

Burnham's problem? He's a small thinker

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Andy Burnham has now been Prime Minister for a week. That is long enough to begin judging not just what he has done, but how he thinks.

So far, what we have seen is a series of relatively small policy announcements on bus fares, temporary energy bill reductions and business rates for pubs. Those may all be worthwhile gestures in themselves, but they raise a much bigger question. Is this really the agenda of someone who wants to reshape Britain?

In this video, I argue that the role of a Prime Minister is fundamentally different from that of a mayor. Mayors operate within rules set by others. Prime Ministers can change those rules. They can change fiscal policy, tax policy, the role of the Bank of England and the priorities of government itself.

If those opportunities are ignored, government risks becoming little more than a manager of inherited constraints instead of an agent for national transformation.

And that matters. Labour needs a coherent economic strategy for dealing with the serious challenges that may lie ahead, from geopolitical shocks to financial instability and energy insecurity.

The point I make is not just about Andy Burnham. There's a bigger issue about the kind of leadership Britain now needs and whether any of our mainstream political parties are prepared to provide it.

Do you think Britain has a government with a genuine long-term plan, or are we seeing politics reduced to a series of short-term gestures?

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The Debate Ammunition for this video is available here.

This is the transcript:

Andy Burnham has been Prime Minister for a week. Long enough for us to get some idea about the man. The man that we've been offered, the man who's been chosen by the Labour Party to be our Prime Minister, is revealing significant weaknesses. What's the weakness? He's a small thinker. That's his weakness.

This is a man who's playing with small gestures. a small cut to bus fares. A small cut to the cost of electricity for a very limited period of time. A small reduction in the business rates of pubs. But he's not a big thinker.

He's the sort of man who can become a very successful mayor and who can't go any further.

Mayors work within constraints. That's the whole purpose of their role. They govern a small area within the rules that are given to them.

A Prime Minister doesn't work like that. A Prime Minister sets the rules. A Prime Minister doesn't have to have constraints except those which really are imposed by the economy as a whole, because everything is within their legislative remit, if they want.

They can change the rules of the Bank of England.

They can change the fiscal rules.

They can change tax.

They can change spending.

They can change the nature of government departments. They can change a great deal, and Andy Burnham is looking at the small stuff.

What we also know is he's going to continue with the big stuff that was set by Keir

Starmer.

Shabana Mahmood stays as Home Secretary, so her racist policies on migration will remain, and racist they are. Let's not bother to discuss that.

Pat McFadden stays at the Department of Work and Pensions, so his attacks on benefits will continue. This is a man who hates the social security system and has got it in for people with disabilities, and he's still in charge of what they get.

We have Andy Burnham saying that Donald Trump can use US Air Force bases in the UK for defensive missions against Iran, but there are no defensive missions against Iran. There are only offensive ones.

And worst of all, his Chancellor with Andy Burnham's explicit backing in Cabinet, has said we are going to stick to the fiscal rules. So, the constraints chosen by government to impose on itself, which always result in austerity, under-investment, and a collapsing range of government services, are going to continue.

Andy Burnham is willing to tweak at the edges, but he's not willing to change the big things. Why then, did he want to be Prime Minister? You only want to be Prime Minister and to put up with the absolutely ghastly lifestyle that goes with it, and all the pressure and all the stress and all the encumbrances of office, because you want to change things.

Changing the bus fare is not a big deal. That's what mayors do.

Changing the rate of VAT on electricity, and not on gas, and not on domestic heating fuel for six months, is not big stuff.

Changing the rules on pubs with regard to business rates, but ignoring cafes and restaurants and other such institutions where there are still burdens being paid by those organisations and businesses, is not changing the big stuff.

In fact, all of those things represent small stuff precisely because the change in the bus fare didn't change the rules which affect commuters.

The change in VAT on electricity did not affect gas and heating oil.

And the change in the business rates on pubs did not affect other places where people meet and which are just as important. He revealed a bias to alcohol, but in practice, most people don't drink in pubs.

