

[Transcript] The News Agents / Andy Burnham on Keir Starmer, Manchester United, and the police

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

The news agents are back in Manchester to talk to the King of the North.

No, it isn't our first Royal interview, as if that's ever going to happen, thanks for nothing Emily.

No, instead, far better.

It is Andy Burnham, one of the great survivors of British politics.

Maybe the better, more accurate title for him is King over the Labour Water, a man eyed wearily by Keir Starmer, who could so easily, were it not for a few mistakes, have been Labour leader himself, but has since tried to craft a different path, trying to reconfigure English politics and the balance of power within it.

So on today's episode, an extended conversation with the Mayor of Greater Manchester, his past, his present and what his future might yet bring.

It's Lewis here, welcome to the news agents.

Andy Burnham, Mr Mayor, Mayor Burnham, thank you for letting the news agents into your office, people can't see on the podcast version, but we're next to a sort of shrine of Andy with all of your favourite things, not quite.

Welcome to Manchester.

Well, no, it's good to be here.

I want to talk in this interview about you and your political journey and how you've got to where you've got to, but I think should just start with some news of the day, we're recording this on Thursday afternoon, and that is great Manchester Police and a couple of controversies that are gripping Greater Manchester Police at the moment.

Start with one, this is the story around three women who've now come forward to say that they have been stripped search by Greater Manchester Police, one of whom has waived her right to anonymity.

What's your reaction to that extraordinary story, isn't it?

Yeah, they're very distressing cases.

And my first reaction is to say, as I always would in a situation like this, that they must be fully, properly and independently investigated and they will be.

That's important for the individuals concerned and what they've experienced, that they have answers.

But also just for women's confidence in policing here in Greater Manchester and more broadly, because there are issues, aren't there, that people have now given some other news over recent times.

So from my point of view, it's answering that question, are women safe when they're in the custody of the police?

And, you know, in my view, they are, but whenever a case like this arises, you have to really be sure that you're looking into all of the issues involved.

And that's why I'm pleased that we've been able to agree with Dame Vera Baird, Casey, obviously a very senior criminal barrister, former victims commissioner, that she will come in and look at these cases and just advise us as to any wider issues arising for the police arrangements in Greater Manchester.

I mean, some of the details of this one particular woman's case, the Zane area man, a Sky News

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story.

I mean, they're really horrendous, aren't they?

She's forced face down onto a thin mattress, police officers take off her jeans, cut off her knickers, pull a pair of oversized castley shorts over her legs, remove her top bra, leaving her alone, topless, all captured on CCTV.

And yet, funnily enough, and this isn't the first time we've seen this in a police story recently, a couple of crucial hours of CCTV evidence appears to have gone wrong.

Yeah, as I say, these are serious cases.

That's astonishing, isn't it, the CCTV going missing?

I mean, that's disturbing.

Well, to be honest, there is still work underway within Greater Manchester Police to try and locate it.

And there are hours of evidence that have been made available, but there are, as you say, there are missing hours.

There is a lot of work underway to retrieve that.

But no one here is flinching away from any of this.

This is really serious.

It's why Vera Baird is going to help us understand the wider issues here, because there are wider issues about custody.

Do you think women in Greater Manchester have confidence in the Greater Manchester Police and should do?

Yes, broadly, I think they do.

Greater Manchester Police has been through difficult times itself in the recent past.

But we have a new, I say a new Chief Constable, he's been in post a significant amount of time now.

But a huge amount of change to Greater Manchester Police.

So yes, indeed, very much so.

Some of the issues relate not to his time.

I think what people will also see is that when things do go wrong, there's no sense of kind of hiding away, or, you know, that's not how we work.

When this fully came to my attention, and actually there are three cases, I had found out about one of them a few weeks ago when it had been really brought to my attention.

I've since met that person.

And, you know, we take all of this extremely seriously, but to answer your question, yes, people can have confidence in our police leadership here, but also in Greater Manchester Police more broadly.

So I want to talk a bit about your political journey, given that we've got time, because this is a podcast and that's what we can do.

I mean, you've been in politics a long time now, you've actually been away two years in front of my colleagues.

And counting.

And counting.

And in a way, as a result, because political sort of careers these days are much shorter

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than they used to be.

You're one of the sort of longest serving survivors of British politics, almost in danger of calling you a veteran.

He doesn't like that.

He doesn't like that.

I get called that in terms of football, so I'm quite happy to have the same in politics.

In terms of you going into politics, which obviously now seems a long time ago, what was it that spurred you into it?

And is there a particular political memory or earliest political memory?

What was it that made you think this was the arena that you wanted to be in?

Well, the big reason was growing up here in the Northwest of England in the 1980s.

It was hard not to be confronted with politics wherever you looked at that time.

So I said, before I grew up in the Lee area, which I came on to represent as a member of Parliament, that was a mining area.

The miners' strike was a very big, big thing.

