DECCA AITKENHEAD

Andy Burnham interview: Could I have beaten Theresa May in 2017? Yeah, possibly

The cagoule-clad Manchester mayor is now 'King of the North'. He reckons he could have been PM, he tells Decca Aitkenhead

Andy Burnham believes he could have had a shot at No 10

Decca Aitkenhead

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When I last met Andy Burnham, seven years ago, all the reasons why he would lose the Labour leadership election two years later were clear to see. He seemed, as everyone always says about the former cabinet minister, thoroughly decent. Unfortunately, he also seemed to be all the other things people used to say about him: a bit wooden, low-watt, rather stiff. It was no surprise when he lost to Jeremy Corbyn. A charisma-free zone up against a cult leader, he didn't stand a chance.

Fast-forward to 2021, and Burnham is approaching rock-star-politician status. Dubbed "the King of the North" by excitable fans, the mayor of Greater Manchester is probably the only politician in England to be having a good war in the pandemic. When Downing Street announced in October that his city would be placed under tier 3 restrictions, Burnham's refusal to acquiesce unless Manchester received more money caught the government by surprise.

Dressed in a navy cagoule and open collar, like a modern-day folk hero, he delivered a barnstorming speech, declaring: "We aren't going to be pushed around any more." For two tense weeks Burnham stood his ground. When the talks broke down, another stirring speech converted failure into moral victory. Burnham hadn't won the argument with No 10, but he had unquestionably triumphed in the propaganda battle.

"Burnhamania" has even reached the pages of Vogue, under the memorable headline: "Suddenly, inexplicably, we all fancy Andy Burnham." His voluminous eyelashes, perfect eyebrows and fondness for cagoules are in danger of getting as much attention as his politics. When we meet over Zoom, my first question is therefore obvious. The transformation since we last met makes him almost unrecognisable — what, I ask, has changed?

Burnham inspired a limited edition beer

"Me!" he laughs. "I changed. When I was in Westminster, I kind of knew that being in that world, doing the things I was doing, wasn't me, at times. I often felt: this isn't me. I was a bit of a fish out of water in all the stuff that goes on in the restaurants, all the hobnobbing." He can't have been that out of place: he served as chief secretary to the Treasury, culture secretary and health secretary. "But the problem was, Westminster makes you a fraud. The stuff that made my eyes water was NHS privatisation stuff — and there was a real push from

No 10 at the time around more private sector involvement. That was the kind of thing where I really first started to feel, oh, I'm not sure I can do this."

In his final months as culture secretary, he persuaded Gordon Brown's government to reopen the Hillsborough inquiry, which led to a 10-year campaign for justice and opened his eyes to a new kind of politics. "That was the crossroads, really. It was a decision point. Was I going to be the wooden politician in the suit? Or was I going to know what I knew — that [the Hillsborough victims] were right, and the government was wrong? I think that was a major personal break with the conventional, in-a-suit, wooden world." In 2017 he stood down from parliament and was elected Greater Manchester's first mayor.

This year he made another decision, when Covid began to engulf the country. Having been health secretary during the 2009 swine flu pandemic, he felt he had too much experience to sit on the sideline, and has been hammering the government to let him put it to use. When I interviewed Sadiq Khan in spring, the London mayor struck me as diminished by the first gruelling lockdown, but throughout this crisis Burnham seems only to have bloomed. So much so, that critics who used to call him wooden now accuse him of showboating. I ask what he makes of the charge that his emotional public statements are basically grandstanding.

He sighs. "None of it's fake. That's the first answer. The second answer is: I didn't seek the confrontation with the government. I kept trying to work with them. I kept trying to resolve it. But they were trying to lock us down without enough support. So what does a mayor of any city do in those circumstances? You just roll over and say, 'OK, fine'? Of course you don't. If we do that, devolution in this country will always be a kind of pat-on-the-head devolution from Whitehall. There has to be a point where people in these positions will say to the government, 'No! You're not doing that without us saying so.' So it's important. You know, Scotland and Wales have learnt to do that. England won't have a mature political system until parts of England learn how to do that."

I know a lot of people in London who are getting fed up with Burnham's demands for more public money. Until now he's been very smiley, but as I run through their argument, his expression tightens. Greater Manchester has been under stricter restrictions, and for much longer, than most of the country, they say, because its people

keep breaking the rules. Northerners famously love to party — that's what's got them into this mess — and Burnham has to take responsibility for his region's failure to comply with the rules that would bring its Covid numbers down. Why should the rest of the country bail him out when he can't put his own house in order?

He fixes a long stare — then starts to laugh. "What would I call that? 'Snobbish bollocks' is what I'd call that. We hear about people out and about on the town in London, and you look at the parks in the summer, and you look at Oxford Street, Regent Street at the weekend. You are not seriously telling me that there's any real difference between people anywhere?" Greater Manchester police, I point out, have issued more fines for Covid breaches than any force in England. "Our compliance rate is 75%," he retorts, "and I think that's the rate broadly everywhere." Since our meeting, London, the southeast and parts of the east of England have leap-frogged Manchester into tier 4; Manchester, at the time of writing, remained in tier 3.

His voice swells as he goes on: "People in that world down there saying, 'Oh, it's all because they can't behave themselves,' are basically denying the big point — that this country is fundamentally and deeply unequal. Do people who say that realise there's some communities where barely anybody was staying at home last spring? Because they were all in the kinds of profession where they worked all the way through.

