

## What if Burnham loses?

Financial Times Europe

05 jiu 2026

Robert Shrimpsley robert.shrimpsley@ft.com

---

It is around 2am in a civic hall in Wigan. Nigel Farage is struggling to keep control of the reptilian grin creeping across his face as he awaits the declaration. Meanwhile the news is flashing across Labour's WhatsApp groups. The king of the north is vanquished. Andy Burnham has lost the Makerfield by-election. No one is coming to save them.



They all knew this was possible. Campaign insiders said it was close. And yet it seemed the script was written. Now they stand like the Greeks beholding the body of Achilles. They eventually dreamt up the wooden horse; what is Labour's plan B?

The betting markets discount this imaginary scene. Allies are already ruminating on who would be in the Manchester mayor's first cabinet once he is prime minister. But the seat was always a good prospect for Reform. So what comes next if Burnham loses?

That dwindling band of Keir Starmer loyalists sees survival in that outcome. Wes Streeting, the recently resigned health secretary, would still challenge him. But Starmer's people argue a shocked party would back the prime minister to stop Streeting. "If Andy loses, Keir will still be here next year," says one ally.

This seems optimistic. The genie is too far out of the bottle. In the words of one who wants Starmer gone: "The shock of Andy losing would be seismic. The status quo will not seem like an option."

So the leadership challenge cannot be dodged. Angela Rayner would probably step up. Yvette Cooper and John Healey, the foreign and defence secretaries, are mentioned as compromise candidates, though rarely with enthusiasm.

More significant is that a Burnham defeat would probably herald a decisive shift of strategy away from trying to win back those voters in traditional Labour areas who have

turned towards Farage. If even Burnham cannot beat Reform in his own backyard, MPs will ask, surely the party needs to look elsewhere.

While Burnham believes he can win back both older working-class voters and younger, more leftwing voters attracted by the Greens, defeat would encourage those who argue that the next election will be won not in the centre ground but by the side that can most unite its political bloc. Even if Burnham wins, the pressure to lean towards the progressives may grow.

Rather than chasing long-lost Reform supporters, they will argue, Labour must rebuild the fragmented left bloc by targeting alienated progressive voters. In the words of the former Downing Street strategist John McTernan, the red wall will give way to a “city wall”. “If we can’t win Makerfield we have to make sure we can win Dulwich and Birmingham Hall Green.”

Labour would turn decisively towards a more leftwing platform focused on urban professionals, graduates, the young and regaining Muslim workingclass voters. New York’s Zohran Mamdani would be the model.

An early shift would be to more openly oppose the Netanyahu government on Gaza. Another would be ditching or diluting Shabana Mahmood’s doubling of the time it would take for legal migrants to qualify for permanent residence. Labour would stop competing on Reform’s territory and make the case for immigration.

It would commit to a path to rejoining the EU, double down on Ed Miliband’s net zero agenda and embrace wealth and business taxes. This would be a party moving back into the comfort zone depicted by the welfare secretary Pat McFadden in his text lamenting that every meeting with MPs asked “who can we tax . . . to pay benefits to others?”

A left-bloc strategy might also suggest leaning into the generational divide. The winter fuel payment shambles showed the dangers of tampering with pensioner benefits. But nudging politics a little more towards the concerns of the under-40s would be aligning with its most likely supporters.

Of course, few strategies are entirely black and white. Burnham, if he wins, would also seek to rebuild Labour support on the left. As one of those early in demanding a ceasefire, he could show more support to the Palestinians, though his position may still be too nuanced for some. He too is dabbling with wealth taxes and he backs proportional representation.

But as the new MP for Makerfield, he would also be more mindful of the kind of voters he now represents. He recognises the potency of the immigration issue and is already paying a price for loose talk on fiscal responsibility. His left appeal will be primarily economic, built on rolling back Thatcherism, through an active state and a focus on inequality and the cost of living. His is the last chance for the vision of a Labour Party able to unite the old working class and liberal progressives.

In reality, if it cannot offer an obvious pathway to higher household living standards — and few contenders seem adequately focused on growth — it will struggle. Perhaps this is a further argument for consolidating the left vote, though it also makes Labour an easier target for Farage.

Whatever happens, Labour is turning left. But not in one single direction. And there is another consequence. A strategy which no longer focuses on winning back voters from the other side of the left-right divide is a further step towards the polarisation of politics: a choice between a Reform-style right or a Green-Labour left. It speeds debate away from serious policy and towards the politics of vibes, identity and contempt for opponents.