflect one more widely held on the Labour left, I want to respectfully disagree with her on this question.

On one level, her article reads like someone reporting the obvious facts about Burnham’s re-burnished reputation and leadership ambitions. But the lack of any criticism, approvingly noting his transformation into a ‘neutral figure’ for the left and acknowledging that the left has no credible

candidate implies an endorsement of sorts.

Let us hope that the way the article is framed allows her some wriggle room to reject an eventual endorsement. But there will certainly be people on the Labour left who will argue for a positive engagement with Burnham were he to stand which makes the debate more significant.

What is behind this turn?

The Corbyn left is today much weaker than before the last General Election. Over 100,000 members have left the party – mostly younger left wingers.

It is true that the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs (SCG) do not have many obviously credible candidates. Corbyn's generation, which includes Diane and John McDonnell are too identified by the defeat of the Corbyn project and are anyway well into pensionable age. On the other hand many of the younger MPs are in parliament for the first time. In such demoralising circumstances there is always a temptation to grab onto any possible opening. Such a tactical move is even more attractive if it further weakens a Starmer leadership team that has been bureaucratically attacking you and trashing your legacy for more than a year.

Everyone agrees that Starmer has been seriously wounded by the recent election results. If those results were to be repeated Labour would again lose the General Election – the better results in Wales, in most mayoral elections and in some unexpected southern seats, do not alter that cold fact.

It seems some of the SCG see a defeat in the Batley and Spen by-election opening up the possibility of reforming a coalition between themselves, previous Corbyn supporters who went over to Starmer for political and/or career reasons and the soft left. Starmer himself had successfully gathered that coalition together to win the leadership on the basis of unifying the party, continuing a radical policy platform and being electable.

Abbott perhaps sees a possibility of reforming that grouping but with a tweak to the left through blocking with Burnham.

Such a manoeuvre, to a degree, derives from the historic optimism of parts of the traditional Labour left. Essentially they see a sleeping socialist movement that is continually held back by a right wing leadership aided by the mass media. If the left can win at conference or elect slightly more left wing people then the giant will awake and carry us forward to socialism.

Corbynism then can once again win back those less ideological, Labour people who backed the Corbyn surge because it looked like a winner for a while but jumped ship as soon as it was a goner. Ideas and policies can trump the brutal realities of the political relationship of forces inside labour. The apparatus, the Parliamentary Labour Party and the army of councillors will see the light of our good ideas. Their material embeddedness and personal benefits in managing capitalist reality day to day is underestimated.

What is the problem with Burnham?

According to Abbott, Burnham has changed.

But the facts are he:

- is a Blairite who voted for the Iraq war,
- did not vote against welfare cuts,
- failed to get union or left endorsement for the 2015 leadership because of his new labour criticisms of the unions.
- stated that if he had become leader he would have done better than Corbyn,
- has not criticised the witch hunt against the left or the removal of the whip from Corbyn.

She even identified something positive about him building a 'northernness brand' during the 2010 leadership campaign. But this 'King of the North' stuff can anyway cover a multitude of sins. What does being northern actually mean politically?

The positive things he has done since then are outlined:

- dealing more dynamically with the Manchester homelessness problem
- standing up to Johnson on his management of the pandemic
- reforming the bus system in Manchester
- not resigning from the Corbyn shadow cabinet in 2016 after the Brexit vote,

But Burnham left the Corbyn ship a year later to take up what has become his own power base – the Manchester mayoralty. So has he really changed?

This looks like the same hope that many ex-Corbyn supporters saw in Starmer's famous ten pledges during the last leadership campaign. Burnham himself knows he probably cannot win the leadership of the Labour party on an openly Blairite platform so it suits him to encourage people to think he has moved towards the left. This is what makes the article Diane has written so worrying.