My earliest memory to answer your question was watching boys from the black stuff with my mum and dad, and that's one for older enthusiasts of the Newsagents podcast.

Well, this was an Alan Bleasdale drama that unfolded over a series of weeks, which told the story of Liverpool in decline in the early 1980s, and it was very real for me because my dad and my mum had lived that.

They were both from Liverpool.

My granddad worked on the docks in Liverpool, and there was one of the programmes called George's Last Ride, who was an elderly gentleman putting his wheelchair around the declining docks.

It was a very emotional thing in my family, and we watched it, and I remember asking my mum and dad questions.

But actually, and this obviously became a big theme in my political journey, it was in the late 1980s when I was at university, and I'd gone from here, a Northwest in real decline, to Cambridge University, and I'd sort of seen a different world there, and I was finding it hard to relate one to another.

Came home for the Easter holidays, April 1989.

I was at Villa Park watching Everton in a semi-final, all my friends were at Hillsborough. I knew how unsafe Hillsborough was, I knew all the issues there, and with them we know what happened.

And that experience of that happening, the fans being blamed for what happened, going back to Cambridge and finding the world that wasn't aware of really the issues involved. That just wasn't registering there?

No, a bit, but not really, and to the extent it was, they were just taking the narrative of blaming the Liverpool fans.

It was kind of quite a radicalising experience for me, all of that, you know, that was kind of the time when I was going from kind of being aware of politics, sort of interested in it.

I'd already joined the Labour Party.

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Was your family political?

Well, not in terms of being activists.

No, I didn't go to meetings with my mum and dad, you know, they didn't do that.

They were Labour voters, and they were always talking about politics, hence the boys in the black stuff experience, but no, they hadn't gone to university, they weren't activists.

So I was the first person in my family, beyond distant relatives, who said, right, I'm going to get more involved and I'm going to go to meetings.

So I was kind of a bit of an outlier from that point of view.

That is fascinating, the Cambridge experience, so it was something radicalising, you say, about that, about the kind of the disparate worlds, the disconnected worlds.

Why did it radicalise?

What was it about it?

It's just the treatment of the north of England, the attitudes that you get confronted with the world, just thought, ah, maybe the Scouts, they would be like that, wouldn't they?

Or, you know, it's all their fault and this, that and the other.

And those are things I kind of heard years later, decades later, in Whitehall, as I tried to reopen Hillsborough.

And I think that kind of is still there, you know, it's always been there.

The kind of north of England is somehow to be patronised and to be sort of kind of stereotyped.

And I've always kind of, you know, I'm related to some people, the professional, northern and everything.

Going into Parliament and raising all the issues and talk about the north, you quickly get that sort of slightly patronising approach taken.

But, you know, it was that experience of being in Parliament, doing what we did on Hillsborough, myself and Steve Rotherham, that we actually decided together in the middle of the last decade, 2016, we kind of basically sat down with each other, are we getting anywhere in here?

Can we change this system in the way that it needs to change, or do we now go outside of here and build something different from outside and actually try and change this Westminster world from outside?

And that's what we decided to do.

We did it very deliberately.

We did it together.

We see this as building in some ways as sort of a kind of movement outside of Westminster for change.

And I think, you know, six years in for both of us, we feel that we've absolutely established devolution in the north.

But the northern voice is getting stronger, more undeniable, and it's beginning to change things for the better.

I want to get on to that.

I just want to just focus a little bit more on the sort of slightly more distant past, which is, as I say, you've been around politics for a long time.

I mean, you were a spud in the new Labour government, you were a protestor jowl, among others.

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And when you look back on that time, when you look back on your journey, your political career, you're then the Secretary of State and then the Shadow Cabinet, how do you think you've changed?

Do you think your politics has changed?

Not hugely.

I was always...

You strike me as someone who's maybe got a bit more left-wing.

Well, I was always to the left of new Labour, definitely.

It was sadly great, lovely Tessa's no longer with us, but, you know, I learned so much from Tessa.

Not so much about kind of where you live in the party, just about decency in politics, how to do it right, how to engage with people.

She was wonderful.

So I learned so much from her, learned so much from David Blunkett, who I was privileged to be his parliamentary private secretary.

You know, I kind of grew up in that era, and I bought into a huge amount.

You know, the idea that kind of Labour had to be locked on to the kind of views of most people here in the North about tough-on-crime, tough-on-the-course, absolutely.

And I've always been quite strong on those type of issues, but I economically was to the left of new Labour.

Even then?

Yeah, yeah.

And sometimes I would, you know, kind of find it a little bit difficult, some of the positions that were taken.

Like what?

Like what sort of thing?

I can remember falling out with Tessa to a little degree over, you know, when the decision on benefits for single parents, and that was kind of an early thing that New Labour did in government.

It was really controversial.

It basically cost Harriet Harman her career in the early part, because she was Secretary of State at that time.

Tough one, that.

But then I've come back to Hillsborough.

