

# ‘Something about Burnley’: Political dynamics in Labour’s ‘most winnable’ target seat

Mike Makin-Waite

Do reactions to the onslaught on Gaza in a northern English town signal any wider political realignment in ‘red wall’ constituencies?

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Last autumn, I suggested to *Soundings* editors that I would write a short piece assessing the political mood in Burnley, Lancashire. I would consider whether this so-called ‘red wall’ parliamentary constituency might revert to Labour at the coming general election (together with some other comparable seats, also won by the Tories in 2019’s ‘Get Brexit Done’ poll). The article was originally intended to be pretty straightforward. However, events on and since 7 October 2023 in Gaza have complicated the picture considerably.

Last September, in Burnley at least, the shift back had looked likely: boundary changes have brought two wards from the neighbouring borough of Pendle into the parliamentary constituency, wards which have consistently returned Labour councillors. Labour strategists therefore identified Burnley as Labour’s ‘most winnable’ target seat in the whole of the UK, requiring only a 0.13 per cent swing

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from the Conservatives.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Labour had patiently re-established its reputation for competence in addressing Burnley's needs. The party's council leader, Afrasiab Anwar, was a sincere and effective communicator who had won respect and built connections with people across the borough. Party members seemed united and focused. Most of them had put behind them the rivalrous process to select a parliamentary candidate. In this contest, Oliver Ryan, a young councillor from Greater Manchester, had been selected in preference to a local and well-liked former council leader. Some people saw Ryan as a 'Keir Starmer candidate', but others insisted this was unfair: 'he makes his own mind up on things and, in any case, is more closely associated with Angela Rayner'.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the case, Burnley Labour activists seemed to have accepted Starmer's broad approach, trusting that 'responsible' policies and evidence that the party was well-disciplined would win support from voters who were now tired of the excited promises which the Tories had promoted around Brexit - promises which had not been realised. Positive signs for Labour included a number of victories in council by-elections and a significant defection to Labour from another group of councillors. These had edged the party to the point of being one seat short of an overall town-hall majority.

However, by the time I visited Burnley towards the end of 2023, things had changed significantly. Responses to the Israel Defence Force's bombardment of Gaza, 2400 miles away, had unsettled local politics and broken longstanding relationships: Burnley was, once again, going through 'interesting times'.

The situation in Burnley was a local expression of a wider reaction by Labour members to Starmer's stance on the conflict, which was brought into sharp focus when the party's MPs were whipped to vote against the Scottish National Party's 15 November 'ceasefire' motion in the Westminster parliament.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the leadership's failure to support a ceasefire, a significant number of Labour councillors have left the party across the country, continuing in their seats as independents. Labour lost control of Oxford and Norwich councils; and Blackburn, Walsall and many other towns and cities also saw resignations.

In February, Labour faced further problems when recordings were leaked of an October meeting of party members in Hyndburn, another constituency which borders Burnley: the reaction included the party leadership suspending two parliamentary candidates, one of them already on the ballot papers for the Rochdale by-election.<sup>4</sup>

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There were distinctive features in the reaction to Gaza in Burnley: it saw a larger proportion of Labour councillors resigning from the party than anywhere else in the UK. This halved the size of the Labour Group, casting them back into opposition. However, realignment deals subsequently meant that Anwar himself stayed on as council leader, now as head of the ‘Burnley Independent Group’ which was formed by the councillors who had resigned - and which is currently running the council in partnership with the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats.

A detailed look at these local developments is food for thought not just about Burnley but also with regard to some of the wider problems generated by Labour’s current strategy and culture.

### **Who’s afraid of Starmer?**

On the morning of Saturday 7 October, council leader Anwar had been with Labour’s parliamentary candidate Ryan and other party stalwarts, holding a surgery in Burnley Wood Community Centre and discussing issues from housing to neighbourhood policing. The local party’s initial statements in response to the horrors which had unfolded in the kibbutzim of southern Israel and in respect of the first actions of the Israel Defence Force were in line with the position of the national party, endorsed by Ryan’s office: ‘Israel’s right to defend itself’ was underlined.