"They were delivering parcels to people who make comments like, 'They're all out partying.' And then, of course, you have the question of some being so insecurely employed that they couldn't take any time off if they were asked to self-isolate. And then you add in the problem that they have overcrowded housing. So I just think it's such an outrageous comment, to be honest, that is totally snooty. And it just fails to understand that there are people who live almost parallel lives to the lives that they live."

Is there a danger, I suggest, that by championing the north so vociferously, he is stoking regional animosity and provoking a backlash? "Well, that is an argument for the status quo, isn't it? It's basically an argument to say, just accept there will always be a north-south divide and the north will always be second or third class when it comes to the support that's provided. That's what that is an argument for.

"And I think there are some people who don't like the fact that the north has learnt to use its voice. Genuinely, I think that is part of what

lies behind comments of the kind that you've relayed in this interview. There are lots of people who really don't like it. Because they've been used to pushing the north around for a long time. And they're not used to there being any standing of ground or answering-back."

I wonder whether he thinks he could have won the Labour leadership if he had shown his party this full-blooded Burnham. He chuckles. "I guess when I stood for the leadership in 2015, I had all these people from that world telling me, 'Oh you can't say that, you can't do that, you can't ...' And, yeah, it would have been better if I'd followed my own instincts, maybe." Could he have beaten Corbyn if he had?

"I honestly don't know. I could have, possibly, but I wouldn't say definitely." If he had, would he have fancied his chances to win the 2017 election and now be in No 10?" He laughs again, a little bashfully.

"This isn't necessarily my view, but my other half thinks that possibly I could have — I mean, it sounds grand, this — that I could have swayed Brexit. I could have potentially brought a few people back in the north, who in the end didn't vote remain. I personally wouldn't go as far as to say that I could have changed Brexit. I just think the debate would have been a bit different. And could I have beaten [Theresa] May in 2017? Yeah, possibly."

Burnham has worked in politics his entire adult life. Born in Liverpool in 1970 to a telephone engineer and a receptionist, he attended Catholic schools and studied English at Cambridge. His parliamentary career began in 1994 as a researcher for the late Labour MP Tessa Jowell; various special adviser jobs followed, and in 2001 he was elected to the then safe Labour seat of Leigh. By 2005 he was in government; by 2007 he was in the cabinet.

Burnham met wife Marie-France van Heel at Cambridge

His private life has always been low profile and irreproachable. He met his wife, a marketing executive from Holland, at Cambridge; their 20-year-old son is studying at GRO-C London, their elder daughter is a fresher and their younger daughter is still at school. I ask what the family has argued about during lockdown, and all he can come up with is some minor turf wars if he tries to work at the kitchen table.

When I ask if his children have to take extra care not to break any Covid rules for fear of being splashed all over the papers, he laughs. "Yes, but that's nothing new for them — they've been used to that for years." He's so squeaky-clean, when I bring up the recent arrest of the Liverpool mayor, Joe Anderson, on suspicion of conspiracy to commit bribery and witness intimidation, he clearly doesn't even want to talk about. "I don't know the details, Decca, I really don't," he stalls.

Come off it, I say — politics is notoriously gossipy: the rumour mill around him must be churning.

"This is Manchester!" he protests. "People don't pay attention to what's going on in Liverpool."

I'm curious to know what his wife makes of finding herself married to a sex symbol. "Er, bewildered," he grins. "She thinks she needs to bring a case against whoever wrote that [Vogue article], because she's been sold short." Has the family been teasing him about it? "Yeah. I'm not even king in my own house, never mind king of the north."

The 50-year-old took fewer than 10 days' leave last year — a short trip to Wales was the extent of his summer holiday — but he looks remarkably well. He wants me to make it very clear that, contrary to

speculation, he does not wear mascara. Nor does he dye his hair or wax or pluck his eyebrows. He swears he doesn't even use moisturiser. He buys all his clothes from Kendals department store in Manchester — "the traditional Mancunian's one-stop shop" — but when he applies lip balm mid-interview, I ask him to hold it up for me to see.

Molton Brown, I exclaim — that's posh!

"Arghhh," he groans. "That was a schoolboy error letting you see that. I've destroyed my northern-bloke credentials now, haven't I?"

He strikes me as one of the happiest politicians I've interviewed. "Honestly," he agrees, "I am so lucky to do this job. In Westminster you used to walk into a government department and you would feel that half the place was working against what you wanted to do. I walked into here" — the mayoral office — "and immediately it just felt like 99% of the place was completely with you."

He talks to Keir Starmer about once a fortnight, but the extent to which he has detached himself from Labour in London becomes clear when I ask if he thinks the whip should be restored to Corbyn. "If a full apology is made, yes." Does he consider Corbyn's apology over antisemitism in the Labour Party last month to be full? Burnham looks slightly blank. "He issued one?"

It was more of a clarification than an apology — but it got him reinstated to the party. Was it enough to satisfy Burnham? "I haven't read the apology in detail," he says vaguely. "I think I would have to have another look at it."

He takes care to stress that his happiness in Manchester in no way makes him hostile to London. If Burnham is secretly harbouring any schadenfreude, it doesn't show. "You know, it's not a case that we wish London ill. We don't. I love London. I'm a patriotic person, I'm proud of the capital city and I don't want to come over as anti-London, because I'm not. I just don't see why we can't get the same consideration as London."

In May he will stand for re-election, and he plans to run for another term after that. "I expect this to be my last job in politics. I see what I'm doing here as a proper project — a root-and-branch change in British politics, the change that is needed.

"And I think more and more people are buying into it. That's why I really hope the mayoral elections next year will be a sort of

referendum on English devolution. I really hope people will vote in those elections, to show that, actually, they value these positions and they are important."