Then there was that stitch-up on Hillsborough in the second year of the Labour government.

It was the Stuart Smith inquiry.

I remember being in my car, driving when that news came over the radio, pulled over and basically cried on a lay-by somewhere in Sheffield when I heard that.

I remember that really vividly, and that kind of was like a pain, there was a bitterness there because it was like, oh God, we were waiting for this.

Having said that though, you know, I'm still proud of so much of what that government achieved.

But it was as I grew in confidence, because obviously I came in as a loyal Labour team player.

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Didn't have the confidence sometimes to voice how I might have felt about some of the policy positions.

Try to play.

You know, that was my upbringing, you know, you're loyal to the team, you kind of do what you need to do.

And it was very successful.

Yeah, definitely.

And I don't regret any of it.

But then you kind of learn more about your own views and your own feelings about policy.

You get the confidence then to voice them.

The big crossroads opened up in front of me in 2009 when Gordon had made me culture secretary.

I got an invitation to speak to the 20th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster.

That basically threw me into a crisis.

For everything I've just said to you before, you know, I knew that I couldn't ever live with myself if I didn't sort of go there and face up to what I knew to be the truth.

But could I do that while, you know, necessarily being a representative of the government I was in, it was like the ultimate, the ultimate dilemma.

It's like a sort of coming of age moment in a way.

I think so politically for me, yeah, I kind of learned through that era, you know, develop my voice a bit and my confidence and, you know, you kind of get more sure of yourself as you come through.

But that was basically the big crossroads where my kind of professional life collided with my personal life and I had to decide.

And I actually look back on it and think that when I took those steps, if you like to finally go to Anfield as I'd made the decision I would do and I'd made the decision in advance to reopen Hillsborough as far as I could.

I knew I was walking in many ways to the edge of the abyss between the government I was in and the people I grew up with.

And that was how it felt standing up to address the cop that day.

But in doing it, I was taking my first steps out of Westminster and I look back at it and see it.

See the road.

There is, I've been talking about the new labour period because it was so successful and because it was the longest period where the labour has been offered by a long way.

Basically you can see at the moment there are lots of voices at the top of the Labour Party who want to emulate it and cite it as a model.

Do you think that's wise or do you think that the world and politics has sort of moved on from that period?

I think as ever you learn, don't you, but you don't just copy I think is the way I would describe it.

There were lots of things in that era that I definitely would say we should capture and learn from and carry forward.

You know, that period of going through the mid 90s into government in 1997, it was actually

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a really kind of inclusive kind of feeling in the Labour Party because actually people of all different strains of opinion in the party were sort of part of it and all voices were there and there was a great sense of unity.

So then you look at some of the other things that were done, I think some of that kind of spirit was lost a bit too quickly when we got into government, you know, the kind of keeping to the Tory spending limits and some of what we'd been voted in on kind of, we didn't capitalise on.

There was more of an opportunity than Labour realised and there's a sort of a timidity in Labour in government that we kind of have to be don't do too much and we might frighten the horses.

Well, actually looking back, I think new Labour should have gone for it much more in that early period in government rather than slightly looking over its shoulder and will we be accepted by the civil service and what will the media say?

There was a bit too much of that in retrospect.

Do you think that's happening again now?

I think it's always going to be there and, you know, it's something that Labour politicians have to kind of deal with more in my view than Conservative politicians just because of the way we often get treated by the right-wing press.

But you mentioned, for example, the decision in the late 90s to stick to Tory spending limits.

We're seeing that again now.

Do you think that's a mistake?

Well, no, I think the country's in a really difficult place now given, you know, the way in which things have gone in recent times.

There is, you know, the discipline of new Labour.

I think it is absolutely right that Keir, Rachel, the Shadow Cabinet kind of take that as something that was important.

So don't make commitments that are not funded.

I, you know, I absolutely get that.

But at the same time, you have to give a sense of when there is funding, what's the priority and where will it go?

And you've just got to be realistic about the time that you're in.

But you do have to, in difficult times, give people hope that change is coming.

This will be different.

It's not where we are now.

I look at where things are at the moment and I find it hard some days coming into here because I kind of see the challenges people in Greater Manchester have got.

I kind of look at the figures for the number of families in temporary accommodation, families made homeless, kids living in the accommodation that's just not right really for any child to be living in.

You know, obviously I work a lot on homelessness here and you just kind of, you see what's wrong and then you just kind of see a kind of inertia in Westminster in terms of, you know, failure to get to grips with those issues.

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And there's a need for discipline, but there's a need for hope as well.

And it's kind of how do you get those two things in the right balance?

And obviously it's difficult.

But do you think that maybe there is a danger at the moment going towards the next election that because of the fear that you've talked about in terms of how the Labour Party will be treated, that there isn't enough hope, the party does need to lean in more to the idea of change as well as stability?

It's not for me to obviously always provide a running commentary on what they're doing because you look at the polls and clearly they're doing a lot right.