Before long, however, residents were raising urgent questions with local councillors, and the councillors were discussing concerns amongst themselves: where was Starmer’s balancing acknowledgement of the oppressions and violence to which Palestinians had long been subjected? However appalling the killings in Sderot and at the Supernova music festival had been, how could the IDF onslaught and razing of Palestinian homes in Gaza be considered a proportionate response? Instead, people argued, this looked like the collective punishment of civilians, including many innocent children.

Mosques and community groups organised petitions. Posts on social media asked political representatives to take a stand against Israeli violence and call for a ceasefire. Muslim Labour councillors across east Lancashire were accused of doing ‘too little, too late’, and a van displaying an image of the councillors enlarged to billboard size, accompanied by this slogan, was driven around the nearby town of Blackburn - where eight councillors later resigned. A couple of Burnley councillors

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reported receiving death threats if they did not demand a ceasefire, and others were warned they would 'have to leave town' if they didn't resign from Labour. Similar instances of intimidation occurred in several other towns and cities.

Anwar himself became the focus of frustration: why was he not amplifying the anguish of many of the people he represented? He had signed a 17 October statement on behalf of 'community, civic, religious and charity organisations in east Lancashire' calling on Rishi Sunak and Conservative politicians to work towards a peaceful resolution. But where was any sign of criticism of the national Labour leadership, which was explicitly refusing to call for a ceasefire?

In fact - together with many other elected representatives and activists - Anwar *had* been urging a change in Labour's approach - but this was happening *within* the party, including in Zoom calls and conversations with Rayner and her shadow cabinet colleagues David Lammy and Yvette Cooper. However, working through 'proper channels' had involved accepting the need for discretion: breaking ranks to openly criticise the party leader was not seen as helpful.

Loyalty involves adhering to a party line, of course. But if that feels 'top down', without any sense that the leadership is genuinely concerned about the strong feelings of large groups of members, relationships are soon strained. Loyalty is a two-way process - perhaps multi-dimensional.

At the end of October, Anwar's 'bottom-up' commitment to his local constituents, together with a growing frustration at not being able to state his own opinions, led to him to state publicly that 'Keir Starmer must call for an immediate ceasefire; call for the release of hostages; and call for opening aid corridors to alleviate the suffering in Gaza'.<sup>5</sup> On 2 November, together with Asjad Mahmood, the leader of Pendle Council, Anwar went further, calling on Starmer to resign because he was not 'standing up for Labour values'.<sup>6</sup>

Burnley's 'local' politics were now national news. On BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme, Anwar explained why he thought Starmer's request for a 'humanitarian pause', rather than a ceasefire, was 'not good enough':

... aid will get in but then the bombing, the attacks will start again  
... these innocent civilians have got nowhere to escape to ... the  
whole international community came out and said that Israel has the

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right to defend itself, just as any other nation does, but it's got to be proportional and within international law ... the number of people, innocent civilians, who are losing their lives on both sides, we need to call it out and there needs to be a stop to it.

Unsurprisingly, Starmer did not consider resigning: it was Anwar who was to break with Labour, in the following week, together with nine other district councillors and two of Burnley's county councillors. This step had been co-ordinated quickly but systematically: a large number of Burnley Labour activists left the party at the same time (Burnley Independents claim that there have been 200 resignations, amounting to approximately one-third of Labour's membership in the town).

Some commentators and national politicians pointed out that it was the Asian heritage councillors (all of them, and only them) who had defected in Burnley.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, this was an attempt to belittle and narrow the significance of their decision, as if their stance - unlike that of their non-Asian colleagues - could be understood solely through the lens of ethnicity, and hence was seen as lacking legitimacy. Having said that, I was told that the informal meetings of Labour members held prior to the resignations, to discuss concerns over the party's stance on Gaza, had not involved any non-Muslim councillors. One councillor, who remains in the Labour Group, has stated that 'we were not invited and did not know of these meetings until after the event. We would have very much liked to have had the chance to contribute to the debate, but we were excluded'.

