Interview: Andy Burnham

Morgan Jones and Frances Foley

Andy Burnham has been mayor of Greater Manchester since 2017. Prior to this, he was the Labour MP for Leigh between 2001 and 2017 and served in various positions in Gordon Brown's cabinet. In February 2025 he spoke to Morgan Jones and Frances Foley about devolution, housing, the need for ideological confidence, and why he thinks Westminster should abolish the whip system.

Morgan Jones (MJ): Obviously, *Renewal* is a journal of social democracy, and so we're interested in how people define themselves politically. I'd be interested if you would call yourself a socialist or a social democrat – what would be your preferred term, and what does it mean to you?

Andy Burnham (AB): I'm happy to call myself a socialist, also social democrat wouldn't cause any anxiety either. Sounds like I'm sitting on the fence already, doesn't it? But no, I think this is an era not to shy away from what we are, but to lean into it more, and certainly not to pander in the opposite direction. I think we're living in a time where, if we look towards the next election, even less than one year into this parliament, to me, it's just going to be an election like no other – between two world views, one represented by the new right, if I can call them that, the other by a more progressive view of the world. And we need to get ready for that now, to be proud of who we are, what we believe in, and fight it in that way, I think, maybe not in the way that parties of the left have operated in times gone by.

MJ: Obviously we are, as you say, not even a year into this parliament. But what do you think are the best socialist policies being pursued by the Government currently that do lean in to what we are?

AB: Renationalisation of the railways is the obvious one. It's long overdue, congratulations to them for having the courage to do it. It kind of mirrors, in some ways, what we're doing in a microcosm, with buses in Greater Manchester. It speaks to something about the essentials of life being run primarily for the public interest, not for the private interests. And I think we've had a society, since the 80s, where the opposite has been the case. And if you look at the state of the water industry, and what's happening with energy bills today as we're meeting, I don't think it is anything that's out of kilter with the public. The public are ahead of politicians on this one... they're not discretionary purchases, are they? They are things people have to have. And we've already seen in Greater Manchester how, if you have those things under firmer public control, the benefits multiply, from something as simple as buses being under public control.

And here I go back where I began with my kind of theme about two world views. The people we will be opposing are still arch-Thatcherites. They are deregulators, they are privatisers. And we've got to really lean into [the argument for selective public ownership], really clearly taking inspiration from the decision on railways, but I think going further... it's not nationalise everything, or deregulate everything. It's about saying that the things that are utterly essential for people to have a good life, the things that everybody depends on, they need to be run much more firmly in the public interest. And I think we do take inspiration from that early decision on rail, but there are other things that could follow now.

Frances Foley (FF): I'm glad you started to talk about those two world views as well, because my question is about left and centre parties around the world, which are struggling to be propositional right now, whether or not they're in power. It sometimes feels like we're a bit on the defensive and reacting rather than leading the conversation, and sometimes even lacking confidence. Why do you think that is? Where do you think that comes from?

AB: I don't know if I'm honest. Where does it come from? I think it's built up over a long time. And maybe, you know, if you go back to the 1990s and the 2000s there was a reluctance to call out privatisation in the way that I have, and there's a sense of living in that sort of middle space, because you're trying to lean into middle England. I think the public got ahead of us.

They could see that the housing crisis was disastrous, in terms of the grip it had on the country. And I kind of feel we've been slow to – we've been in this cautious position. And actually life had moved beyond us. And I think life is moving faster than politicians in many ways these days, or certainly faster than the

traditional parties have moved. I don't want to take any lessons from what's going on the US. But I suppose if you have to take one, it's the need to move faster, be clearer, and not get overly bogged down in the nuance of politics.

If I remember my time in the Labour government of the late 90s, 2000s, you know, it was a world of nuance. And, you know, maybe rightly so because life is complicated, isn't it, and you have to be careful, and make balanced decisions. It felt to me like social media sort of just ended all of that. People require quicker decision making, clearer decision making, because politics stopped connecting somewhere along the line, didn't it? And I think the left perhaps was too much in the world of nuance and caution, and now needs to be more confident in what it does believe is right and wrong. And I think with that hindsight on the 80s, now you can really say clearly, no, no, that was not the right direction that was taken back then, and it felt like the left struggled with that in in sort of more when it was closer to those times. But now I think should call it out very clearly.

FF: Obviously there's a lot that's already happening, in terms of that kind of courage and confidence, in Greater Manchester, but maybe also at the national level. What's one experimental policy idea that you think is worth risking some political capital on right now? Just a good bet.