And we're not yet at that period where we're kind of, we're getting close to a year to go, but we're not there yet.

And I think conference this year will be a big moment.

So I think they've put the party in a position where it can win and win well.

Obviously this is through stages, isn't it?

And we're going to enter that final stage soon where the party does have to say, well, these are our priorities and this is what we will do.

So I kind of feel they're in that position or they're coming close now to that position where more of the stall will be set out.

So I do think there's a further and final stage where it is about bringing that kind of sense of optimism, that sense of change for the better, a country that can work better than it has been in recent times because let's be honest, it's not been working.

I think there's a profound sense this summer when we look at the sewage in our streams, rivers and seas, when we look at railways just being completely run down into the ground.

This country is not working as it should.

And that is a very profound mood that has settled on the country.

So the political party that breaks through that, hopefully it will be Labour soon, will gain a very big political dividend.

Do you think the Labour party is winning that 20 point lead in a poll, or is it the Conservative party that's lost it?

It's a bit of both always, isn't it?

We're sort of moving on and saying, you know, we can be trusted to run the country and it's, I think it's a large part of the government really having lost support.

I think the three by-elections kind of revealed that.

There was a bit of both in those results and I think it's absolutely right at this point of a parliament that, you know, the party hasn't put all of its cards on the table.

But I think, you know, the final stage comes when the cards do get put on the table.

Probably that's when the kind of deal is signed with the British parliament and then a change of government comes.

That is the cliché, isn't it?

I mean, do you think the deal has been signed with the electorate or sealed with the electorate?

Getting close, I think, maybe not on the dotted line quite yet.

The tourists will have a chance.

They don't deserve to know it's Labour that are in a really strong position and, you know,

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I think there is a settled mood in the country now that they want a change of government. But I don't think there's been a clear decision yet as to what precise shape that change of government is.

You mentioned the by-elections and it's an opportunity to talk a bit about localism, which I know is obviously one of your passions.

I mean, the by-elections, you say, they were mixed.

Do you think that the response from the Labour Party with regards to what happened in Uxbridge was the right one, in the sense that the day after the Uxbridge loss, we had Emily Thornberry come into the New Zealand studio, she went to many other studios as well, told to by the Labour leadership, basically saying to the mayor, he needs to change his policy?

I think it's always going to be the case that there will be discussions between Labour mayors and people at the top of the party at a national level.

So to give you an example, when we had the debate here about the clean air zone for Greater Manchester, which was in the early part of 2022, the deputy leader of the Labour Party, who is also a Greater Manchester MP, was in touch with me saying, what's going on and what do you think?

And I was already changing my thinking about it at that point.

The controversy had really kind of landed, partly because we had a pre-pandemic plan that landed in a post-pandemic situation and it kind of wasn't doable anymore.

So I had already made that judgment myself.

But that was quite right that Angela picked up the phone to me and discussed that.

And as I understand it, I've not been privy to those conversations, but something similar is happening, obviously, between.

Sure, but I mean, Keir Starmer says that he's a localist, that he wants to empower people like you.

But the day after a by-election, which is lost by 450 votes, he's calling on the Mayor of London to change his policy.

I mean, it doesn't sound like much of a localist.

Surely that was ringing alarm bells for you in a way.

I mean, it was pretty wounding for Keir Starmer had backed him up until that point.

The by-election happens.

Bam.

He's got to change the policy.

I think you've seen over recent times, it's not always going to be the case that a mayor who was elected to be their voice for their place and do what's right for the place will always then necessarily fall in with some of the kind of Westminster thinking that isn't always going to happen.

I mean, that's just a reality of devolution.

I think Labour needs to kind of really adjust to that reality because it is the reality now.

We do our job better when it's place first rather than party first.

Of course, we're loyal to the party, we've kind of got that within us.

But I have always in my six years in this role have been really true to a place first

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approach because I'm conscious in the two times that I've been elected Mayor of Greater Manchester that voters from beyond the Labour Party have lent me their support.

I'm always conscious of that and these roles work when they are place first.

I think sometimes commentators from Westminster come here and don't fully get that.

That is what English Devolution is about.

If you don't take a place first approach, I don't think you deserve to succeed really because these roles are absolutely about what is right for people here in this part of the world.

And Sadiq's doing that in London.

He's made his judgement about what's right there.

I'm doing what I think is right for people here in Greater Manchester and I think both of us and other mayors really take that very seriously and sometimes that will create tensions at a national level.

You'll be happy to take on a Labour Prime Minister Gears down when he's, if it's in the interest of Greater Manchester.

I have in my six years been quite an independent voice at time because I am doing what's right for Greater Manchester.

I am here because I want finally the north of England to get fair treatment from Westminster.

I am here because I have got fed up over the years with the London centrist in my own party and I see it and I still hear it at times.