Nevertheless, as Anwar argued, again on national radio, 'this is not just a Muslim issue ... Suella Braverman is trying to turn this into a culture war, turning communities on one another. This is a humanitarian issue'.<sup>8</sup> As is well-known, everybody's heritage, identity and religious views influence their politics - across all ethnicities. But the conflict in Gaza is not a 'Muslim issue'. Very large numbers of people of all faiths and none have been calling for an immediate end to violence. As Anwar pointed out, at least two-thirds of the 339 Labour councillors around the country who had recently signed an open letter calling for a ceasefire were not Muslim. In fact, within a week of the initial resignations, the independent group was strengthened by a non-Muslim Labour defector - a white woman acting in line with her own beliefs, who had visited 'the Holy land' on pilgrimages organised by a Catholic priest through Building Bridges in Burnley, the town's inter-faith network.

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## What is politics?

As noted, with eleven out of Labour's twenty-two councillors leaving the party *en bloc*, Labour lost control of the council (Burnley has forty-five councillors in total - Labour had been in charge as a minority administration). What would happen next?

The Green Party had been growing locally. From winning their first council seat in the town in 2018, they had built a seven-strong group, and held all three seats in the inner urban Trinity ward. Their group leader, Scott Cunliffe, had also recently won one of Burnley's five seats on the 'higher-tier' Lancashire County Council. The Liberal Democrats also held seven seats, and it was soon evident that agreements could be made between the new 'Burnley Independent Group' and Green and Liberal Democrat members: the resulting combination of twenty-five councillors would be able to determine council policy. Within a fortnight, it was agreed that Anwar would continue as council leader, and Cunliffe would hold the portfolio for 'sustainable development and growth', applying green influence to local economic initiatives.

The first full council meeting with the new partnership in place was held in December 2023, with delegations of 'members of the public' in attendance.<sup>9</sup> Proceedings opened with a 'right to speak' contribution from a member of the public, arguing against a suggestion that the issue of Gaza could be ruled out of order as proper business for the council. The speaker was Bea Foster, who had herself been a Labour councillor until a few years earlier, and was a key member of Building Bridges, as well as a member of Burnley's 'Women for Peace' organisation, which brought together Jews, Muslims, Christians and women of no faith. Foster argued that the conflict was having direct effects in Burnley: 'sadly, as a result of the war, we are seeing the impact on relationships in our town'.

Newly independent councillor Lubna Khan then introduced a motion, seconded by Cunliffe, that called on Burnley Council to speak up for a ceasefire, and for the leader and chief executive to write officially to Sunak and Starmer to this end.<sup>10</sup> During the debate Anwar - with a level of intimate emotion that has not often shaped Burnley council debates - predicted that his young daughter would in future years say to him, 'Daddy, you were in a position to do something. What did you do?' He didn't want to have to answer that he had been 'too scared of Keir Starmer', or that he 'was only elected to sort the bins out'. He couldn't any longer accept being asked to compromise, as he had been urged to do by the senior Labour figures

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he’d lobbied. He’d realised that the ‘consultations’ he’d taken part in with Rayner et al had just been a ‘tick-box exercise’: the party leaders weren’t genuinely open to reconsidering their position.

Deputy mayor Shah Hussain described how the conflict had affected him: ‘my mental health has suffered ... [as a result of] being a member of a particular political party and its leader advocating what I would consider breaks international law and provides support for the genocide that we are now seeing ... For that very reason, I had to break a twenty-five-year relationship’. Public gallery observers of the meeting felt that such personal speeches conveyed a ‘refreshing honesty’. ‘The councillors weren’t being “whipped” and told how to vote, like before. Now they were speaking from the heart and saying what they *really* thought ... it was like they felt good because they were representing what the community really thought, *authentically*’. A councillor who was a member of a different party commented that ‘you could see that the newly independent members were actually being themselves. They’d had enough of being told what to do, having to act in line with the top-down agenda of right-leaning politicians’.