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Politics

Andy Burnham: 'Westminster has become a living nightmare'

In 2017, having failed to win the Labour leadership twice, Andy Burnham decided to take his desire to implement change elsewhere. Specifically: Greater Manchester, where, as the city's first directly elected mayor, the modest Liverpudlian would tackle serious societal issues (homelessness) and fights for justice (Hillsborough) head-on. Two weeks into the job, he was catapulted into the 'darkest night' of his life, when the bombing of the Manchester Arena killed 23 and injured 139. Here, he recalls the events and aftermath of that terrible night, reveals his plans to eradicate rough sleeping in the region and explains why he believes radical devolution is essential for cities to succeed

By **Robert Chalmers**

28 August 2019

Charlie CLIFT

On the train from London to Manchester to meet Andy Burnham, I find my thoughts turning to some of the shortcomings that have hampered the careers of other prominent mayors. In a history that includes such commonplace failings as fraud, embezzlement, bribery and possession of crack cocaine, you also encounter men such as GRO-D, former mayor of Huntingdon, Quebec, who declared an affinity for the recreational slaughter of kittens, which he would run over while driving to his office. "Stray cats have no business in the street," asserted GRO-D, "So, bang! I accelerate!"

It's possible that I have become over-preoccupied by mayors whose behaviour has fallen short of the standards required by this – or any other – institution and that my view of the office has been tainted by red-top cuttings and the

seminal book on such disgrace: Philip Slayton's *Mayors Gone Bad*. My other misapprehension, I admit to Burnham, whose office is a sparsely decorated suite in a building close to Manchester Central Library, is that mayors can't resist a bit of flamboyance.

"Why," Burnham asks, "did you think that?"

"I suppose it's to do with the gold chains, the ermine capes and the knee breeches. Do you find that you're starting to thrust your thumbs into your lapels before you deliver a speech, and developing a paunch?"

"That," says Burnham, 49, who is wearing what has become his trademark navy-blue suit, "is the ceremonial mayor. People's ideas about elected mayors [an initiative introduced to the UK in 2000] get wrapped up in those images. Ken Livingstone, Boris Johnson, Sadiq Khan – the executive mayor – this is the new thing."

"Don't you fancy some of that luxury tackle? Maybe just the beaver-fur tricorn hat?"

"I suppose I could ask for the hat, but I'd anticipate a degree of ridicule."

Burnham is instantly engaging, but his charm – unlike that of many politicians – is not an instrument consciously intended to control, but a naturally diffident manner born, I think, of some residual trace of amazement that someone of his background could occupy such elevated office as his. Burnham, who entered parliament as MP for Leigh in 2001, served as chief secretary to the Treasury, secretary of state for culture, media and sport and secretary of state for health, all under Gordon Brown. He quit as shadow home secretary in September 2016 in order to stand as mayor of Greater Manchester and was elected in May 2017 with 63 per cent of the

vote.

Even when he was well ahead in the 2015 contest for the Labour leadership, which he lost to Jeremy Corbyn – his second bid, he came fourth in the 2010 contest won by Ed Miliband – he appeared modest and unassuming. Had he taken charge of the party and won the general election of June 2017 it is impossible to imagine that the nation would have spiralled into its current desperate state of bitterness and confusion. The worry now must be that Burnham might go down in history as the most outstanding modern prime minister we never had and that Westminster is doomed forever to be dominated by demagogues and mavericks.

"Can you be too decent and clean-cut as a politician?" I ask Burnham. One of my friends, I tell him, once dismissed him with recourse to a well-worn political slight, namely: "He is the sort of vision that might appear at your door if you were a grocer and put a sign in your window saying 'Smart Boy Wanted'."

"I don't know. My dad has similar hair to me. I've been accused all my life of dying it. I can confide in you, Robert, that I have never once dyed my hair."

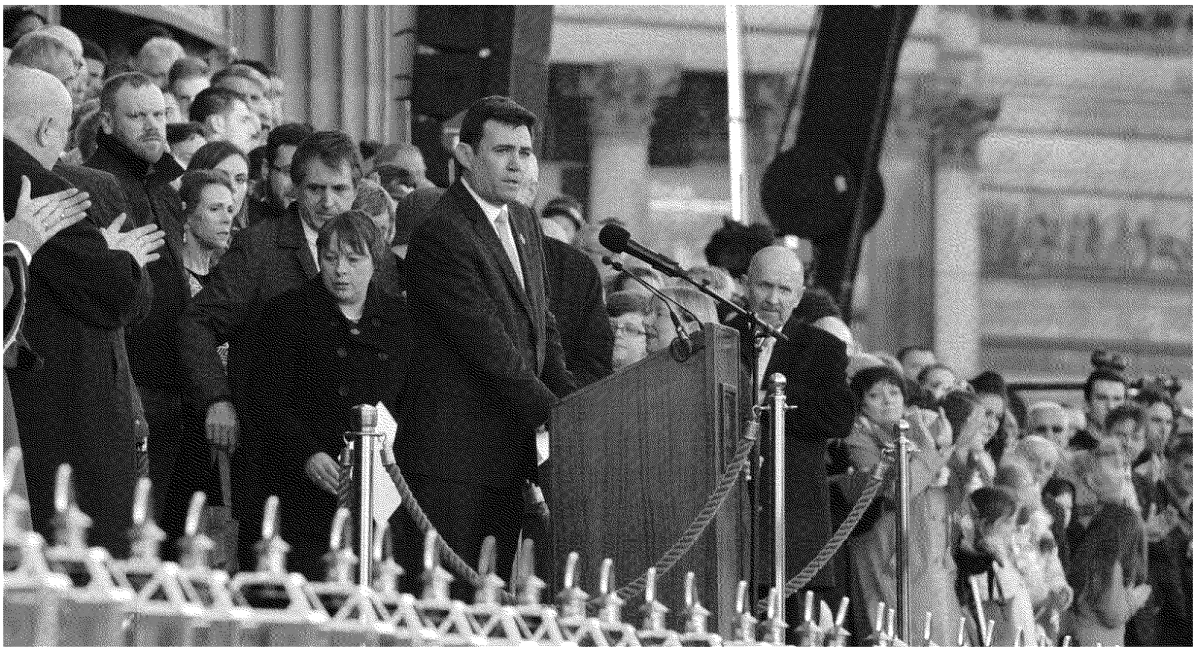
"You also famously give the appearance of having applied a lot of mascara and eyeliner, but then so does a golden retriever."