AB: Well, I wouldn't so much call it experimental as revolutionary in the context of British public policy. And it would be to kind of mirror what we have done in Greater Manchester, but make it national, and that is to declare ourselves a housing first country, like Finland did a number of years ago.

If I look at the multiplicity of challenges facing the country in all of the public services and in the sustainability of public spending, the position of councils, benefit system, and the NHS in terms of what it's dealing with, the single best investment you could make to deal with that would be to give everybody a decent home – and build hundreds of thousands of council homes and social homes. That would be the best use of public money that we could possibly make right now. And the revolutionary bit is obviously... housing has been treated as this is a thing that's in the laws of supply and demand and the market... in some ways the biggest mistake that was made in the 1980s [was to accept that housing should be left to market forces], because the grip of the housing crisis is deadly. It's deadly for individuals in terms of the costs they have to pay on their housing. It's deadly for broader public spending. The cost of chasing rents in the private rented sector through the benefit system, but then the failure to do that, because you can't really do that, and the freezing of local housing allowance, has put another bill onto councils. And [the homelessness charity] Crisis are saying today if we don't do anything, the bill that councils will have to meet for temporary accommodation is going to go over a billion pounds in the next few years. If this carries on it will break local government.

So for me, freeing Britain from the grip of the housing crisis, having thought about everything that we're facing, is actually the thing that would deliver most returns. I don't know what the level of pressure inadequate housing is putting on the health service, but it's pretty significant, both from damage to people's physical health and their mental health as well, because so many people are living in a substandard housing situation. But it also affects other public services as well. So I feel that could be a sort of preeminent mission for the government, and I would actually create a subset target of the 1.5 million. I would say at least half a million social homes and council homes, are what we should do. If we went at that with complete unity of purpose, involving your mayors, ministers, everybody, I think that would be seen by the public as the right thing to do. And it's something that only the left would lead, and actually would then deliver things that people on the right of politics may see as sensible things to do, in terms of the sustainability of public spending in a longer term. I think it's critically linked to that. So hope that's an answer. I wouldn't put it in the category of experimental, because I'm not sure we're blessed with lots of time for experiments. I think we need to get on with putting our cards on the table and making some big choices about the things that need to be prioritised. And for me, it's Housing First.

MJ: So talking a bit about the idea of unity of purpose that you mentioned there. Do you see the Labour government offering an kind of ideologically coherent programme at the moment?

AB: Yes, I think it is. It is definitely taking shape in that way. It's hard coming into government. I remember 1997, and I think you have to be realistic about it. I remember the government back then. With Labour out of government for so long, it is hard to come in and cohere an approach within the first year. I remember the '97 government having real bumps on the road in that first year, but I can see it coming together.

And I think perhaps the most clear impulse that's been on show so far, is the impulse to devolve more power to regions. I think that is coherent, and it's coming through in a coherent way. And I would say that having kind of laid that ground, I think they should really deepen and go with that, and go with it in a quite accelerated way. Because, from our point of view, Greater Manchester is going to a new funding arrangement with Whitehall in April. We are having an integrated settlement, with a block of funding, which will mirror more what Wales and Scotland and Northern Ireland have. The argument I'll be putting to the government at the Spending Review is, the more that you put into that integrated settlement, the more returns you will get for public investment, because you can break down the silos and join the dots in terms of making it coherent within a place.

To me, all roads these days lead back to devolution, but just the sense of more agency at a regional, local level is actually an antidote to the alienation that people feel with the political system. I think where devolution has been working best, people do feel a connection to it and can see some positive changes coming through. So I would say that is a coherent move that the government has made. And I would say, really go with it and follow the logic of it, because actually it links back to the first point I was making, that if you task the combined authorities of England to build those half a million social homes it will get done. I'm confident that my Combined Authority, the one that I lead, will absolutely deliver, if you give us a really clear remit on that at the spending review, we have proven that we can deliver and deliver quickly. I'm sure other combined authorities can do the same. I think there are threads here that the government has sort of put out there that are becoming intertwined into quite a coherent program. But I would say, accelerate it and deepen it.

MJ: I saw you speak at the end of last year at the Co-operative Party conference. I was interested to hear you saying that you think the last Labour government wasn't interested enough in what the Co-operative Party was offering. Do you think the Labour movement is more interested now? And if so, how is that manifest in these ideas of kind of shared ownership, community ownership, and community power?