Burnley Labour councillors who stayed in the party have handled the situation in a variety of ways. When the eleven resigned, those who stayed avoided any sectarianism, instead stating disappointment at having ‘lost colleagues and friends from the Labour Group’ and acknowledging that the decisions to resign had ‘not been taken lightly’: ‘we hold no ill will to the newly independent councillors and sincerely wish them well in serving their residents. As Labour people, as mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, we all want an end to the violence and for there to be a just and lasting peace’.<sup>11</sup>

The only Labour councillor to contribute to the 6 December debate did not oppose Khan’s motion directly, opting instead to question details of the wording. In response Councillor Khan asked whether her former colleagues would really refuse to support her motion ‘because of a word’. Her conclusion was passionate: ‘If that’s politics, then you can keep your politics ... we will keep on doing what we are doing, using our voice, and if that means that you don’t see us having a really big political career or getting very far, then that’s fine ... We will not compromise on this anymore’. Khan’s motion was carried, with Green and Lib Dem support. The Labour Group had decided that this would be a free vote (not ‘whipped’), and most of their glum-faced councillors abstained. However, three voted for the motion, while a

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couple of them voted against. All Burnley's Conservatives voted against the motion, having criticised Anwar and the independents for 'putting global issues before local'.

### **Shifting alignments and longer-term trends**

Councillors switching party and 'crossing the floor' is not something new or unusual in Burnley.<sup>12</sup> Such moves reflect shifts in people's thinking, new political friendships, individuals' sometimes-idiosyncratic trajectories, and responses to changes in national party policies. The current leader of Burnley's Liberal Democrat Group, Howard Baker, was first elected as a Labour councillor. Councillor Charlie Briggs defected to Labour as recently as last September (and remains in the party); previously a Liberal Democrat leader of the council, Briggs later 'went independent', partly because the Lib Dems' opposition to Brexit was not going down well with voters in Burnley. One of the Green councillors representing Trinity ward had previously been a long-term Lib Dem activist there.

In terms of voter allegiance, the most defining - and well-known - shifts in Burnley's politics over recent decades took the form of large numbers of electors switching to support a series of forms of right-wing populism.<sup>13</sup> From the mid-1990s, Burnley's first significant independent group of councillors incubated divisive, racialised and resentful attitudes, articulating anxieties that had been generated by the wasting of Burnley's industry in the 1980s. This helped lay the basis for a far-right breakthrough: in 2002, Burnley was the first place to see Nick Griffin's British National Party win a clutch of council seats.<sup>14</sup> By the time the BNP's momentum collapsed, in Burnley and elsewhere, their polarising narratives on immigration, 'multiculturalism' and 'Europe' had been glossed and promoted more widely by UKIP, subsequently feeding through into the 2016 Brexit vote and the Conservative success in the 2019 general election. In that election, Burnley - a Labour seat continuously between 1935 and 2010, when a Lib Dem held it for one term - returned a Conservative MP for the first time in more than one hundred years. Will the recent realignment affect Labour's fragile recovery in the town?

Although long-term disillusionment with the Labour Party is probably the most profound factor in Burnley voters' switch to the populist right at the beginning of this century, there is also something else about the town that helps explain why it was the place that first 'surfaced', and anticipated, some of the key themes that have reshaped national politics in the last twenty years. This 'something' involves a



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recurrent preparedness on some people’s part to state political positions which are sharply at odds with prevailing dominant views. Perhaps there are positive elements of defiance and assertiveness in such pushbacks to ‘the mainstream’, even when the content of the views which carries the defiance is confused or even reprehensible, as it was in 2002.<sup>15</sup> It is possible to see these instances of subaltern disaffection or protest as expressions of ‘plain talking’.

But there’s an alternative and more critical assessment of this recurrent aspect of local political culture. Burnley’s moments of being at odds with mainstream opinion - whether back in the 1890s, when the Social Democratic Federation (the largest left-wing organisation of Victorian times) was strong in the town; or in the early 1930s, when the Communist Party grew rapidly in Burnley at the very time it was haemorrhaging members nearly everywhere else because it was going through a particularly confrontational and ‘sectarian’ phase; or in the 2000s, when the provocative message of the BNP was a way, at least, to attract attention - are the expression of a problem. They mark local leaders’ political and cultural distance from the sources of social power. This relative isolation is a weakness, not a strength. Activists who ground their politics in local social movements can affirm and validate people’s oppositional stances (for socialism, against the mill owners, against immigrants, for the Palestinian people), and we can see such affirmation as positive, or not, depending on the content of the positions being taken. But what is the strategy for generalising positive local impulses and sentiments so as to actually reshape the wider political co-ordinates, social trends and economic drivers that determine life in places like Burnley?

