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By: TA | AP Insight

Andy Burnham brings good vibes to Labour's annual conference

British Prime Minister Andy Burnham has been in the job for two months, and so far his party isn't demanding his head. These days, that's an accomplishment.

The governing Labour Party opened its annual conference beside the River Mersey in Liverpool on Sunday, with Burnham pledging to turn the page on a decade of economic and political turmoil.

He is the U.K.'s seventh prime minister since the country voted in 2016 to leave the European Union.

Burnham said the message of his keynote conference speech on Tuesday would be: "It's time for Britain to have hope again."

"I am here to end the decade of drift and division that we've had since Brexit, because it's not been a great decade for Britain," he said on Sunday.

His message is aimed at both the British public and a center-left party that is hopeful but nervous — ready to embrace his promise of better times, but worried about economic damage rippling out from conflict in the Middle East.

University of Manchester political science professor Rob Ford said Burnham's difficult task is to win over "a skeptical electorate" eager for change, "while at the same time doing that within the constraints of a very difficult economic and fiscal situation."

In short: "How do you serve people a bowl of cold porridge and convince them it's a pepperoni pizza?"

Upbeat Burnham replaced unpopular Starmer

Britain's main political parties all hold conferences in September and October, combinations of pep rally, social gathering and policy forum that set the political tone and agenda for the year ahead.

Last year's Labour gathering was gloomy, as members despaired about Prime Minister Keir Starmer's deep unpopularity, little more than a year after winning power in a landslide, and the seemingly unstoppable rise of the anti-immigration opposition party Reform UK.

Burnham, then the popular mayor of Greater Manchester, was followed around Liverpool by journalists as speculation grew that he would challenge Starmer.

Events came to a head months later when a panicky party forced Starmer's resignation and his replacement by Burnham as party leader and prime minister in July.

Now, Labour is seeing a "Burnham bounce" driven by the new leader's upbeat talk and modest moves to put money in voters' pocketbooks by cutting tax on electricity bills and capping bus fares.

Meanwhile, Reform is facing parliamentary and police investigations over its finances — though it also recently received 72 million pounds ($95 million) from two cryptocurrency billionaires.

> All of this speculation on an early election, I can knock that dead - Andy Burnham

Burnham has already set out some priorities, including handing more power to local leaders in order to generate "good growth in every post code."

He says he'll reform Britain's privatized utilities, especially the expensive, leaky and polluting water network, and will tackle the soaring cost of housing with measures including a government-backed loan plan to help people buy their first homes.

While the party is relatively united behind Burnham, he faces a divisive decision about whether to approve new oil drilling in the North Sea – opposed by environmentalists but backed by trade unions – and pushback over plans agreed under Starmer to make it harder

for immigrants to settle permanently in Britain.

The next general election does not have to be called until 2029, but Labour's revival has sparked talk of a snap election – something Burnham denies he's considering.

"All of this speculation on an early election, I can knock that dead," Burnham told broadcaster ITV on Friday.

Looming budget promises pain

But no matter how upbeat Burnham is, economic pain is coming.

Burnham must explain to party members and voters how he will deal with economic turbulence from the on-off U.S.-Iran war, which has severely restricted the movement of oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz.

Treasury chief John Healey is set to deliver the Burnham government's first budget on Oct. 28, with rising energy prices pushing up inflation and the cost of government borrowing.

Like other countries, Britain also needs to find money to increase defense spending to counter threats from Russia - John Healey

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At the same time, Burnham is promising to strengthen Britain's state-funded National Health Service and set up a "national care service" to fix what he calls a " broken" social care system.

That means tax rises or spending cuts – or both – could be on the cards.

One thing that might bring an economic boost is to ease some of the trade barriers erected by Brexit.

Burnham has pledged closer ties with the European Union, though he's currently bound by Starmer's 2024 election pledge not to rejoin the bloc or enter its single market for goods, services and employment.

Progress toward closer ties has been slow. A summit to reset EU-U.K. relations which was initially due to be held in July has been pushed back to November at the earliest because the two sides are wrangling over the bloc's "made in Europe" rules, which Britain says will hurt its producers.

Ford said that, unlike Starmer, who quickly squandered the public's goodwill, Burnham has retained his reputation "as an optimist and an effective communicator." But Burnham's "really stern test" is yet to come, he said.

"The bills are still going to land on the doormat," Ford said. "He's going to have to be the prime minister who can sell the average voter on, 'Yes, that is indeed a bowl of cold porridge in front of you, but it will get better.'"