

Burnham's excuses for inaction

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We learned a lot about Andy Burnham this week.

We learned that he does gesture politics. £2 bus fares. Very small tax cuts, and £20 a week off pubs' business rates.

At the same time, we learned that he does not get the bigger picture. The changes to VAT were temporary, and only affected electricity. The cuts to bus fares did not necessarily help regular commuters. The changes to business rates ignored cafés, restaurants and other places essential to community life. He revealed a bias towards alcohol.

Behind all that there was something more sinister. He, and his chancellor, committed themselves to upholding the so-called fiscal rules, which are the voluntary restraints that governments place on themselves to limit spending and guarantee austerity.

Beyond the gestures, then, Andy Burnham had nothing to say. There were no changes to social security. The problems with Carer's Allowance will continue. The bedroom tax is still there. The penal regime within Universal Credit appears set to be maintained.

He reappointed Pat McFadden as Work and Pensions Secretary, and he appears to have a pathological dislike of those making benefit claims, especially for disability, in which it appears he does not believe.

He reappointed Shabana Mahmood as Home Secretary as well. Her racist approaches to migration will continue.

Reappointing Lisa Nandy means that Labour's attack on a free media in the UK will also be maintained.

It appears Burnham is going to allow further exploitation of the North Sea for oil and gas, abandoning any green credentials that he might have.

He is going to let Donald Trump use US air force bases in the UK for "defensive"

measures against Iran, when there are no defensive measures against Iran; there are only offensive ones.

We now know that his commitment to devolution does not extend to allowing further independence referendums. He is in denial of democracy and freedom of choice.

We have heard nothing about electoral reform.

There has been no hint that the government might reduce its borrowing costs by taking control of the Bank of England, and cutting the interest paid on central bank reserve accounts, because doing either would remove the excuse for austerity.

And as for the economic consequences of Trump's war, we got no indication that he is even aware that there might be consequences, let alone that they need planning for.

Gestures and £2 bus fares, with significant terms and conditions applying, might work to make you a popular mayor, but such things are desperately microeconomic. The problem is, Andy Burnham is now in charge of the macroeconomy. There is very little sign that he is aware of this as yet, understands anything about it, or intends to make any changes.

As a mayor, Burnham got used to living within the constraints he was given. It seems as though he plans to run his premiership on the same basis. What he has not appreciated is that, as Prime Minister, he can change the constraints. Either he has not yet appreciated that as yet, or he does not wish to make those changes. That, of course, may be the deeper truth. But the only thing that I suspect is left to discover about Burnham is which of those two excuses for inaction he is going to opt for.