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Book Review

Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram, (2024) *Head North – A Rallying Cry for a More Equal Britain, Trapeze, UK, 272 pages, ISBN978-1-398-71974-3, Paperback, £22.00*

The rise of Andy Burnham to the premiership in the summer of 2026 is a further indication that Britain continues to live through an era of political disruption. In little more than a decade, the country has had seven Prime Ministers. The temptation is to attribute this instability to the shortcomings of individual leaders. A more convincing explanation, however, may be that Britain itself has become increasingly difficult to govern. This review explores the possibility that Burnham may prove to be a different kind of Prime Minister. His agenda, particularly in relation to the role of the state, local government, and the distribution of power across Britain, offers the prospect of significant social change. For readers of *Concept*, with an interest in public policy and democratic renewal, his ideas merit serious attention. Co-authored with Steve Rotheram, Mayor of the Liverpool City Region, *Head North* was published two years before Burnham became Prime Minister and takes the form of a series of conversations and reflections between the two politicians. While both authors make important contributions, the discussion that follows focuses principally on Burnham's political vision and the arguments he advances throughout the book.

The first half of the book is biographical, charting the experiences that shaped Andy Burnham's political outlook. He describes growing up in a working-class Liverpool family and identifies

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both the miners' strike and the campaign for justice for the Hillsborough victims as formative influences. These experiences fostered a conviction in the young Burnham that "Britain's economic and political system was often stacked against ordinary communities" (p. 21).

Burnham was the first member of his family to attend university, studying English Literature at Cambridge, where he developed a particular passion for poetry. He writes candidly about experiencing severe imposter syndrome during his years as an undergraduate, a feeling that would later return when he entered Parliament. He is also passionate about football and music, both of which feature prominently in his understanding of identity and place. Alongside the expected references to seminal Manchester bands such as The Smiths and The Stone Roses, he highlights Birmingham's UB40, whose name was derived from the unemployment benefit form familiar to many during the economic hardships of the early 1980s. These cultural references are not merely incidental. Music, like sport, has long been intertwined with questions of class, identity, and political belonging. Burnham's attendance at the funeral of former Stone Roses bassist Gary Mounfield, better known as Mani, where he paid his respects alongside figures such as Ian Brown and Liam Gallagher, reinforces the impression of a politician who remains closely connected to the working-class culture that shaped his formative years. The biographical section of *Head North* also traces Burnham's rise through the New Labour era, during which he served in the governments of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. He twice contested the Labour leadership, losing first to Ed Miliband in 2010 and later to Jeremy Corbyn in 2015. Growing increasingly frustrated with the culture and constraints of Westminster politics, Burnham decided to "head north", as the book's title suggests, becoming Mayor of Greater Manchester, a position he held for almost a decade. It is this period, and the political

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philosophy that emerged from it, that forms the most significant and compelling part of the book.

The political vision Burnham outlines in *Head North* is nuanced and resists easy categorisation within a conventional left-right framework. He presents himself as the product of contrasting Labour traditions, describing his father as embodying the values of 'Old Labour' and his mother as being more closely aligned with 'New Labour'. Burnham's mother is also a committed Christian, and he acknowledges the influence of Christian ethics on his political outlook, despite describing himself as a lapsed Catholic. Ideologically, he draws selectively from both old and new Labour traditions, frequently combining them through concepts such as 'aspirational socialism' and 'business-friendly socialism'. There is, however, one important aspect of his political philosophy that departs significantly from the assumptions associated with New Labour: his argument that four decades of neoliberalism lie at the root of Britain's social, political and economic problems. This period encompasses the governments of Tony Blair and may help to explain reports of tensions between Burnham and Blair. Burnham contends that Britain is not simply a 'deeply unequal country' but a 'deliberately unequal one' (p. 157). He characterises neoliberalism as a 'divisive ideology', defining it as 'the mantra that the market is the answer to everything', and argues that its assumptions became 'firmly planted in the mindset of Britain's political classes' (p. 225). Equally significant are the political conclusions that flow from this diagnosis. For Burnham, the British state must become more interventionist if it is to address what he sees as market-generated inequalities. This conception of the state as an active agent of social justice, and as a provider of publicly controlled goods and services, marks a clear departure not only from New Labour but also from much of the consensus that has shaped British policymaking over the past two decades.