AB: I think so. I think the generation that are now ministers do have a closer connection with the co-operative movement, because I think that people who were children of the 80s and 90s saw co-operative ideas as kind of t building a bridge back to a world that made more sense to them. Jim McMahon is a great, great champion, but there's lots of others. The question with it is always how do you make it deeds, not words? There's a lot of nice words spoken about the co-operative movement. But how do you actually, you know, start to turn it into policies that make a practical difference.

I think Ed Miliband has got a huge opportunity with the reform of energy. I think that is massive in terms of its potential for the co-operative movement. I think what I was just saying about housing is another area. But to start maybe thinking more practically, and short term: I mentioned at that Co-operative Party event something that I've done with the credit unions in Greater Manchester, which was a scheme to allow people to buy annual Bee Network bus passes through credit unions and do so via weekly or monthly payments...I think you could take that principle to a lot of other things as well. And the co-operative movement could show in a meaningful way how it can help people with the crisis. I'm kind of optimistic about where these kinds of ideas might go in this parliament, but it needs to be focused on tangible things, I would say, as opposed to good sentiments and good words, but lack of delivery.

FF: What's one thing you think people misunderstand about the role of mayor? And then maybe, separate to that, what's one thing you think they misunderstand about you?

AB: Hard questions – and good questions. Rightly so. I think the thing about the role of mayor is, what I was saying, people think you can just order everybody about, you can just tell everybody what to do. They think you've got more power than you actually have. You do have a lot of power, but the power is in convening. And I think everyone needs to understand that. I think if you understand that, then you understand the power of the role you have. It's not an autocratic type position, it's very much a convening type position.

The public often will just complain to me about everything, and think I'm responsible, but that's okay. Even though that's sometimes a misunderstanding of the role, I don't mind, because what it has done is bring an accountability that was lacking before in relation to all public services. And actually, even if somebody complains to me about something for which I'm not responsible, I can still do something to hold that entity to account. So the train companies will be the best example where we've done that as mayors over the last few years.

What do people misunderstand about me?

FF: It's just an invitation to set a record straight, if there are things that you find annoying.

AB: Oh God, I find loads of things annoying. I'm not gonna blame anybody, you know, because, you go on a political journey and it has different phases. I always kind of got annoyed by the accusation of being a flip-flopper. I'm not that. I generally have pretty fixed feelings and instincts about things... I never much enjoyed that characterisation, even if I brought it on myself on occasions which I possibly did. I actually do take fairly long-term approaches on things and pretty much stick with them.

I think the thing that I guess I found hard, to try and answer your question as directly as I can, Frances, is what Westminster does to you. Westminster can make you appear in ways that you're not, and it does that to good people... You end up having to fit within its quirky ways, the line to take, and the whip and that. And I look back on all of that and find that it really frustrating. I personally believe social media changed politics, and politics hasn't changed enough to reflect that. You know, where people want instant opinions from elected representatives. They want authentic opinions. But how do people give that within the whip system and the way that politics is? So inevitably you get stuck on the dilemma of that, and you say something you didn't quite mean, or you're struggling with how to word it, and then you say it, and then someone will call you a

flip flopper. Because you get stuck in these things, oh, there's a vote coming, and you're going to have a position.

And you know, the whole welfare reform thing that happened in 2015 was really frustrating, because for me, I moved the Labour Party. I moved the Labour front bench to a position of opposition to that welfare reform bill in the form of a reasoned amendment – this House declines to give the bill a second reading. And I thought I'd moved mountains to get them from where they were going to be, which was either supporting it to start off with, then it was to abstain, and then I got them to reasoned amendment. I do look back with a bit of frustration at that. I understand why people didn't see that as opposition, or as not as strong opposition, as outright walking through the no lobby. But you know, the ways of Westminster, I think, are frustrating. They do end up allowing people to be misrepresented and characterised in certain ways. I don't know if that answers your question.

FF: That's exactly why I asked the question, because the system sets people up to be portrayed in certain ways, and also people don't quite understand the confines of it. And also, what you say about compromise and trying to find ways through is politics.

AB: I'm going to come back to something that is not popular in Westminster audiences, but I will say it again, I would still advocate for the removal of the whip system. I think we need a more mature politics where people can go out and say what they feel, and it doesn't mean the end of the world. Because actually, nineteen times out of twenty, I think most MPs would vote with the party that they're affiliated to. But there may just be that one time in twenty where the party needs to see what the real level of opinion is. And it actually would have made the governments I was in better if we'd have had that approach. And I think it would enhance the status of Members of Parliament, because when they speak, people would think, Okay, well, this is this person's opinion. You'd always do it with a loyalty. Most people wouldn't do it just to cause problems. You would do it with a conviction and a loyalty. And I think it would connect politics better. I think I've connected better as Mayor of Greater Manchester, because I do operate in that way now, from a place first, rather than a party first, point of view. And I definitely feel, eight years into this role now, that I am really clear that the way in which I can do politics in this role is far superior to the Westminster way. Of course, the cabinet, senior ministers would have to be bound into a form of collective responsibility. Of course, you accept that, but I think you could take a different approach beneath that, that would probably raise the esteem of politics.