Not actually from the leadership necessarily but I'm talking about, you know, when we talk about what's right for the north, I've seen sort of people in the party in London sort of say, oh, you know, this is anti-London.

You know what?

It isn't.

If the Labour Party believes in equality, well, that should extend to equality between the English regions and actually people here getting the same that people in London and the Southeast expect, i.e. a bit more of a priority when it comes to transport investment for instance.

So these jobs work if you approach them in that way and I remember from the early days of devolution in Scotland when Labour hierarchy nationally treated the Scottish Labour Party as the branch office or that's how it was perceived to be treating them when telling them what to say and what to do.

That created the space for devolution to fail there for Labour and obviously the SNP to move in.

So, you know, devolution is a good thing.

It allows for a more mature political debate.

It opens up a country that can be run differently and power shared across all corners of the United Kingdom.

It's a good thing.

Do you ever feel like a branch office?

No, never.

But I've never run it in that way and I think everyone in the Labour Party knows that I've

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not run it in that way.

Let's imagine, so you win in Great Manchester next year and let's say there's a general election next year, which there probably will be, and Keir Starmer becomes Prime Minister. So let's fast forward four years time.

How will we know if Keir Starmer is true to his word about being a localist?

What will you be able to do in four years time that you can't do right now?

As the party are talking about bringing rail into public ownership, as they rightly should do, as I said before, that privatised model is completely and utterly broken, completely. I would hope in four years time to be able to run an integrated public transport system of exactly the same complexion as the London system, where it is bus, tram and train, all in a single system.

You've seen a fair few Labour leaders come and go.

What's your relationship like with Starmer?

Do you talk often?

No, I wouldn't say we talk often, but we do exchange messages.

Quite surprising, isn't it?

You're one of his most senior political figures in the party.

Not talking very often.

Why?

I don't see it that way.

Obviously, I'm here and I do support the party in any way I can.

Keir was here in Manchester sort of every time, launching his missions.

I speak to the Shadow Cabinet all of the time.

I don't expect to be constantly involved in discussions or at Shadow Cabinet meetings because I'd say I've got a different job to do here, which is very much a place first job.

The Mayor of Greater Manchester, my weeks are very much locked on to this place, what it means.

I'm not always sort of necessarily dabbling in Westminster politics.

People often kind of think I am, but I'm actually not.

Really?

Well, no, because I mean, people have this sort of obsession with criminal analogy in Westminster, that any statement I make must be a comment on Westminster politics. And it is a bit tedious, to be honest with you, because I will just say what I think here about things.

It might be a national policy, and that's all we've seen, it's read in code, all that means that there's a tack there on somebody.

Well, in terms of, all right, you straight talk and say what you think.

What do you think about the Labour Party policy at the moment on the two-char benefit limit?

Well, I said they're right not to make unfunded commitments.

So that is right, and that is learning one of the right lessons, I think, from the past.

But I think you also have to say when resources are there, what will be a priority.

And I said very clearly that should be a priority.

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I said you'll learn from the good things of the last Labour government.

The last Labour government had something of a mission around reducing child poverty.

And I hope the next Labour government that will see come, hopefully, into being in 2024-25 will have the same mission around reducing child poverty.

I mean, that should be an absolute priority as soon as circumstances allow.

Yes, I would say so, yes.

But the Labour Party hasn't said that.

I'm saying that, you know, as they get close to the election, you do have to disable when resources allow, these are the things that we will prioritise, and that's the point that

I'm making.

Do you think there was this narrative at the moment about how the Labour Party is behaving, and this, again, this connects with the sort of localist agenda and empowering communities and empowering places, as you put it, which is that the Labour Party at the moment is exercising a lot of command and control, that it is being too centralised, that central office is dictating too much about what the Labour Party can do in the nations and regions.

We saw what happened with Jamie Driscoll, for example.

We're seeing what's happening with parliamentary selections.

We're seeing what's happening with some expulsions.

Are you a bit concerned about that?

Well, I'll be honest on this point, say I am a little, and I said as much in relation to the situation with Jamie Driscoll, alongside Steve Rotherham, the mayor of the Liverpool City Region.

I think when you have a sitting mayor, I don't think it is in any way healthy to have a process that, for instance, doesn't allow a right of appeal when it comes to a selection process.

So I'm not going to change my tune here, because I did say I was uneasy about how that situation was handled, and I will repeat it again today.

I think I can understand how, at the national level, getting close to a general election, Labour wants to be clear and have control of its situation, its policy, its message.

But I also said earlier in this interview that the Labour movement, at its best, when there was a sense that all the voices are coming in and shaping things, and actually, in government, the Labour movement needs to be able to rely on all parts of the family to play their part and keep people together, and that's something that I remember very vividly from the new Labour era, that John Prescott had a big role to play, Dennis Skinner played a big role in some of those difficult times, and I was in Parliament in those new Labour years.

The family, if you like, if I can put it that way, needed to have things out, or sometimes people needed to come in support of others.