"Exactly."

"No disrespect."

"None taken."

"And those eyelashes."



"These eyelashes. They do not convey gravitas, I know. When I first appeared on television, I'd get tweet after tweet asking if I wore make-up. And so, yes, I am aware that my eyelashes may not radiate statesmanship."

The mayor of Greater Manchester is one of a handful of British political figures blessed with that rare ability to connect. Burnham manages it without engendering the sort of loathing that others with that gift – Nigel Farage, George Galloway and Boris Johnson spring to mind – inspire in a high proportion of the population. Any journalist who has attempted to engage with frontbench parliamentarians will be familiar with the rigid cordiality most exude, so fearful are they of saying The Wrong Thing. I mention an afternoon spent with one Labour minister, whose caution reminded me of a phrase sometimes used by southern Spaniards to insult Catalans: "They're so closed in that, if you join them in a hotel lift, they won't tell you if they're

going up or down."

"Well," he replies, of said ex-colleague, "that's exactly how he is."

'Westminster can't agree about anything… We're watching the whole thing disintegrate'

Any doubt as to Andy Burnham's capacity to lead in the most challenging of circumstances was dispelled by his handling of the terror attack at the Ariana Grande concert at Manchester Arena on 22 May 2017. Twenty-three people, including the perpetrator, died and 139 victims, around half of them children, were wounded.

"I'd been in office for exactly two weeks," says Burnham (who recently announced an initiative to reinvent safety procedures around venues). "It was my dad's birthday. I took him a bottle of wine. I was at home watching *Newsnight* when my mobile rang. It was Steve Rotheram [the elected mayor of Liverpool]. I ignored two calls from him: it was 10.45pm. He rang again, so this time I answered. Steve's call," he adds, "was interrupted by another from the chief constable. At which point I was catapulted into the darkest night I have ever experienced. I sat up receiving reports, taking decisions as best I could, with my kids asleep in bed. Then I arrived here in the office at 5am to find many colleagues at their desks. Emotionally, the thing I remember about that night," he continues, "is experiencing a kind of nausea. Nausea and emptiness."

"As a mayor, this has to be your worst fear," I say. "Had you experienced, I won't say a premonition of this, but had the possibility of such a catastrophe haunted you?"

"Yes. Absolutely it had. I say that without hesitation because I was shadow home secretary in November 2015 when the attack on the Bataclan happened. The following day I faced Theresa May in the House. I asked her about the capability of cities outside London to withstand an attack of that kind." Preventing such an atrocity, he says, "became something of a fixation. I kept asking her about it."

In the early hours, Burnham recalls, on that morning after the attack, he rang [council leader] Richard Leese. "We agreed to make a statement outside Manchester Town Hall. It was tough but it seemed the right thing to do, to calm any possibility of hysteria. We decided to hold a vigil. That, I think, allowed space for people to gain reassurance. Not from us, but from each other."

"This was in the middle of a general election campaign."

"It was and we decided right away: no political speeches. I had Westminster politicians calling, saying, 'Oh, hi. Can I come and make a speech?' And I was saying, 'No. No. *Absolutely* you can't. You can come and stand respectfully in silence. Like anybody else."

"You handled that vigil exceptionally well."

"It wasn't anything we did. Except, as a team, to create a place for the city to come together. The vigil set the tone."

In the following week, Burnham visited every hospital in Greater

Manchester. "It was massively distressing. I think of GRO-C and his sister Megan. Megan died – she was 15 – and GRO-C had his legs shot to pieces. I visited GRO-C in hospital. He was 21. That was really difficult."

"Can such things reduce a mayor to tears?"

"Since you ask, they can. Yes. I've had tough times over the years. I don't know if fate put me in front of the Anfield Kop on the 20th anniversary of Hillsborough. [Burnham, invited to speak as secretary of state for culture, media and sport, conducted himself with tremendous dignity in the face of a crowd angered by the misplaced perception that he shared the callous indifference of some others at the heart of government.] But I did feel that after the Arena bombing I had something to offer, because I had some relevant experience."

On stage at One Love Manchester, 4 June 2017 Dave Hogan for One Love Manchest

"Didn't Westminster refuse to pay the £17 million for dealing with the Arena tragedy?"

"The prime minister went about everything the right way. It was the civil servants, I think, who didn't want to pay the bill, which was eventually more like £25m. We tried to recover the money through the proper channels. We were supporting people from all over the country, remember. We had to go public in the end. Once we did, they paid. It's a symptom of the times. Things are not being sorted at a national level of government."

Westminster, he says, "has become a living nightmare. The place is antiquated. And basically dysfunctional."

"Worse than when you went in?"