### **The shape of things to come?**

The deeper trend underpinning voters’ shifts to the BNP, UKIP and Johnson - in Burnley as in other traditionally Labour-voting areas - was a long-term decoupling of Labour from these constituencies in the decades either side of the Second World War, which was linked to their ever-accelerating de-industrialisation. From the 1970s, the terminal crisis of paternalist Labourism and the rise of neoliberalism and individualism caused a dealignment of the party and many of the working-class people whose support it had previously enjoyed.

When New Labour was elected in 1997, it took years for ‘regeneration’ investment to arrive in Burnley. Even then, this funding was neither scaled nor

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designed to address the fundamental determinants of the town's economic decline. However welcome the new schools, Sure Start centres and housing renewal schemes, Blair's 'project' fundamentally accepted the key coordinates of the social and economic settlement shaped by Thatcher.

Nor did New Labour's 'narrative' persuade people. Instead, many thousands made sense of what was happening in the town in nativist terms, adopting what Ash Amin has described as the 'raw imagery of good insiders and bad outsiders, homely pasts and scary futures'.<sup>16</sup> The strength of such affective sentiments explains why Labour has found it difficult to re-establish relationships with voters, as evidenced in the 2016 referendum and 2019 election. Much of the support which has 'come back' over the last couple of years has more to do with a jaded and sullen disenchantment with the hollow claims of right-wing populism rather than any positive enthusiasm for Labour. (Ryan's general election pitch combines an attempt to engage with and channel this mood of disappointment together with signals of his patriotism and 'local' credentials: 'I love our country, but nothing works anymore. I'm a Lancashire lad, I live here ...').<sup>17</sup>

In this context, last November's resignations by Asian heritage councillors and activists amount to another loss of a significant base. Such subtractions of support threaten Labour's hopes of holding key seats and winning back 'heartland' constituencies like Burnley.<sup>18</sup> The technical character of the 'outreach efforts' now underway in response only confirms the Labour leadership's long-standing clumsiness in its relationship with its Asian heritage activists.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, even these efforts are more positive than a sentiment expressed by a couple of loyal Labour members I talked to in February. They felt 'hopeful' that their party could win the Burnley seat 'even without the Muslim vote' - a vision of 'winning' which sharply expresses the broken relationship between Labour and many thousands of people who have long supported it, at the same time as suggesting that this broken relationship does not matter.

There is a more general problem: the party's 'top-down' managerialism has long meant that grass roots members are not given genuine scope to reshape party culture and policies. Opportunities for debate and political discussion have been diminished and shallowed. This trend has been exacerbated by the recent marginalisation and exclusion of left-wing voices, and the imposition of extremely narrow parameters within which party members are allowed to express views on such issues as Zionism.

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Such moves may well allow Starmer to present himself as being in charge of his party. But they also mean that the Labour leadership is unable to draw on and benefit from the wide variety of well-informed understandings held by its members and supporters, including many who are racialised and have experienced discrimination. What’s happened in Burnley shows how this lack of suppleness and responsiveness can lead to once-loyal and dedicated members being squeezed out: the rigidities and constraints being used to reassure business donors and centre-right voters that the party is ‘under control’ are achieved at the cost of a brittle narrowness which means that diverse views cannot be incorporated into the party’s life and appeal.

This problem is reinforced by Labour’s traditional thinking on class, and its linked failure to understand intersectionality. Instead, it has accepted inaccurate and reactionary conceptions about ‘the needs of the white working class’. Glib notions of ‘the left behind’ have shaped how the Labour leadership frames its appeal to voters in so-called ‘red wall’ towns. This is an example of conservative pundits’ influence on Starmer’s party: their aim is to manage the ‘risk’ that voters now want a change from Tory government.

What about another possibility? If the populist-right successes of the mid-1990s and early 2000s were a harbinger of things to come (Brexit and Johnson), might the realignments and new political arrangements now seen in Burnley also point the road to wider changes across the country (this time of a progressive kind)?