So I would say there is a risk in feeling that things are too narrow or too factional, and I just hope, going forward from here, that those risks will be avoided.

I think here, and the leadership should have a bigger tent than they do at the moment, perhaps.

I personally feel we're in an era when politics has fragmented to a considerable degree. We do have devolution, as I said.

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More voices are in the mix, aren't they, in the social media era?

That's just how it is.

I don't think it's possible, really, to go back to a sort of very old four-channel television when everything was much more sort of simple.

I think politics is more complex now.

People are engaged in debates more quickly because of social media, comments are made, or things are said.

I would just say, you know, I can understand the need for, you know, a degree of focus and discipline.

Absolutely.

And I've recognised that in terms of the financial considerations.

But at the same time, Labour and government will be at its best when people in all different places within the party feel engaged, feel part of it.

And I think that's something that needs to be taken into consideration.

Too harsh on the left, perhaps.

Well, it's easy always to say, you know, it's just too harsh on this bit of the party, too harsh on that bit of the party.

But it has been a real person, if I'm honest with you, you know, and this isn't just a reflection on the current era.

If I've got a real frustration about Labour politics in my 22 years, coming on 23 years as an elected Labour representative, but obviously longer than that in the party, or I've worked 30 years now in Labour frontline politics, because I was kind of, went into Parliament in the sort of early 90s to work for Tessa Jowell.

My big frustration, you know, I'm going to be absolutely direct about this.

I have often felt myself in the middle of a war between the left and right of the party, you know.

And I often got a bit bewildered by it, you know, the kind of way in which the energy that goes into that, I never fully understood that my upbringing was the energy goes into fighting the Tories.

And that's what I've always done.

You think too much of the energy is still there.

I think sometimes when I look around, I see some of this, and particularly in the social media area, I see some of this argument going on and then, you know, people trying to pick fights with each other at weekends, I just, you know, I just think that's mad, to be honest.

I don't know why people do it.

I want to move on from the Labour Party.

I know we're running out of time.

There's a few other things I want to ask you, but just on that basis, on what you just said about the fight, do you think it's unfortunate then that Corbyn is not allowed, being allowed to stand again as a Labour MP?

I mean, it's a difficult judgment, you know, in terms of everything that the parties have been through and the change that I'm sure Keir is wanting to make.

I mean, I'm going to keep out of that one, I think.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Andy Burnham on Keir Starmer, Manchester United, and the police

Really?

Well, yeah, I mean, I'm not going to run commentary on every single issue that's going.

It's quite a big one, though, isn't he?

I mean, do you think it's unfortunate, perhaps, in terms of how it's ended up?

I mean, he's a former leader of the party.

I do think it's unfortunate how it's ended up, as it is with the Jamie Driscoll situation.

Now, I don't know all of the internal considerations that they've looked at.

So I'm sticking out because I don't know all of the ins and outs, the details.

I'm not on the NEC.

I don't see all of the things.

I think it's unfortunate how it's ended up.

But to that extent, I'm going to leave that one be.

This is The News Agents.

Talk briefly about the Tories.

As Mayor of Great Manchester, you have a bit of a front-row seat, or at least maybe back-row seat, in terms of how they treat Manchester, is probably what you'll say.

They felt very front-row in the middle of the pandemic, when we were being railroaded into tier three.

That's what I want to talk to you about.

So you've been at Mayor of Manchester since 2016.

So you've had that seat, you know, Theresa May.

I think David Cameron was actually still there, probably when you were first elected, and obviously in all of the others who've come since.

Why were your impressions of them, sort of watching them, rather than sort of on the media sort of laying into each other, just as operators, as political operators?

What are your impressions of them?

It's no secret that I've got a high regard for Theresa May, who was the first Prime Minister I worked with when I was here.

And we'd worked together on Hillsborough and other things when I was Shadow Home Secretary.

I have a high regard for her, but what I've kind of witnessed ever since then is a real disintegration of standards, really, in terms of the norms that I knew when I was a Minister in Whitehall.

I think they were still intact during the May era, but I think they've definitely been whittled away and were completely obliterated in the Truss era, and in the Johnson era as well, to a degree.

If I was a conservative, I would really be kind of troubled by this question, you know, that the extent to which standards of government norms in the running of the country, which they are meant to embody, completely, the bottom has dropped out of all of that.

And they should be very worried about that, I think.

What was Johnson like to work with during the pandemic?

Was he like watching him?

What was he like?

It was early on, you know, we tried, but they were just making wrong call after wrong call.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Andy Burnham on Keir Starmer, Manchester United, and the police

We were saying from here, for goodness sake, let us do local testing.

They stood down the testing teams, then the next day, let us do local contact tracing.

We've got the teams here.

They outsource it.

So they ended up with a kind of billion, billion pound, sort of 37 billion pound outsourced call operation that didn't contact people who were testing positive.

When we were saying, if you'd have given us money to knock on doors, we could have done it for a fraction of that price.