"Yes," Burnham says. "Social media changed everything. Before, it managed to run on, like an old clock. With social media in parliament, you can't make sense of it any more. It can't agree about anything. It can't do anything."

"You don't miss it, then?"

"We're watching the whole thing disintegrate. Westminster is built for point scoring. When you go to parliament, there are all these things that you want to achieve. But under the whip, all you can do is try to make a name for yourself [by rebelling]. It's a bizarre place, with a deeply dysfunctional atmosphere. I don't miss it in the slightest. It's just poisonous now."

"Most people would agree that you couldn't have bailed out at a better time. Did you come to Manchester to escape Jeremy Corbyn?"

"Not because of Jeremy, no. I quite like him on a personal level. We got on pretty well during the contest. I went into his shadow cabinet. That was hard to do because I was quite bruised after the experience [of losing]."

The vision Burnham had for the nation at the start of that 2015 leadership election, according to supporter Steve Coogan, involved "a radical left-wing plan: a fully comprehensive education system, social care brought into the NHS and abolishing tuition fees. The fact he's labelled by trolls as a 'red Tory' is a sign of how deluded some of our membership have become."

Was there any achievement of Attlee's 1945 government – nationalisation of rail and bus services and energy provision, say – that he wouldn't wish to replicate? "None," he replies.

The first thing that inspired Burnham to enter politics, he says, was *Boys From The Blackstuff*, Alan Bleasdale's seminal 1982 BBC drama set in his native Liverpool in the early years of the Thatcher government. "I remember watching every episode with my parents, who knew all of Bleasdale's work," he says. "And… that was it. That was when I knew that I had to do something."

Born in GRO-C north of Liverpool, he went to a GRO-C state school. Father, Roy, was a telephone engineer; mother, Eileen, a doctor's receptionist. He still lives near GRO-C close to his retired parents, with his Dutch wife, Marie-France. The couple, who met at university, have three children: Jimmy, Rosie and GRO-C

His socialist instincts were galvanised by the miners' strike and, especially, the events at Orgreave in June 1984, where mounted police charged unarmed pickets. To live in the north-west at that time was, as Alan Bleasdale put it on

Desert Island Discs, "an experience that would politicise anybody".

"He was right," says Burnham. "I wrote to him, actually, to say how great an impact his work had had on me, but he didn't reply."

"That," I say, "doesn't sound like him." (Bleasdale has been a friend for 30 years and unpaid editor of my writing for almost as long.)

"Well, I can't say I wasn't disappointed. Anyhow, I am on the left, economically. On law and order… I have this sense that there are rules and you don't break them."

After leaving his comprehensive in GRO-C he studied English at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. The transition was "the most bewildering experience I've ever had. I came face-to-face with overbearing self-confidence of a kind I'd never encountered. I found it intimidating. It took me a year to work out they were all talking rubbish."

Burnham – president of the Rugby Football League, vice-president of Leigh Centurions and a lifelong Everton supporter – remains so firmly bonded to the northwest that somebody once remarked that "his favourite flavour of crisps is coal". After graduating he struggled to find work locally and moved to London, joining Baltic Publishing. While producing one of its magazines, the enticingly titled *Tank World*, he hired Eleanor Mills (now editorial director of the *Sunday Times*), who introduced him to her stepmother, Tessa Jowell.

"I didn't know who Tessa was," Burnham says. "But she was a rare individual. I learnt an enormous amount from her. She really was different. She wasn't a normal politician. She had proper time and proper care for people."

"*Tank World*," Mills recalls, "was the world's premier bulk liquid

transportation publication. Our office was under the Westway close to the M4. I was 22 and ambitious; he used to take the piss out of me mercilessly for being posh. The only place for lunch was a Tesco shop at the local garage or this dilapidated pub in Brentford. The only good thing about that job," she says, "was working with Andy. Whenever we sat down over a drink, he was always talking about wanting to make a difference. He knew that he had a great deal to offer and that the world could be a far better place than it was. So when Tessa needed a researcher, I knew he would be ideal."

It's curious, I suggest, that a character with such apparent diffidence is so confident a public speaker. "You know," Mills says, "There is a side of him that quite likes being a performer. He likes an audience."

Jowell's integrity informed Burnham's own approach to 16 years as an MP. If you think the art of English political oratory is dead, you might revisit Burnham's eleven-minute address to the Commons on 27 April 2016 on the subject of Hillsborough, posted on YouTube. His speech, one of the greatest of the modern parliamentary era, was utterly devoid of calculation or artifice. Rather than encourage the customary braying from the opposing side and perfunctory nodding from his own, it instilled a shocked silence in the House and induced, in at least one member of his own frontbench, Angela Eagle, a quivering lower lip and tears. It elicited a round of applause – a rare phenomenon and against Commons convention.

Burnham's address on Hillsborough that day was a merciless excoriation of the English establishment on every level: police, judiciary, media and, above all, parliament itself. "The question for South Yorkshire Police," Burnham told the House, "is this: why, at this inquest [concluded at Warrington the previous day, it found that 96 victims were unlawfully killed], did they go back on their 2012 public apology? Millions were spent retelling discredited

lies against Liverpool supporters. If the police had chosen to maintain its apology, this inquest would have been much shorter. But they didn't. And they put the families through hell."

He had attended the hearing, he added, "on many occasions. I saw how hard it was for the families, told to show no emotion as police lawyers smeared the dead and those who survived. Beyond cruel. The original inquest was similarly brutal, but didn't even get to the truth. What kind of country," Burnham asked, "leaves people who did no more than wave off their loved ones to a football match still sitting in a courtroom 27 years later begging for the reputations of their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters and fathers? This cover-up went right to the top. It has been the privilege of my life to work with [the Hillsborough families]. They have kept their dignity in the face of terrible adversity. They could not have shown a more profound love for those they lost on that day. They truly represent the best of what this country is all about. Now it must reflect on how it came to let them down for so long."