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The word Burnham draws upon to articulate his interventionist vision is that of 'control'. This is a politically astute choice. By appropriating a word closely associated with the Brexit campaign's call to 'take back control', arguably one of the most effective political messages of modern times, Burnham repurposes the language to advocate greater public control, democratic accountability, and community influence over essential services. As Mayor of Greater Manchester, this involved greater control of the region's bus network, while his longer-term ambition extends to greater public control of water, rail, and energy. Housing provides a useful illustration of what he means by control. He argues that local authorities should become 'once again the overall guardians of housing', supported by enhanced powers over funding, planning, and investment (p. 231). Central to this vision is an expanded role for local government. He argues that 'for too long, decisions about regions like ours had been taken by people hundreds of miles away in London who didn't understand or care about the people where I lived' (p. 107). This critique is directed not only at marketisation but also at the highly centralised nature of the British state. Burnham's spirited defence of local government as a vital democratic institution is particularly striking. After a decade of austerity, during which local authorities disproportionately bore the brunt of reductions in public expenditure, Burnham's insistence on the importance of municipal government feels both timely and refreshing. He argues that 'Councils are the last line of defence for communities around the country and yet are treated as last in the queue when it comes to a funding priority' (p. 130). He even suggests that all central government officials should spend time working within local government structures in order to better understand the realities facing communities beyond Westminster (p. 130).

Head North sets out a wide-ranging programme of reforms that extends well beyond local government. Indeed, many of the policies outlined in the book have subsequently featured in

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Burnham's speeches since becoming Prime Minister. Social care is one of his foremost priorities. He advocates the creation of a National Care Service in which social care would be integrated more closely with the NHS, reflecting a broader commitment to treating care as a public good rather than a market commodity. Another key concern is the growing number of young people classified as NEETs (not in education, employment, or training), which Burnham estimates at around one million. For him, the exclusion of so many young people from education and employment constitutes a national crisis requiring urgent intervention. To address this challenge, he calls for a rebalancing of the relationship between higher and vocational education, challenging what he regards as a longstanding tendency to privilege academic routes over technical and vocational pathways. This debate is particularly relevant to community education practitioners, especially those working with young people in a policy landscape increasingly shaped by employability agendas.

Burnham also advances an ambitious programme of constitutional reform. He supports the abolition of the House of Lords and its replacement with an elected second chamber, while advocating proportional representation for Westminster elections. Such reforms would bring the electoral system at Westminster more closely into line with those operating in Scotland and many other European democracies. In addition, he calls for a fundamental reset of Britain's relationship with the European Union. In doing so, he becomes one of the few senior Labour politicians in England and Wales to argue openly that Brexit has been both a political and economic mistake.

Hitherto, this review has been positive about the vision Burnham outlines in *Head North*; however, a critical perspective is also necessary. Britain's social and economic problems are generational, structural, and deeply entrenched, and it is doubtful that they can be overcome

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through political will alone. While *Head North* is particularly effective in diagnosing many of the root causes of contemporary Britain's difficulties, Burnham is less convincing when addressing questions of implementation. Several proposals remain underdeveloped, with limited discussion of how they would be delivered or financed. In particular, the meaning of "public control" is often left ambiguous, and the extent to which this implies public ownership, nationalisation, or alternative forms of democratic governance is not fully explored.

At times, Burnham's attachment to northern identity appears somewhat romanticised. The repeated celebration of "northernness" as an inherently positive force occasionally risks obscuring the social, political, and economic complexities of the regions he seeks to champion. Similarly, the frequent references to football, while reflective of an important aspect of Burnham's personal and political identity, can become repetitive. Greater engagement with some of the other influences he references, including literature and poetry, would have provided a fuller account of the intellectual traditions that have shaped his political outlook.

More significantly, the limitations of localism and devolution receive relatively little attention. It is not always clear how devolving power will, in itself, generate the economic growth that Burnham identifies as a central policy objective. Likewise, the book says little about Scotland, despite notable parallels between Burnham's political outlook and policies associated with the SNP administrations of Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon. This omission raises important questions about how Burnham's vision would operate within a multinational state and how a Burnham government might engage with continuing debates surrounding Scottish independence.