So that was an early frustration.

But then as we got later into the year, and the case rate was high here, in my view, because they lifted national lockdown too early for the North because, you know, it began in London, went up the country, and then they kind of, they thought it was all fine because it was getting better in London and they lifted it and we were stuck with a problem then.

They started, you know, putting restrictions in here, no compensation.

They closed hospitality in Bolton, no compensation.

And then they said, well, we're going to have this tier three thing and I said, well, where's our full furlough?

Well, there won't be any.

And it was just at that point that, you know, we just said, no, we're not, we're not having this anymore.

So everything he'd come into government to represent, levelling up, voice of the regions and the precise opposite was what was being done from 10 Downing Street.

And that's why we took a stand against it.

And what was your impressions of him just watching it more, talking to him at that time?

I mean, did you think he was in control?

What was he like in that period?

Oh, I don't know, just hard to pin down on anything and just reeling from one thing to another.

His character was right for the moment that we were in.

No, I'd never got that sense that there was control over things.

Things were just happening in a chaotic fashion, you know, the restrictions that they placed on us in July 2020 were kind of sprung on us at the last minute.

When they announced them, there was no detail, people were just thrown into total care.

That was basically how things were.

And Suneak, do you have much of a relationship with him?

What's your impression of him?

I guess there are some signs of improvement on the Johnson and Truss eras, but I don't think that's saying a great deal.

I don't have a kind of clear sense of what he's trying to do for the country.

I've described it here as what was the phrase that we discussed before, chaotic inertia.

That sounds like it to me.

I've just stole my phrase.

I did steal your phrase, but I did some half credit there, but it does feel like that.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Andy Burnham on Keir Starmer, Manchester United, and the police

You know, it just doesn't feel like things are getting fixed.
You know, we've got this latest issue about ticket office closures.
You know, that just gets sprung on us before the summer recess.
Practically every rail ticket office in the England is going to be closed.
You know, really important things are ripped out of communities.
A three-week consultation, I say a consultation.
There's no supporting documents.
You know, people are just completely bewildered by this whole thing.
So it's almost things are going backwards in a chaotic fashion.
And then the politicians sort of denounce those things and they just walk away with them and go and do something else.
I don't know what is this Suneck era about?
I've no clear sense of it.
To the extent that the Johnson era did do some things on levelling up to be fair to them, there was some funding for public transport outside of London.
There was some talk of levelling up.
There was a devolution conversation that we began with Michael Gove.
And I want to give credit where it's due.
You know, Michael has been a support to us.
And again, perhaps to be fair to this government, you know, we signed a devolution deal earlier this year with the government and that was progress.
But broadly, when I look at the big picture, I just wonder, where's the direction for the country?
And I don't see it at the moment.
For a wrap up.
And that's your question about football.
It doesn't come naturally to me.
So hold my hand.
How comfortable are you with the prospect of Man United, which is one of Manchester's big cultural exports being owned by the Qatari government?
Well, if these are questions that everyone's having to sort of embrace in this Premier League era that we're now in.
How do you feel about it?
I don't think anyone feels completely comfortable about that.
And I'm going to be really clear about that.
But the Premier League has kind of moved into a sort of a place where is all the money clean in any Premier League club, you know, there's associations with regimes around the world.
That's how it is now, isn't it?
So obviously, we don't have an outcome yet with regard to the ownership of Manchester United.
I think there's a lot of people in this city would tell you there's a lot wrong with the current ownership regime there in terms of the money that's been taken out of Manchester

[Transcript] The News Agents / Andy Burnham on Keir Starmer, Manchester United, and the police

United over the last decade or so.

You've got questions about it, though.

Does it make you feel a little queasy?

Well, but I think there's a differentiation, isn't there, between you can't solve those issues from here, can you?

Those are issues for the UK government.

Talking to the Qataris, those human rights issues have to be raised at that level.

And they were through the World Cup.

If they were kind of so strong, well, you know, the country would have to decide as a country to say, this is our relationship with Qatar.

I think the way I would put it would be the engagement brings an opportunity to have a different dialogue with them about what this city is all about, what we expect in terms of respecting equality, anti-discrimination, human rights across the board.

Football always creates that opportunity for that type of dialogue between people and it's one that this city will never shy away from.

Absolutely.

Finally, we always finish these with a bit of quick fire.

Oh, no.

Yeah, here we go.

Right.

I've been round long enough to know that this is the worst thing.

OK.

Here we go.

Barbie or Oppenheimer?

Neither.

I guess it would be Oppenheimer.

I've not seen either of them.

You're not a Barbie fan.

My wife and daughter said they were going last weekend.

I just literally looked at them with disbelief.

But anyway, I don't know enough about it.

Blackpool or real?

I would go Blackpool.

Politician you'd least like to be stuck in a lift with?

Oh, God.

I think you're probably Liz Truss at the moment.

I still have no idea what that was all about.

