ANDREW MARR SHOW
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ANDY BURNHAM

AM: Andy Burnham, the elected Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester joins us from Salford. Andy Burnham, in short, what do you want?

AB: The closing of the north-south divide, Andrew. A former Cabinet Secretary this week said that the UK is one of the most regionally unbalanced countries in the OECD, and he compared the north-south divide to Germany after the wall came down in the early 1990s. He says in relative terms the divide is almost that big. Now, it’s five years almost to the day that a Conservative Chancellor came to this city and promised people here and across the north a ‘Northern Powerhouse’. We’ve had some progress since. We’ve signed a radical industrial strategy this week with government, there’s lots of cranes on our city skyline, but it’s been piecemeal. The big promise, Andrew, was on transport. People can see here that the rail system’s gone in reverse in the last five years. Continued austerity means we’re still having to cut essential services. So unless the incoming prime minister makes a firm commitment to the Northern Powerhouse, it’s in danger of fizzling out.

AM: Alright. Well, you mentioned rail just now. At least two of the candidates – Michael Gove and Dominic Raab – have put a serious question mark over the future of HS2. Boris Johnson feels in the same sort of place. HS2 is now under threat isn’t it?

AB: It would seem to. And it’s crucial, we would say. We need it because it lays the infrastructure, Andrew, for the west to east rail system, Northern Powerhouse rail as that it’s called.

AM: So you’ve changed your mind quite radically on this, because back in 2014 you said HS2 represented, ‘maximum disruption and minimal benefit,’ to your part of the word, and was a, ‘poor deal
for most of the region’s taxpayers. HS2 should go back to the drawing board,’ you said. But you’ve changed your mind.

AB: No, they did go back to the drawing board, and since then it’s become part of an integrated system where we’ve got west to east rail coming through using the HS2 infrastructure. That was exactly what I was calling for. So now you’ve got Northern Powerhouse rail coming on the back of HS2. But let’s be clear, those two projects alone do not solve transport problems in the north of England. If you are to build a Northern Powerhouse, as we were promised by the Conservatives, it means putting the north at the front of the queue for transport and infrastructure investment for the next 25 years, as London has been for the last 50 years. That’s what they promised us, Andrew, and we’re still waiting.

AM: You mentioned the Kerslake report on the north-south divide a moment ago, and that compared that with the divide between East and West Germany back in the 1990s, at the end of the Communist period. Can I put it to you that when you were in government, you were Culture Secretary, you were Chief Secretary to the Treasury, you were Health Secretary, you did very, very little to close that divide.

AB: Well, we did something. But let me just agree with what you’re saying. We have lived in a London-centric country for as long as I can remember. Westminster has failed the north of England under governments of all colours over many decades, and that is what has got to change.

AM: Including under Andy Burnham.

AB: Well, yes. Well, to a degree. But we did something. I’m talking to you now, Andrew, from Media City, which was the Labour government’s initiative to ask the BBC to rebalance. And actually we’re not asking for favours here. I would put it to you that today, ten years on, the BBC is stronger. I remember as Culture Secretary, senior BBC executives coming through my
office saying, ‘oh, there’s no talent up there, it’ll be a wasteland. There’ll be nowhere to buy a flat white coffee. It’ll be awful for us.’ And look at the BBC today. Stronger because it has voices from all over the country on its airwaves and not the ivory tower that it was then. And I think other organisations can become stronger if they rebalance from south to north in the same way as the BBC has.

AM: So we’ve been talking about the Blair years a bit. You’ll have seen from social media a very interesting thing going on right at the moment. Tony Blair has hit back in a video against Jeremy Corbyn’s attack on your government, the Blair government, for being part of a kind of neo-liberal consensus, not doing enough for people at the bottom of the heap and so on. Looking at that contest between Tony Blair and Jeremy Corbyn, which one of them is right? They can’t both be.

AB: Well, do you know, I just kind of find it odd that the energy is going into constantly raking over the past when we have a Conservative government that is really damaging people’s lives here. So surely the Labour Party should be focusing on that, getting ourselves a bit further forward in the polls rather than arguing with each other. I think that’s part of the problem, I could say, Andrew. We should be focusing on the government and doing our job as an opposition.

