Funding the Future

What to think now of Burnham?

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There is talk again that Andy Burnham might return to Westminster. A byelection in Manchester opens the possibility, and if he does, there will be plenty of cynical commentary.

Some will say he is simply pursuing ambition, which would undoubtedly be true.

Others will say that, after years as Mayor of Greater Manchester, he has seen a path back into national politics and is taking it before the moment passes.

I am not especially interested in any of that. Politics is about power; if you want to change anything, you have to engage with it. Burnham is. So the more important question is this: would Burnham's return to Westminster be good for the country? And, uncomfortable as it may be for many in the Labour right to hear, I think the answer is yes. And I say that despite the fact that I have never been his greatest fan, and still think he is the bearer of many of the faults that have deservedly left Labout in its current dire state.

For all that, Burnham is one of the very few senior Labour figures who still seems to understand that Britain is not just a collection of individuals and markets, but a network of places, communities, and systems. Housing, transport, health, social care, local government and the connections between them are, for him, not add-ons to the economy but the economy itself as most people actually experience it, and this matters.

Westminster politics and Labour apparatchiks have spent far too long behaving as if the country can be run through a handful of fiscal ratios and a weekly focus group in a marginal seat. That, though, is not governing. It treats the country as if it is purely a financial operation and politics as just a game of marketing. The result is exactly what you would expect: collapsing public services, decaying infrastructure, regional resentment, and a growing belief that politics cannot change anything.

Burnham, by contrast, now represents a tradition of Labour politics that is municipal

and practical. He understands that people measure the economy not through GDP but through whether they can get to work, whether they can afford housing, whether their parents can get care, and whether their lives feel stable rather than permanently exposed to risk. That alone would make his voice valuable at Westminster, where far too many MPs have never run anything and still talk as if they are permanently auditioning for a ministerial job, even when they have one.

The other reason he matters is that Burnham is one of the few people in Labour with enough stature to say openly what is otherwise whispered: that the modern British state is dangerously over-centralised, and the Treasury has become a veto machine rather than a tool of democratic government. This matters because Labour's current leadership appears to believe that politics begins and ends with what they think to be credibility, which they believe is something granted by the bond markets, the right-wing press and the mythology of household-budget economics.

Burnham does not appear to share that worldview. He might have done in 2015, when he stood for party leader when Corbyn won. But years in Manchester seem to have changed him. His politics is now rooted in the real economy, in the systems people depend upon and in the belief that public investment, public planning, and public control of natural monopolies are not moral failings but the foundation of national resilience. That is realism. The UK has been run for rentiers for forty years, and anyone who does not see that is not serious about reform.

As a consequence, the conclusion is clear: Burnham's exile to Manchester as its mayor is what has made him the politician he is now. Being responsible for a city provides a form of education that Parliament rarely provides. It forces you to deal with real constraints, real failures, real institutions and real lives. That is why Burnham now sounds different. He has had to govern in a way that being a minister did not.

But there is more to Burnham than this. If Burnham were to return to Westminster and make proportional representation and serious parliamentary reform central to his project, he could change the entire political scene. PR is not a technical fix. It is a shift in power. It would end the manufactured majorities that have allowed minority governments to impose radical ideology without genuine consent. It would make politics more plural and more honest, and it would make it harder for the far right to build its appeal on resentment generated by unaccountable rule, and Burnham appears committed to this. To Labour MPs, most of whom look as if they might lose their jobs, this might be his greatest appeal. If Burnham embraced reform, he would not be returning as just another Labour MP. He would be returning as a potential architect of a different Britain.

The trouble is that I cannot ignore the other possibility, which is that Burnham's return might change nothing, because the Labour Party itself may now be beyond repair. Labour has become increasingly centralised, increasingly managerial, and increasingly hostile to internal challenge. In the process, it has abandoned pluralism, as will become

very obvious in the weeks to come. Too often, it now behaves like a political machine whose main goal is to prevent anyone inside it from saying anything that might upset the leadership, or the financial commentariat to whom they appear to owe their allegiance.

This formulation of Labour has been a recipe for disappointment. If Burnham returns to Westminster, he may find that his instincts for devolution, public control of key systems, renewal through investment and parliamentary reform might collide with a leadership that sees politics as a performance of caution. The danger is that he becomes either marginalised or absorbed, unless, that is, he becomes the face of the coup to overturn Starmer, which is why his chances of a return are so slim, given the party machine will now do all they can to prevent it.

If Labour wanted to take a risk, it would welcome him back. That would at least give a voice to a different Labour tradition from that Starmer follows. It is one rooted in public service, in place, in solidarity, and in the knowledge that the economy is not a machine but is a social system. But, if it lets him back, Starmer and his cohort will be on the back benches. That is why I see the return as unlikely. However, in that case, Labour is heading to oblivion. Those in the party not wedded to Starmer might need to show some courage. I remain, at least as yet, no great believer in Burnha, but he might be the best hope Labour has.