For a man who has occasionally been accused of lacking an appetite for rebellion he was, I suggest, pretty fired up that day.

"I'd been in the Malmaison [Hotel] in Liverpool until 3am," he says, "with Al Murray."

"Drinking tea?"

"Not so much tea, no. Later that morning I got on a train and wrote that speech."

"Were you in a slightly dislocated state?"

"I was coherent, but… the real me can come out more when I'm tired. And I really didn't care for anybody in that place [the Commons]. It felt like my

valedictory speech. How did we let those people down for so long? That was the moment where I suddenly thought: Enough. Enough of this bullshit."

Burnham is visibly emotional when he speaks about the recent trial of South Yorkshire Police chief superintendent GRO-D, which concluded in April at Preston Crown Court with the jury unable to reach a verdict over whether he was guilty of the manslaughter by gross negligence of 95 victims. GRO-D faces a retrial. (GRO-D club safety officer, was convicted of failing in his duty under the Health And Safety Act and fined £6,500.)

Remembering the dead with Wayne Bennett at the England vs New Zealand rugby league match on Armistice Day 2018

"What I have learned," Burnham says, "is that the way this country runs, no matter how much you kick against it, you cannot break it. While the jury was out I rang one Hillsborough relative. At first, she couldn't speak. Then

she said, 'I'm afraid they will blame him again' – referring to her son, who died there. And I thought: this country just doesn't work. Does not work. Hence the alienation people feel. Look at the Bloody Sunday families," he continues, "and the Birmingham [Six] families. They're still in an inquest. I helped set up the inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal [in which hundreds of deaths were linked to blood products infected with hepatitis C and HIV used in the Seventies and Eighties]. Those victims aren't even on the road to justice. There's a common thread here. Is there justice in this country for working people?"

"Can anger be a useful motivation in politics?"

"I think we've lost the art of anger. I feel people aren't getting angry enough. I only found my anger late in my parliamentary career. I was trying to climb the pole, wasn't I, in my early years in politics."

"Well…"

"No. I was. I wanted to 'get on'. It was later that I started to reevaluate a lot of things."

It's almost impossible to understand, listening to this, how some opponents dismiss Burnham as a "flip-flop", who drifts with the prevailing tide. How did he get that reputation?

"I suppose that, in some ways, I'm not built to be a politician."

"Meaning?"

"When I first went in to the Commons, I genuinely thought politics was a team game. I was undone by that. My kind of politics involves absolute loyalty to the party. So I was fiercely loyal to Blair. Then to Brown. Then to

Ed Miliband. Then to Jeremy Corbyn. It took me a long time to realise that you get punished for behaving like that."

"Punished?"

"Well, they call you a weather vane or a flip-flop, as you say. Someone who doesn't stand for anything."

Not something, I suggest, that seems remotely true of Burnham.

"In the middle of that [2015] leadership contest," Burnham adds, "we had this welfare reform vote: the one where Osborne was punishing people, calling them 'shirkers'. Harriet Harman said we would support Osborne because we'd lost the election. I said no way. I argued my case within the shadow cabinet and got us to agree on what's called a Reasoned Amendment. That's a halfhearted form of opposition, but opposition nonetheless. I thought: I'll have to vote for that because I'm in the shadow cabinet. I believe that was the moment I lost the 2015 leadership race. If you really want the top job, you're not well served by being a team player. When Jeremy did his usual thing of walking through the opposite lobby… In a social media world, that looked like the principled thing to do." Corbyn's leadership bid, Burnham adds, "was enhanced by that. That is what undid me."

"Shouldn't you just have rebelled?"

"If I'd done what Jeremy did… it wouldn't have been me. I'd have been doing it to win the leadership. I might have won the contest, but what would it have made me?"

'What I remember about the night of the attack is the feelings of nausea and emptiness'

As anybody familiar with the two cities will know, for a Liverpudlian to become mayor of Greater Manchester is no trivial accomplishment. In leaving Westminster, Burnham has moved from a position as a self-declared team player to one in which, while he is working with colleagues including Richard Leese, he tends to shoulder the blame for everything. It's an uncomfortable fact that many constituents, while capable of blithe indifference towards arms sales to Saudi Arabia or cuts in aid to Ethiopia, are swiftly energised by such matters as uncollected wheelie bins, dog faeces or potholes.

For individuals of weak or corrupt character, this focus on the mayor as a lightning conductor for blame has had calamitous consequences. As well as kitten-crusher GRO-D, *Mayors Gone Bad* features civic leaders guilty of offences including supplying opiates to prostitutes and showering neighbours with excrement. One chapter concerns Michael Applebaum of Montreal, a unicycling hypnotist who claimed he could "make people bark, or sing like Michael Jackson". Another is devoted to GRO-D of Providence, Rhode Island, who tortured a man with "a lighted cigarette, an ashtray and a log".

But even a good person, Slayton tells me, "doesn't necessarily make a good mayor". He quotes Jón Gnaar, the former punk who served as mayor of Reykjavik until 2014, as confessing that, once appointed, "I'd got myself into something I will never understand."

You feel that Burnham, too, may have taken time to realise just what he was

confronting in Manchester, in terms of the challenges, limitations on his powers and criticism he receives.