This possibility has been talked up by some. *Red Pepper*’s Hilary Wainwright praised councillors who left Labour or called for Starmer’s resignation for ‘refusing to crouch anymore’.<sup>20</sup> In *New Left Review*, Alexander Zevin took events in Burnley Council as suggesting ‘that the anti-imperial element of Corbynism had the potential to resonate beyond its core’.<sup>21</sup>

Potential, perhaps: Anwar has been retweeting Richard Burgon, John McDonnell and Laura Pidcock (as well as Sayeeda Warsi and Humza Yousaf). In early March, he was invited to speak at a London conference aimed at developing links and collaboration between councillors around the country who have resigned over Gaza. But Zevin and Wainwright are too hastily assimilating events to their pre-established hopes. This is a recurrent if understandable mistake by people on the left, over-eager to see positive potential in developments which are merely symptoms of systemic problems.

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In any case, the values and impulses which have informed developments in Burnley have been liberal, humanitarian and faith-based rather than specifically leftist. Corbynism itself hardly registered in Burnley (or Pendle).<sup>22</sup> Fellow feeling with members of the umma, a powerful and legitimate basis for forms of solidarity, is a more significant component of community sentiment than any anti-imperialist analysis.

And, although the November resignations were a decisive act, they leave the independents without connections to larger political machines (and councillors who have resigned as individuals, in ones or twos, in other councils, are even more isolated). Joining the Greens is one option, and concentrations of support for that party might generate local election successes, even though the undemocratic First-Past-The-Post system militates against the party achieving any large-scale electoral breakthrough. Burnley's former Lib Dem MP has decided to stand for parliament again, and his campaign will surely involve a pitch to Asian-heritage activists and voters who have rejected Labour because of Gaza. Another alternative for the independents is to put energy into campaigning organisations and protest groups. The view of some activists who sympathise with those who have resigned (but themselves retain their Labour membership so as to carry on working within the party) is that the resignations over Gaza have been 'a cry of pain or rage, but not a harbinger of a new movement'.

Previous instances of Asian heritage councillors resigning over 'foreign affairs' have ended with some of them dropping out of representative politics, and others coming back to the Labour Party after a while, their return eased by apologies and expressions of regret. This was the case in Blackburn in 2003, for example, when eight councillors resigned over the Iraq war. This may not happen in Burnley, but it is not clear what the future path will be for the Burnley Independents.

Already in mid-November it was evident that some of Starmer's east Lancashire critics would put limits on the logic of their positions. Despite joining Anwar on 2 November in calling for Starmer's resignation (after what was described to me as 'a little arm-twisting'), Pendle council leader Asjad Mahmood has maintained his Labour membership, perhaps reckoning that the political arithmetic in Pendle was quite different to Burnley's: it would not have allowed him to both resign from his party and stay in a position of influence on the council.<sup>23</sup> More generally, the 'refusal to crouch' displayed by Anwar, Khan, Hussain and their colleagues is unlikely to

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feed through into wider dynamics that will affect Labour in anything like the way that UKIP shifted the Tories’ positions.

It is a useful thought-experiment to consider why the impulse to realignment seen in Burnley will not be generalised in a similar way. One thing to consider is that the cluster of themes and concerns which have been assembled around the far-right politics popularised by Nigel Farage *do* represent a coherent alternative position to what was once the mainstream (and this has proved attractive to ‘grass roots’ Tories). By contrast, progressive people and left-wingers have not yet succeeded in cohering or promoting an alternative radical ‘common sense’ that might include the need to address climate change, shift to a non-imperial foreign policy, decentralise real power and resources to local regions and councils, and much more besides. (Neither does the left enjoy a fraction of the funding or sustained support from influential media outlets which has been crucial to the project of shifting the Conservatives from being John Major’s party to that of Johnson, Truss and Sunak.)

In the absence of a more fully-fledged alternative project, perhaps a politics that could help in Burnley and places like it is a new kind of progressive alliance, generous and comprehensive enough to combine different elements of what can already be seen there. One of these elements is the readiness to combine radical intentions with ‘grass roots’ practice of the kind which the Greens present themselves as promoting. Another is the commitment to speak authentically, confidently and honestly on behalf of the diverse community members they represent, something which the new independents are credited with. Finally, the alliance would have to involve (or at least be working with) people from a left-of-centre party which is serious about forming the UK government, and had the potential to do so. The combination of cultural developments, relationship-building and significant realignments needed to bring about such an alliance currently looks unlikely.