The problem is, Andy Burnham can't think outside the box. We now know that. He buys the box, he accepts the box, he accepts the fiscal rules, he accepts what the Treasury tells him. He accepts the household analogy. He accepts that government can only do what the City will let him do, and that is what worries me about this man.

He's literally perpetuating the neoliberal myth and revealing that he has not got the intellectual capacity to even understand the basis on which that myth is built or to do anything about it.

Will Andy Burnham succeed as a result? No, he won't. Andy Burnham will fail.

And we know that Andy Burnham has a crisis coming his way. We aren't quite sure what that crisis is yet, but we know there's a range of them, and one of them will hit.

It could be war in the Gulf and the resulting increase in oil prices, or the consequent shortage of raw material supplies. It could be the gas price arising from the Gulf again. It could be the consequence of the AI bubble bursting, knocking over into a fall in stock market values, knocking over into a banking crisis. It could be something else. But the fact is all of those crises are waiting. In some way or other, one of them is going to hit, and our problem is we have Andy Burnham in office.

I think he was probably a very good mayor of Manchester, even though his bus revolution was no such thing. The buses remained in private hands after all. But he's not a man for the big picture. He's not a man to deal with a national crisis. He's not a man to manage the national economy. He's not a man with a plan, and that is the biggest problem of all.

Like Keir Starmer before him, he's arrived in office and very obviously doesn't know what to do. Keir Starmer did gesture politics when he arrived. He scrapped the winter fuel allowance. That was a stupid move. Andy Burnham has done better. He has made positive rather than negative gestures, but they remain gestures. There is no plan. If there was, he'd be talking about it. If there was, he'd be telling us what is coming. But he isn't, and that tells us quite clearly he doesn't know.

Not knowing is a crime when you're Prime Minister. You're a Prime Minister because you do know. That's what the point of the job is. You are the person who has the answers. You are not the person who has the questions. You are not the person who sits there pondering about what might happen and what advice you're going to get. You are the person who knows. But Andy Burnham isn't.

That's why I'm quite sure he's going to fail as Prime Minister. Labour will fail in this administration. And we face a political crisis in 2029 where at least five parties will all be challenging for government, and with the way that Reform is going, it is likely that almost none of them will reach a 20% voter share because Nigel Farage's days are over as well.

Looking like that, we are absolutely in a political mess in this country. We don't have people who can think. We don't have parties that are coherent. We don't have policies that talk about how people can be permitted to achieve their potential within our society, which is what they want to do. We don't have a commitment to care. We don't

have a commitment to flourishing. We don't have an economics of hope. All we have are constraints. Voluntary constraints accepted by most of our mainstream political parties in a way designed to limit our possibilities and to deny us the choices that we really need, about how we can live well.

Living well doesn't mean over-consuming.

Living well does not mean everybody being rich.

Living well means living without stress.

That is possible even within the constraints that we as an economy face and within the constraints that this planet imposes upon us. But nobody is talking about that, least of all, Andy Burnham.

A £2 bus fare will not remove anyone's stress.

£45 off an electricity bill is not going to change any household budget.

These things are petty. I want a big thinker. I'm not getting it. Where are they? That's what we need. Let's keep talking on this channel about what we can create because, frankly, no one else is, and that's the biggest problem of all.

I wish there was somebody else who was talking about alternative political narratives.

I wish there was somebody else who was talking about how we can do tax better, but I'm not hearing that either. Saying, "Let's tax wealth," is not a solution because, as Gabriel Zucman admits, a wealth tax can only raise £10 billion when we need more than £1 trillion a year. That's more than a hundred times what a wealth tax can raise. A wealth tax is another example of small-scale thinking.

We need big thinking. We need it now, and that's what we are lacking. I'm trying to create it. I hope you are thinking about it. I hope other politicians are. That's what I think. What do you think? There's a poll down below. Let us have your comments. Please share this video, and we'll see you again soon.

Poll

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