If Andy Burnham has a flagship policy, it's his Bed Every Night campaign. Since being elected, he has donated 15 per cent of his salary to the fund to eradicate rough sleeping. Numbers have stabilised or declined in eight out of ten Greater Manchester boroughs. Burnham says that 1,423 people have been accommodated under the scheme. "Of those, a third have moved into more suitable housing."

Burnham has worked closely with a number of celebrities, most significantly then-Manchester City captain Vincent Kompany, in their joint Tackle4MCR charity, to which the Belgian will donate all proceeds from his testimonial in September.

One of the more memorable experiences of the time I spent with Burnham was a visit we made with Kompany to a homeless project in Ardwick. One of the edgier centres enrolled in Tackle4MCR it's a shelter founded by an independent charity called Supporting People In Need. Those sleeping at this facility have vanquished a range of dependency problems, but none have overcome an addiction to Manchester City. When Kompany walks into their dormitory, with its metal bunks – it's clean, but littered with spare pants, bin liners and ageing trainers – the reaction is somewhat akin to a Southern Baptist prayer meeting being joined by Jesus Christ.

"Why," I ask Kompany, "are you bothering with this?"

"Why not? Why wouldn't you?"

"Many footballers don't."

With artist Don Grant and then-Manchester City captain Vincent Kompany

"Fundamentally, my kids – much as I like to think of them as being from Brussels, like me – are Mancunian. Carla, my wife, is from Manchester. I can't recommend humility to my own children with people sleeping rough just down the road. I feel very lucky to have been part of something so successful that is… Mancunian, basically, in the shape of Manchester City."

"Your father is a mayor [for the centre-left CDH party] in the north of Brussels."

"Yes. I saw homelessness there, though I left when I was 20. I'm acutely conscious that this is one of the great issues of our time. Of course there are many difficulties facing society, but I believe this is one that, with a bit of common sense and determination, we can solve. It's fixable, in my opinion."

How important has his relationship with Burnham been?

"Absolutely central. Andy has been the driving force in all this."

The directors of this project, says the mayor, were "very negative about me at first". (One organiser recalls an initial meeting with Burnham in a pub, where they had "a frank exchange of views". "That," says the mayor, "is one way of putting it." The organiser puts it like this: "Some lads got smacked over the head with bar stools. But Andy had left by then.")

"The people here just couldn't believe," Burnham says, "that a legend like Vincent would visit their humble project. He has brought everybody together."

But even his rough-sleeping initiative has attracted criticism, notably when

electrical problems forced a shelter to close last winter. "Reading the reports, you'd have thought I installed the wiring myself. I have always tried to do something. But by doing things you set yourself up to get criticised. Many at Westminster aren't trying to change anything."

"Is the aim to get all rough sleepers off the street?"

"Why not? Realistically, it's to develop an infrastructure so people don't have to spend a night on the streets. If the criticism is that we're not working fast enough, I don't mind. People in this city know that for some to succeed doesn't mean others have to sleep in doorways. That's not the Manchester mentality."

The city has a degree of devolution in areas such as health, transport and skills training, though most major funding still has to be approved by Westminster. "We're still waiting," Burnham tells me, "for them to pay what they owe from last year's moorland fires."

Does he sometimes feel that he's the scapegoat for problems resulting from central government cuts (such as impending closures of fire stations)? I can't imagine people seriously bent on swift, radical change – Hitler and Stalin may be bad examples – being particularly interested in serving as mayor.

'When I first went to the Commons, I thought politics was a team game. I was undone by that'

"Hitler," Burnham says, "might have found the position somewhat constraining. But I can do more that is meaningful here than I could in the Commons. The things I do control are more relevant to people's everyday experience."

"For instance?"

"This may sound like a small thing, but I'm committed this year to bring in something called 'Our Pass', which will give free bus travel for 16- to 18-year-olds across Greater Manchester." Less affluent teenagers, says Burnham, are often isolated in an area of about one square mile. (In Greater Manchester – unlike in London, where bus journeys are capped at £1.50 – multiple tickets across the region are prohibitively expensive.)

"I was at a school in Oldham recently, from where you could see Manchester city centre. The kids said it seemed distant and intimidating. I want them to look at those skyscrapers and say: I could work in one of those. And visit the galleries, music venues, the theatres and Central Library."

Radical devolution, Burnham believes, is essential to enable cities to succeed where the nation has stagnated. There's a whole book on this: Benjamin Barber's *If Mayors Ruled The World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (2013). Barber believes cities are held back by deluded idealists "who imagine a world in which sovereign states still fashion solutions to global problems". He cites Norman Mailer's doomed attempt to run as mayor of New York City 50 years ago on the slogan "No More Bullshit". Virtually connected urban democracies, not centralised government, Barber believes, hold the key to global peace and prosperity. "We can learn a lot from American mayors," Burnham says, "even though they are a mixed bunch."

As luck would have it, I've brought along photographs of mayors, including

some of his lesser-known colleagues from the American continent. "Oh, dear," says Burnham.

He examines a picture of Bosco Ramos, who served as honorary mayor of Sunol, California for 13 years until his death in 1994. There's a statue in the town centre to Bosco, a Rottweiler-Labrador cross. "Thirteen years," Burnham says, "is quite impressive. But looking at this he served a population of 913. I mean, I've got 2.8m."

He doesn't recognise Lincoln, the three-year-old Nubian goat that was elected honorary mayor of Fair Haven, Vermont in March, or a jar of foot powder that was declared mayor of a town in Ecuador in the mid-Sixties.

At this point in our several meetings, Burnham was preparing to represent his city in the Boston Marathon. "You might struggle," I suggest, "if Lincoln the goat runs."