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## Notes

1. Dominic Collis, 'Burnley revealed as number one target seat for Labour Party at general election following Boundary Commission constituency changes', *Burnley Express*, 26 January 2024. See also <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/snp-conservatives-liberal-democrats-labour-itn-b1132551.html>.
2. Unattributed quotes are from the author's conversations and email exchanges between November 2023 and February 2024 with over twenty people currently active in Burnley politics, including councillors from the Burnley Independent Group, Green Party and Labour. Most asked that their comments be used anonymously.
3. As Alexander Zevin has noted, fifty-six Labour MPs 'defied the whip ... anyway, amidst a collapse in Labour's support among Muslim voters from 75 to 5 per cent'. 'Gaza and New York', *New Left Review* series 2/Issue 144, November-December 2023.
4. Aletha Adu and Eleni Courea, 'The grassroots Labour meeting at centre of party turmoil', *Guardian*, 13 February 2024.
5. [https://twitter.com/afasiab\\_anwar/status/1718613481904050329](https://twitter.com/afasiab_anwar/status/1718613481904050329).
6. <https://news.sky.com/story/sir-keir-starmer-asked-to-resign-by-two-labour-council-leaders-over-gaza-ceasefire-stance-12999131>.
7. I use the term 'Asian heritage' to describe people who moved to Burnley from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and also their children and grandchildren: the phrase is widely used in the town, in a respectful way. It is significant that the point that all of the initial ten Labour defectors are of Asian heritage has not been promoted in divisive ways *within* Burnley: an indication that the 'political' nature of the councillors' stance is largely accepted (rather than being seen 'merely' as an expression of their 'ethnic' or religious identity), and also an indication of how far the town has come since the days, twenty years ago, when it seemed that any issue at all, from parking charges or taxi fares to the food being sold in fish and chip shops, could become the focus of sharp and racialised divisions.
8. [https://twitter.com/Taj\\_Ali1/status/1721435964369723517](https://twitter.com/Taj_Ali1/status/1721435964369723517).
9. Partly to accommodate the numbers attending, the 6 December council meeting was held in the Mechanics Theatre, rather than the usual location of the town hall council chamber. The meeting was filmed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n48JicBU-0M> (the debate on Gaza runs from around eleven minutes into the recording).
10. Burnley Borough Council, Minutes of Full Council Meeting, 6 December 2023.
11. Dominic Collis, 'Burnley Labour Group appoint new leader following 10 resignations over Gaza conflict', *Burnley Express*, 7 November 2023.
12. In my book *On Burnley Road, Class, race and politics in a Northern English Town* (Lawrence Wishart 2021, p69), I noted Labour activists' usual characterisation of independents: 'their pretended "freedom" from partisan stances is judged as either gullible naivety or as an attempt to win support by deception - usually because they are really Tories operating under false colours'. The new Burnley Independent Group, as with the earlier and different group which Charlie Briggs led, points to another interpretation: such formations are a kind of 'surplus' which results from the

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‘mainstream parties’ not being able to accommodate specific combinations of position at particular times.

13. These developments are charted in Mike Makin-Waite, *On Burnley Road*.

14. James Rhodes, ‘Filling the void: Burnley and the everyday politics of the BNP’, *Soundings* 44, Spring 2010.

15. As a Burnley Council officer promoting ‘community cohesion’ in the years following 2002, I learned that ‘reprehensible’ views are not to be simply dismissed. Curiosity and a genuine attempt to understand the angers, fears and hopes that shape such outlooks are an important precondition for any effective progressive responses.