Beyond the constitutional questions lies the wider challenge posed by international capitalism. These constraints are considerable and include the pressures placed upon national governments

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by multinational corporations, financial institutions, and international bond markets. Such forces raise important strategic questions about the extent to which national governments can pursue programmes of state intervention, redistribution, and economic transformation. Burnham's own political record also merits scrutiny. Most notably, he supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a decision he acknowledges as mistaken in the book, although the issue is dealt with only briefly. He was also a prominent figure within New Labour, a project that, according to many of its critics, moved Labour beyond traditional social democracy towards a centre-left variant of neoliberalism. His political journey has led some commentators to question whether Burnham possesses a coherent ideological core. As the oft-repeated joke has it, a Blairite, a Brownite, and a Corbynite walk into a bar, and the bartender asks, "What would you like to drink, Mr Burnham?" To give Burnham the benefit of the doubt, however, political trajectories are rarely static. One of the strengths of *Head North* is the insight it provides into his ideological development over time. Burnham emerges as a politician willing to reflect critically on both his own assumptions and the broader political traditions that shaped him. Rather than presenting a fixed ideological blueprint, the book offers a portrait of political evolution, illustrating how his views have been shaped by experience in government, opposition, and local leadership.

The significance of *Head North* may lie less in the detail of its policy prescriptions than in what it reveals about the political outlook of a figure who has successfully navigated an era characterised by uncertainty, instability, and declining trust in political institutions. Understanding the sources of Burnham's appeal therefore requires looking beyond the policies themselves to the style of politics he represents. It is to this question that the final section of this review now turns.

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The most effective politicians are often storytellers and educators who, in the words of Tony Benn, act as signposts rather than weathercocks. Burnham displays many of these qualities. In addition to being an exceptionally effective communicator, arguably one of the most accomplished political communicators of his generation, he appears to have grasped something that eluded his predecessor, Keir Starmer, namely, that the political landscape of contemporary Britain differs fundamentally from that which sustained New Labour in the 1990s. The social, economic, and political conditions that underpinned the cautious centrism of that era have largely disappeared, creating greater space for a more ambitious and interventionist political project. In an age of political disruption and declining trust in institutions, governments increasingly struggle to rely solely on managerial competence or technocratic solutions.

Indeed, it was arguably the limitations of such a technocratic approach that contributed to Starmer's political difficulties. In this respect, Burnham may be understood not as an antidote to populism but as an advocate of a distinctly social democratic form of it. His critique of distant and unresponsive Westminster elites echoes what Chantal Mouffe (2019) describes as 'left populism': a strategy that mobilises popular grievances against established centres of power in pursuit of political change. Similar themes have been employed successfully by the SNP, whose political appeal rested upon the claim that Scotland was neglected by out-of-touch political elites in Westminster. Burnham advances a comparable argument with respect to Greater Manchester and the North of England, presenting devolution and local control as mechanisms through which communities can reclaim political agency. It is a message that appears to resonate with a significant section of the electorate.

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Burnham's ideological flexibility is another notable strength of the book. He resists conventional left-right categorisations, proving as willing to speak about working-class aspiration as he is about inequality and class. Although aspects of his appeal undoubtedly rest on questions of identity, and his northern roots and Liverpudlian accent remain important political assets, he grounds his politics in a broader narrative of democratic renewal and the constructive use of state power.

Reading *Head North*, one gains the impression that Burnham believes any revival of British social democracy will require the left to reconnect with voters beyond its metropolitan base and move beyond some of the forms of hyper-liberal identity politics that have characterised sections of the contemporary left in recent years. Crucially, he appears to recognise that the capacity of the state to act as a force for good is closely tied to questions of national renewal. One reason why the populist right has often been more successful than its left-wing counterparts in recent years is that it has offered a coherent account of national sovereignty and identity at a time when many on the left were questioning the continuing relevance of the nation state (see Fraser, 2008). Burnham's political vision seeks to reclaim the language of nationhood, community and belonging, and to mobilise it in support of a broader project of social democratic renewal. For readers of *Concept*, *Head North* is a stimulating and timely book, full of fresh ideas and political insights. It is a work that I would highly recommend.

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