Metro Mayors have limited powers and to a degree are shielded from the contradictions that the Labour leaders of big councils face when they have to manage budgets which are continually cut by central government. One reason some working people have switched to the Tories in the 'red wall' areas is that they have nearly always lived under Labour councils and they blame them as much as anybody else for the degradation of their areas. Manchester is not like Hartlepool. It has also benefited from regeneration money for decades – Mancunians still thank the IRA for bombing out the town centre and releasing the rebuilding money..

Alliance and illusions inside Labour

Is it wrong for the Labour left to reach out and try and win back some of the people who supported Starmer? No. Is it wrong to build alliances with such forces, including Burnham, around some key policies or campaigns. No, not at all.

Some of the ten pledges like the Green New Deal can be a focus for a new coalition to the left of Starmer inside Labour. And indeed if it came down to a contest where the choice was say Burnham or Yvette Cooper then you might consider a tactical, no illusions vote for Burnham on the basis it

may be easier to fight for a socialist alternative within Labour. But such a tactical decision would not imply any endorsement, campaigning or support for Burnham.

But that is different from putting your trust in somebody like Burnham as the next leader of Labour. The leadership of the party is much more decisive than any policies passed at conference. Moderate leaders of Labour have dumped radical conference policies when it comes to election manifestos since time began.

Corbyn was attacked and vilified so much by the PLP, the media, the establishment and the party apparatus not because he had a few left wing policies but because he had some control of a party that could form a government that might implement a few of them. At the moment it is sowing illusions when people like John McDonnell call on Starmer to respect the broad church of Labour and put some left people in the shadow cabinet.

Burnham will not repudiate Diane's support but he is not going to present himself as the man of the left or in any way beholden to the Labour left. He will quietly cultivate their support in any leadership campaign but will place himself as the person who can unify the party and win elections. Like Starmer he might verbally support a few of the policies supported by the left but there is no guarantee that he will not water them down.

Probably he will make a big deal of the localist Preston or Salford models. Burnham's current strength is also the continued relative weakness of the Blairite wing of the party. Although Starmer is working with Mandelson he has not brought ex-Blairite ministers back into the shadow cabinet.

What should the Labour left be doing?

One obvious thing to do is to continue what Diane Abbott herself is doing right now – being the alternative labour leadership inside the growing Palestine solidarity movement. The same goes for the anti-racist campaigns, ecological work and support for industrial struggles. This also means working with left currents which are outside the Labour Party. No fighting socialist alternative will be built here without a coming together of those forces both inside and outside Labour.

Ignoring either as a political space for the left is a mistake. Building alternative political bases inside labour like [Momentum](#), the World Transformed or Jeremy's [Peace and Justice Project](#) or John McDonnell's [Claim the Future](#) group are also useful.

Building an alternative political leadership and culture involves recognising the limits of any strategy that thinks you can capture the Labour party for socialism without a decisive political rupture in every sense. The PLP will not be won en bloc for an alternative that actually challenges capitalism in any way. Nor will most councillors or the apparatus.

This does not mean the left has to be sectarian towards any of these forces. We work in campaigns with anyone but it means we have a coolheaded understanding of how politics work. The failure of the Corbyn project has lessons for us all.

It would be a mistake for the SCG and the left to rule out running a candidate. True there are no obviously credible candidates but a left challenge contributes to building up a base and developing a future left leader. A leadership campaign would allow the left to argue for its alternative strategy in all the hustings. Just backing Burnham does not.

At the same time, a fighting left has to embrace constitutional change, recognising the right of

nations currently inside the United Kingdom to decide on their own futures. It also involves embracing the most progressive democratic arrangements possible, this includes support for proportional representation which has the potential of unlocking the sterile two party system. Already several hundred local parties have passed motions supporting PR and Burnham himself has too. Burnham will make English devolution an issue, the left needs to develop the best democratic response.

We can only hope that Diane Abbott and others in the SCG and the Labour Left do not carry through with the implications of her article and pull back from any political endorsement of Andy Burnham.

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P.S.

- Anti*capitalistresistance. 22 May 2021:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/why-the-left-should-not-run-with-burnham/>
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