AM: One of your biggest pledges when you became Mayor of Greater Manchester, was that you were going to tackle homelessness. It’s gone backwards on your watch, 34 per cent up in central Manchester. When are you going to do something about it?

AB: Well, I’m afraid you’ve got your facts wrong there. I said I wanted to end rough sleeping, and for the first time in eight years the number of people sleeping rough in Greater Manchester is coming down. I have introduced a scheme –
AM: Sorry, I specifically said the city of Manchester, in central Manchester it’s 34 per cent increase in rough sleeping.

AB: I’m the Mayor of Greater Manchester and I have the responsibility for the whole city region, and last year for the first time in eight years the number of people sleeping rough came down. I have introduced a scheme called A Bed Every Night, where we are giving every rough sleeper here somewhere to go every night. There are 300 people in our hostels every night. That isn’t happening in any other UK city. Are we yet where we want to be? No. There’s a lot more to do to improve the quality of what we are doing. But hopefully I will soon be able to –

AM: So you can end it by next year? That’s what you promised.

AB: Well, hopefully, hopefully, I will soon be able to confirm that A Bed Every Night will continue for another year. And in my view, if I’m giving everybody somewhere to go every night, that does meet in spirit the commitment that I made.

AM: The reason I mentioned central Manchester is that is where the vast majority of rough sleepers have been, and that has gone up quite sharply, 34 per cent, according to the survey, on your watch. How do you end it by next year?

AB: By ensuring that we have enough beds in all ten of our boroughs to give people somewhere to go every night. Nowhere else in the country, Andrew, is doing what we’re doing. I’m not saying it’s all perfect, but we are working flat out to make this happen. As I say to you, the numbers are coming down for the first time in eight years. That is a real achievement when we’ve got continued Conservative austerity in our city that is making my job even harder. But even so, we are still bringing things down in the way that we promised.

AM: Now, back in that original 2017 campaign you told Radio Manchester, you said: ‘I get more complaints about the buses than anything else. We’ll be moving ahead with the powers we have with plans to re-regulate the buses. We can have a
regulated system like London.’ Now, you haven’t done that. Why not?
AB: Because we’ve been waiting for parliament to pass the order which allows me to take a big decision on the future of the buses in Greater –
AM: You’ve been given the powers, haven’t you?
AB: No, we were waiting for parliament to pass an order. They now have, so a decision is coming soon, Andrew. You know, buses have to change here. If you want a very everyday example of the north-south divide, let me give you one. It costs £4 here for a single bus journey, capped at £1.50 in London. How can that possibly be fair? So we’re ready to take a decision. But actually we need the same level of subsidy for our bus system and our public transport system again that London has had for years. So back on the theme that I mentioned to you at the top of the programme, it’s time that we were given the same investment as London has had for decades. There’s no Northern Powerhouse without it.

AM: Alright. One last pledge then, which is on climate change. You said you’d make the region carbon neutral by 2038, which is relatively early. How much would that cost?
AB: Of course, it’s a big commitment. And yes, it would require some up-front investment. But the 2038 figure is backed by detailed research from the University of Manchester, and this week the UK government backed it, as I said, in that industrial strategy which we signed. Actually in the long run I think it’ll bring benefits, Andrew, to the Greater Manchester economy. And this is how devolution to the English regions can benefit the country. If you free up the English cities to go further and faster on those big challenges we face, then we will help everybody move forward at a greater pace.

AM: But if you really mean it you presumably want Manchester Airport to contract rather than expand, and you’d be rethinking
the £6 billion that you plan to spend on roads, which is not going to help carbon emissions at all.

AB: Well, firstly aviation is a national policy issue, so that isn't in my hands. But if you want the facts on transport investment, what I have got to spend I have prioritised cycling and walking. I've proposed a ban on fracking across Greater Manchester. We are moving forward with a Greater Manchester-wide clean air zone. If you want to debate my record on these things I'll do it all day, Andrew.

AM: We haven't got all day, unfortunately, but thanks very much indeed for talking to us, Andy Burnham.

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