FF: And you won't be as vulnerable to populists, I think.

AB: Yeah, I think so. And I just still look back at Westminster and think it hasn't really kind of taken on board how much the world changed with social media, because the flip flop thing comes from that as well. You're under pressure to make a statement on something the minute an issue breaks. And it's that impulse sometimes, the need to get out there with something. And then you think, Oh, God, if I'd have waited a day, I might have put it a bit more like this. And it's unfair, I think the impulse of the whip system on the one hand and then social media on the other, and then MPs having to navigate that and somehow make it all hold together. It's kind of unsustainable, I would say, at times.

MJ: I was going to ask you about conference last year, obviously there was a rule change on dual office holding, aimed at preventing people from holding two offices at once, which was widely seen to have been made with people like yourself and Dan Norris in mind. Do you think this is a good procedural direction, to separate these things out?

AB: I definitely think it's a good thing. Yeah, I do, no hesitation. If you have got a job, a senior job, you've got to be dedicated to it. There's just no way, in my view, you can be a part time mayor. It's a completely all or nothing thing and actually, if you don't appear to be giving it your all the public will rightly then say, well, hang on a minute. Why do you need another job as well? Also, in the case of a mayor, if you had another constituency, you've got a potential conflict of interest where people will say, well, are you favouring your constituency … it gives rise to complications, and I think the party's right to separate it out.

FF: We've talked a lot today about how rapid global change can feel quite dizzying for people. And I think some of what you're getting refracted back through politics is that echo back of people feeling a real sense of like a loss of control. So my question is: at this time of quite rapid, disorientating change, what kind of concrete, specific ways have you seen, or used yourself to give people a sense of control and agency? What can you give people at a time like this to make them feel that they have some power of their own lives?

AB: It is back to something as basic as transport, and that identity that comes with it. The Bee Network is a very deliberate piece of local identity. We own it. This is our system. We can shape it now based on what you need, and what our communities need. So I guess it's how do you build up from that, and build out from that? So education is something very much in my line of sight now. I feel that the education system, increasingly, and again, in the government that I was in, but since, almost became shaped in the interest of one particular group, rather than a system for everybody. I am passionate about comprehensive education, but the domination of the university route, I personally think, became a real problem, because it made people think why is this politician talking about other people's kids rather than my kids? And, there's that kind of sense of aliena-

tion, and disempowerment that comes from that, and that will be another thing now where I want us to get more local control over it. So the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate is something that I'm really passionate about, and that's an equal alternative to the university route. And again, I actually really oppose the academisation that we've seen in the sort of last part of the Labour government, but definitely in the early part of the coalition government, because that itself, I think, is education really needs to be owned.

I think people really need to feel a sense of empowerment in relation to education and shaping it and making sure that it's right for everybody. And I, again, I think that was another of so many facets of life were kind of taken when they were fragmented. They were kind of almost taken away from people a bit, weren't they? And the kind of loss of accountability that comes with that. So, you know, the education system, you know, alongside transport. Housing is definitely another, another thing that we're looking at. And the benefit system, almost by definition, speaks to people's lack of agency, doesn't it? Computer says no tick box type approach. We have a kind of a way of describing the benefits system here that, when people go to a job centre they come out feeling worse about themselves than when they went in because of this dehumanising aspect of it, and all the fear of it that people have. Again, the question of how do you create things that empower people, and, you know, make them feel like they're connected locally to things, is huge.

And then just, I guess, one last thought, I'm not really talking talked about it, but obviously my own political journey has been hugely influenced by Hillsborough. I think that's a story of lack of accountability, and a sense of places being treated as second class. And there is a big moment coming as this government presents the Hillsborough Law. I think it's coming quite imminently. There's something really profound about the accountability of public institutions, public services to people, that has absolutely, I think, been lost over the decades, and that simple thing about the duty of candour on all police and public servants that will come with the Hillsborough Law is profoundly important to me as well. I think all of these things together add up to people feeling agency, feeling control, feeling that they can get accountability in a world that has really had it stripped out over recent decades.

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