

THE BIG INTERVIEW

Of all the elected mayors that came to office in 2017, it was the election of Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester that caught the imagination and provided the mayoral movement with a big political personality on which it could hang its hat.

Not only was Burnham a prominent parliamentarian, a member of Labour's shadow cabinet, and a former Cabinet member – he is still a possible leader of his party in the future.

That someone as serious as Burnham had recognised the power and potential of a metro mayor role really did make people sit up and take notice.

So, it was an easy decision to choose Andy for our Big Interview for the 2018 Big Black Book.

Andy Burnham

Greater Manchester Metro Mayor



Having served as a Cabinet member in Gordon Brown's government, and then as one of Labour's most effective and high-profile opposition spokesmen, Leigh MP Andy Burnham surrendered his place at Westminster to lead a city region that is largely accepted as the heart of the Northern Powerhouse, Greater Manchester.

Downtown's boss Frank McKenna caught up with the mayor, asking him about his new role, his past experiences, and why he thinks devolved government can deliver a better deal for the English regions.

Why did you decide to give up a safe parliamentary seat, which you had held for 16 years, to become mayor of Greater Manchester?

I spent 16 years as MP for the brilliant people of Leigh and I tried to fight that London-centric culture that still pervades in this country. But in the end I realised that the best way to make real change was to leave that system behind and challenge it from the outside. I'll be honest, I've not missed the old point-scoring Westminster politics for a second. The work we are doing here is much more rewarding and is really changing people's lives for the better.

What do you think the biggest failings of Westminster are? How does this affect places like Greater Manchester and the other English

regions outside of London?

Westminster, in my view, has failed the north of England. It's given us a second-class transport system, housing and homeless crisis, an education system that obsesses on the university route and neglects technical education and in the past it's focused on service industries and sold manufacturing down the river.

If you are to realise a city region's potential, then you have to involve people differently. Running a city or a city region in the old Whitehall way – publishing strategy documents decided in closed rooms and then instructing the public sector to work in a certain way – is now so totally out of date it is utterly irrelevant. That's why we are involving people with real experience in their fields to help write policy – across our digital and green summits and the homelessness action network.

How have you found your early months in the new job, and what have been the significant moments?

Coming into this role feels quite invigorating because you're in a position where you can do something and make a direct difference. I feel like people here have accepted the legitimacy of a mayor and are impatient to see change delivered. The most significant moment since my election

was the terrible attack on May 22. But through such tragedy the spirit of Greater Manchester shone through. We continue to stand together. The spirit shown since that awful day is the same that Manchester has always shown historically. It is 100 years since the Suffragettes secured women's right to vote and 150 since the foundation of the Trades Union Congress.

Both of these movements grew out of the streets of our city and went on to change the world. In this way, Manchester has always given people hope that things can be better than they are; that we don't have to accept the status quo; that by standing together we can make things fairer for everyone.

Why have you made the tackling of homelessness such a priority?

Throughout the mayoral election the topic that kept being raised by people across Greater Manchester was the growing levels of rough sleeping on our streets. That's because people here don't just walk past people in doorways without noticing them. They want something to be done. I pledged to end rough sleeping in our city region by 2020 and we are working flat out to achieve it. Whilst homelessness and rough sleeping are issues that did not originate here in Greater Manchester, we are creating ground-breaking new solutions to ensure people get the help



they need. We will not stop until we have ensured everyone has a safe and secure place to stay across Greater Manchester by 2020.

I have been taken aback by the generosity of people in our city region as we work together to end rough sleeping. I am proud of how Greater Manchester has come together, with the strong partnership between public, private and voluntary sectors, to make a huge difference to those who need it most.

I know you are working with other mayors around the country at 'what next' for devolution. Given that 'Devo Manc' is the most advanced of the initial devolution deals struck, what do you think the city regions next asks should be?

Devolution has allowed us to create new ways of working that are providing a well-needed boost to our public services. But we could make real change with increased devolution from the Government. Departments in Whitehall can be a big barrier to success though – like the resistance from the Department for Education to allow the devolution of the post-16 skills policy. We have been asked by Government to improve this, but without more devolution we cannot carry out their wishes.

It will be city regions working together that drive the quickest and most progressive change in the future. As we leave the EU it is vital that people here have the right skills to get on in life and drive our economy. The Government must urgently increase the speed

of devolution and fully devolve skills powers and the ability to allocate the apprenticeship levy. It's time to give us the tools we need to change the lives of the people we represent.

You have also advocated a 'Council for the North'. Tell me more about that?

It is time for the North to pool its political influence and show a real willingness to use it, like London, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have been doing in recent times. Westminster has failed the north of England but in the past we have struggled to speak with one clear voice on its unfair decisions. With the change in the parliamentary arithmetic, we have a chance to win more support for our cause. By working together with our council leaders, businesses and MPs – alongside trade unions and the community and voluntary sector - we can ensure a strong voice and a fair deal for the North. If we get this right, it could mark a real change to the politics of our country.

One key area where the North needs to speak as one is the improvement of our transport infrastructure. For too long the North has been forgotten, with people left with clapped-out trains and a second class service. We need commitment from the Government to invest in the North to ensure that our transport system is brought into the 21st century. The redevelopment of Piccadilly station is not simply about Manchester. If the wrong decision is made there it will affect the entire North.

What does Burnham in year three look like? What are the key things you would like to achieve?

Greater Manchester is already the best place in the UK to live – we want to make it one of the best places in the world. Our plan through the Greater Manchester Strategy will ensure that everybody in Greater Manchester has access to the best opportunities growing up, getting on and growing older.

Within three years, and if we can achieve it earlier, no one should be forced to spend a night on the streets. By using the powers we have to improve local buses and by holding transport bosses to account I believe we can start to get the transport system we need to deliver a growing 21st century city region.

It's an ambitious plan but it is one that, with the help of everyone across Greater Manchester, we are determined to achieve. Through devolution, we have the best chance we will ever get to do things differently and write our own future. It is time to grab it with both hands.

You have highlighted the digital sector as a key growth area for Greater Manchester. What has been the idea behind the summits you have hosted – what might they, and other mayoral business forums, deliver?

Greater Manchester famously likes to do things differently and this is exactly what we are doing when it comes to building our digital future. When I got elected as mayor, I asked the digital and tech community here to help me write a plan that will help us achieve our goal to be the UK's leading digital city region. They are helping to provide exciting proposals that will take Greater Manchester to the next stage of our digital journey. Our digital ambitions are more than just in tech though, as we are looking to use digital to bring benefits to our whole society. It is things like this that make us stand out.

The principle of co-design is something that we are really putting at the heart of everything we're doing. We engaged with charitable, voluntary, public and private organisations when writing the strategy on rough sleeping and homelessness. We are bringing people together around school readiness and our green ambitions. We are doing politics differently and driving real change from the bottom up.

What would be your message to business? Should we be confident about a post-Brexit Britain?

Greater Manchester is open for business. We're a thriving investment hub, a digital and creative powerhouse and a manufacturing innovator. But many of our businesses still face challenges as they try to grow and succeed here. Only by working together with business people, can we tackle these issues.

I have appealed to all business people in Greater Manchester, from sole traders to Corporation CEOs, to join me. My new Business Advisory Panel will reflect the breadth and diversity of businesses and business people we have here. Together, I believe we can make Greater Manchester the best place to live, work and invest.