16. Ash Amin, *After Nativism: Belonging in an age of intolerance*, Polity, Cambridge 2023, p6.

17. Window graphics, Oliver Ryan’s office, Manchester Road, Burnley, noted by the author, February 2024.

18. Kiran Stacey and Aletha Adu, ‘Labour acts on fears Muslims will not vote for party over Gaza stance’, *Guardian*, 30 January 2024. In some constituencies, independent candidates have begun planning campaigns to win Labour seats by appealing to ‘the Muslim vote’. An early example of this approach was George Galloway’s successful campaign in February 2024’s Rochdale by-election. Following the declaration, Galloway claimed with characteristic bombast that his victory marked the beginning of ‘a movement, a landslide, a shifting of the tectonic plates’. Though it does illustrate the distance that has developed between Labour and many Muslim voters because of Starmer’s stance on Israel’s actions, the fact is that the unusual, even remarkable, features of the Rochdale contest make it difficult to draw any general lessons: Azhar Ali, a former leader of Pendle Council, was on the ballot as Labour candidate, but the party withdrew its support for him just two weeks ahead of the poll because of comments he had made about Hamas’s 7 October attack. Ali’s comments were made during one of several meetings he held with party members in Lancashire in which he was urging them to stay with Labour in spite of their strong feelings over Gaza.

19. For consideration of these issues as they presented in another east Lancashire town nearly thirty years ago, see Mike Waite, ‘The local politics of race and identity: Three moments in Blackburn’, *Renewal*, Vol 3 No 3, July 1995.

20. Hilary Wainwright, speaking at ‘The Break Up of Britain?’ Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, 18 November 2023.

21. Zevin, ‘Gaza and New York’ (see note 3).

22. In the neighbouring borough of Rossendale, Corbyn supporters *did* build a presence in the Labour Party during the four years from 2015, with a few Momentum members becoming local councillors or constituency officers. Their motions and initiatives in support of Palestine, and against disciplinary actions in respect of allegations of anti-Semitism, generated some debate. The position of longer-serving constituency officers was that time spent on international issues risked being a diversion: ‘we need to win more votes in places like Weir and Bacup if we are ever to form a Labour government which could support people in the West Bank’. By contrast, in Burnley, there seems to have been little debate in Labour ranks relating to Israel and Palestine until comradesly relations were torn apart by the current conflict: Councillor

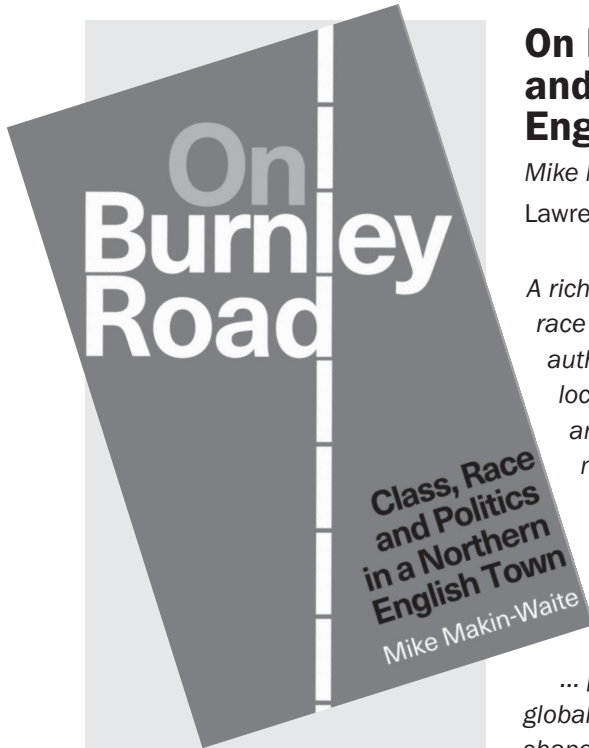
## Soundings

Hussain's temporary suspension in 2016, pending an investigation of social media posts which were critical of Israel, was dealt with in an entirely administrative fashion.

23. The contrast between Anwar's consistency and Mahmood's choice not to resign has helped re-establish Anwar's good standing with people who were earlier frustrated with him. One pro-Palestinian activist I spoke to said that 'when most of the Pendle councillors didn't resign, that brought home the significance of what the Burnley Independents had done'. Two Pendle councillors did in fact resign from Labour and now sit as independents. They are from the wards which have been incorporated into the Burnley parliamentary constituency, meaning that two out of five councillors representing the 'extra' voters who boosted Labour strategists' hopes, making Burnley 'most winnable', have stopped supporting Labour because of the party's stance on Gaza.



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