"If I get into trouble," he says, "I'll forge an alliance with the foot powder." (He completed the course and raised more than £6,000 for families who lost relatives in the Arena attack.)

Burnham is friendly with Michael Bloomberg, mayor of New York from 2002-2013. "When you look at the things he has done on a whole range of things, especially health," Burnham tells me, "it's extraordinary. American mayors have made amazing changes. They're powerful and they shape their cities. English cities haven't had the powers to advance themselves. The 21st-century economy will be all about cities. Bloomberg invited me over not long after I was elected. When Trump got in and opted out of the Paris climate agreement, the convention of US mayors opted back in. I believe the power of national government can be undermined by devolved cities."

'Westminster is dysfunctional. I don't miss it in the slightest. It's just poisonous now'

In Manchester, he adds, "we have endorsed a date of 2038 for carbon neutrality – way ahead of the UK target of 2050 – and 2028 for zero-carbon buildings. We're prioritising cycling and walking infrastructure. Manchester has the most radical environmental policy anywhere in the country."

American mayors, he adds, "can do much more in terms of borrowing money and building. If we could do that, it would answer some of the problems we've got. Westminster created Brexit, for instance, by failing to look after all parts of the UK equally, notably the industrial towns in the north of England."

"Since you mention it, would you argue for a second referendum?"

"To stop no deal. Only then. As difficult as it is, I think the public interest still lies in doing a moderate Brexit deal. Anything else risks divisions that will last for generations."

"Is there really a different mentality in the North?"

"I believe so. I feel that Northerners face discrimination in certain walks of life in London. How many Labour prime ministers have come from the north of England? [One: Harold Wilson] And, yes, I think that we are different."

"Different as a result of historical experience? You must know the recording of Paul Robeson saying that it was the people of Manchester who most inspired him when he was blacklisted, in the McCarthy era."

"Yes. Manchester mill workers refused to handle slave-picked cotton.

Abraham Lincoln wrote to them, praising their sublime heroism. Other ports were flying the Confederate flag. Think about the things that began here: the trades unions, the suffragettes, the co-operative movement. How can you not be inspired by that?"

Andy Burnham greets Theresa May at the Manchester Arena National Service Of Commemoration, 22 May 2018

He's always been absolutely committed to this area," Eileen, Burnham's mother, told me, when I met her for tea at her home near GRO-C. A perceptive, articulate woman, she is vigorously supportive of her son, as you might expect, though she does mention that he was once a member of The Boomtown Rats' fan club. (Burnham's taste did evolve to embrace acts such

as The Smiths, Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses; as mayor he has organised events involving musicians such as his own favourites, The Courteeners and The Blossoms, and poets such as John Cooper Clarke and Mike Garry. *Distractions*, a showcase of younger emerging talent, is scheduled for late July.)

"When people said he left London because he didn't get the leadership," Eileen says, "that is totally untrue. He'd known the North was being deprived from day one."

"Has he changed since he became mayor?"

"I think parliament restricts the real person. I certainly noticed that with Andy. He is totally different in Manchester. Totally relaxed and totally himself."

I meet Burnham again at the Hilton in Liverpool, where we are joined by Alan Bleasdale.

"I remember your letter," the playwright tells Burnham. "I am so sorry that I didn't reply. What it was: I had grown bruised and disillusioned by being approached by other politicians who invariably wanted me to start preaching on their behalf. I can see that was never your motivation."

"When did I write? Ten years ago?"

"Longer. You'd just come in to parliament."

"Your work," says Burnham, "had such a profound effect on me. Especially 'George's Last Ride'." The final episode of *Boys From The Blackstuff*, it shows scenes of chaotic desperation that some considered implausible at the time, but proved to be a curiously prescient vision of the mayhem that callous or shoddy governance, central and local, would inflict on Liverpool. George,

played by the late Peter Kerrigan, is a retired docker and union organiser in the desperate last hours of his life.

"That episode stays with me," Burnham says, "because my grandad worked on the docks. I watched it with him. There were tears streaming down his face."

"It was based on my uncle George," Bleasdale says. "He wasn't on the docks, but he worked in the sewers. He never ever earned more than £10 a week. Peter, who played George, improvised a line at the end, when he is about to die. He says, 'I cannot believe there is no hope… I cannot.'"

'I can do more that is meaningful here in Manchester than I could in the Commons'

At one point in the conversation Burnham shares a memory of a trip to Manchester to watch Everton ("It was the Milk Cup replay at Maine Road in 1984. We all got bricked, in the coach, on the M602") and it's when, for some reason, I find myself imagining those words as they would be pronounced by Jacob Rees-Mogg, that I realise how very different a world this is to the corridors of Westminster.

Returning to the subject of hope, I ask Burnham if he thinks there is any.

"The great positive, I think, is… my children's generation. My son Jimmy is 19. Jimmy and his mates… they see the world differently, people of that age. They haven't been taught to see difference and, if they do, they view it as a positive. Discrimination just isn't part of their make-up. I think they will eventually come through and make this world better. That," he adds, "is what I believe."

Will he stay in Manchester? For the broader good of the nation, you would hope not. It's hard to think of a politician better placed to bring the country, and his party, together, should he return to London. If he does commit his life to Manchester, Andy Burnham is the sort of a person who, like Abraham Lincoln, Alan Turing and LS Lowry, they will end up commemorating with a statue. When it comes to the inscription, they might do worse than a quotation from local playwright Stanley Houghton, which used to be displayed on a brass plaque in the city's Central Library. "The younger generation is bound to win," it said. "That's how the world goes on."

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