I'm not sure we'd have any connection with it.

You'd always be in a lift for as long as her premiership was.

Sanal GB News?

GB News.

I've been on.

I think that's a pretty easy one.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Andy Burnham on Keir Starmer, Manchester United, and the police

What's your most impressive Tory minister over the last 13 years?

I think it's Michael Gove.

So I know I get accused of a bit of being...

Just cursed him.

Yeah.

I was his shadow when he was Education Secretary.

So I've watched Michael over the years.

I recognise somebody who actually is somebody who is still trying to make change happen in terms of how he sees change should be made, who does listen and is courteous.

And I think those values, if the government wants to sort of kind of get back on track and any political discourse is to sort of be done in the right way.

I think Michael...

I don't agree with him on everything.

Don't get me wrong.

But I think he does embody often the right way of doing things.

Canal Street or Coronation Street?

Both.

Both together.

And what's your biggest regret in politics?

Is it not becoming leader in 2015?

People always talk about the sort of David Miller ban, like that was the great sort of turning point.

But arguably it was you and that decision over benefits and the vote that happened there without getting to all that age in history.

If it might have been Labour leader, then it might have all been different.

Do you still think about that sometime?

I obviously think about it and yeah, there were things I definitely would have done differently given my time again in that 2015 campaign.

Brexit might not have happened?

I mean, the thing about that welfare vote is actually I did persuade the then acting leader and the Shadow Cabinet to oppose that welfare reform bill.

It was in a recent amendment, but the nuances of that are not kind of, they don't translate into social media.

And so, you know, but I was never somebody who just broke with the norms of the team to sort of win a sort of personal battle.

So I don't know, looking back on that, you know, I did make big mistakes in that leadership campaign, probably too many to sort of reel off here, but you learn, don't you?

And I think I'm a much better politician than I was.

I'm certainly much more energised here.

I've loved what I've been doing here.

I'm standing for a third term as Mayor of Greater Manchester, fully intend to serve a third term as...

Full third term.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Andy Burnham on Keir Starmer, Manchester United, and the police

Yeah, yeah.

I love what I'm doing.

And this thing is, what we're building here, as I said before, is genuinely part of a very big part of a country that needs to work very differently in the future.

And I'm talking about quite a radical rewiring of Westminster, proportional representation, you know, elected Senate of the Nations and Regents to replace the Lords, more devolution to the English regions.

You know, honestly, I think we need a major rewiring of this country to make it work better.

And what we're doing here is we're laying some of the early foundations for that.

When Sneak Arm was not in that chair, but the equivalent chair talking to me, he said that he would never like to go back to Westminster.

Mayors are the doers.

Would you match that?

Well, I'm not going to say never, because I, you know, I can see one day that I might and I've been honest about that, but it isn't any time soon.

Kier Starmer rang you up after the next lecture, said, Andy, I want you to come out leveling up, Secretary.

It's unlikely that that is going to happen, because actually, I would say to him, Kier, I think I can do more from here, because a Labour government, as I said earlier, needs to deliver and deliver quickly.

And these combined authorities, that many of them are in Labour cities, regions now, I think a Labour government working with these combined authorities will be the really exciting part of that situation, not everybody reverting to Westminster.

That was the problem with Scotland, wasn't it?

Where all the big players were in Westminster and not in Scotland.

I think Labour could really have a generation in power if we get a really good close way of working between a Labour government nationally, Labour mayors in big city regions, getting delivery going dead quick, building social housing, reforming public transport.

That I would rather be here to do all that.

And you're definitely not going to stand next year?

No, I'm not standing for Parliament next year.

Well, great.

Manchester Weeps.

Andy Burn, thanks so much.

Great as much as Weeps come on, because that stuck with me.

Andy, Burn, thanks so much for joining us on the News Agents.

Thanks a lot, Lewis.

This is the News Agents.

Well, that was fascinating, wasn't it?

He is a really interesting politician and a testament, as he himself says, to the idea of a political life fully formed, not born and extinguished within a few years, as is all too common in British politics these days.

Had he lasted as long as most of our politicians do now, no one would probably even remember

[Transcript] The News Agents / Andy Burnham on Keir Starmer, Manchester United, and the police

him.

He'd be a footnote at best.

Instead, he's a man who is occupying a unique perch in the Labour Party and British politics overall.

And as much as I do believe him when he says that he loves what he's doing, that what's happening in Greater Manchester matters, and it's the crucible of progressive politics now, you can hear in him, can't you, that calling within him, even if he slightly hates himself for it, the calling back to Westminster.

He still wants to be at the centre of national events.

There is still a yearning.

Andy Burnham's not done yet.

That is it from all of us for this week.

Remember, you can catch up on all our shows from this week on Global Player and send us story tips and feedback to newsagents at global.com.

Keep it nice.

We'll see you on Monday.

Have a lovely weekend.

This has been a Global Player original podcast and a Persephoneka production.