

What is Andy Burnham's Manchesterism - and can it save Britain?

With eyes yet again turning to Andy Burnham after a dismal set of local elections for Labour, one word will keep being mentioned



Stephen Topping Senior reporter

07:13, 10 May 2026 | Updated 18:16, 14 May 2026

There's a horrifically overused phrase about our city and how it 'does things differently'.

But it's a phrase that won't go away any time soon - because it's true. It was repeated, for the umpteenth time, at a speech to the Institute of Fiscal Studies back in January.

This time, mayor **Andy Burnham** was the culprit. He had just given a speech on Greater Manchester's economy, announcing plans for five industrial 'clusters' across the region and discussing a 10-year plan for investment.

He lamented what he described as the 'four horsemen of Britain's apocalypse' - namely deregulation, privatisation, austerity and Brexit. And he used a word that could soon define not only his mayoralty, but his vision to transform the whole country.

"Manchesterism is a modern and functional response to the high-inequality, low-growth trap that came from the 1980s drive to over-centralise political power in the Treasury and privatise economic power," Mr Burnham said.

Manchesterism, Mr Burnham said, is the 'creation of a different political culture' that represents the 'polar opposite of the Whitehall and Westminster way'. But if the mayor manages to find a way to Downing Street, in the aftermath of a dismal local elections for Labour, it could soon become a significant part of the Whitehall and Westminster way.

Labour was roundly thumped in this week's local elections - losing dozens of seats in Greater Manchester and councils across the country. Yet as voters told the Manchester Evening News regularly as [we visited towns around the region over the last few weeks](#), Mr Burnham remains popular - and Manchesterism is part of that.

What is Manchesterism?

Manchesterism is about being 'placed-based' rather than party political, in order to raise the ambitions of an area. It's about public services working closer together, and in partnership with both the private sector and community groups, to ensure the benefits of a stronger economy can be felt by more people.

Manchester's leaders have a long tradition of working with others to get things done. Its [Labour](#) council has worked with governments red and blue, and shown itself to be firmly open for business with the private sector time and time again.

With the post-IRA bomb redevelopment in the city centre and the regeneration of [Eastlands](#) ahead of the Commonwealth Games, Manchester had already seen huge transformation long before Mr Burnham swapped the House of Commons for the Tootal Buildings. But devolution ramped things up a notch.

The region has become [the fastest growing economy in the UK over the last decade](#) - even faster than London's - at more than double the rate of the national average. Devolution has been critical to this success - and has created the set of circumstances that are becoming known as Manchesterism.

When Mr Burnham became mayor in 2017, he assumed responsibility - and funding - for key areas including transport, skills and business support, housing delivery and strategic planning, and public service reform for areas including health, social care and early years. In the years since, his powers have increased, with the 'trailblazer' devolution deal struck in 2023.

Those powers have allowed Greater Manchester to take public control of key services which enable residents to have improved living standards and, in turn, boost the local

economy. This is Manchesterism in action - and the most obvious example is the Bee Network, a bright yellow symbol of Mr Burnham's mayoralty on wheels.

Assuming public control of the formerly deregulated bus network allows routes to be decided according to need, rather than driven by profit. As passenger numbers increase, fares can be cut, giving passengers more pounds in their pockets to spend elsewhere.

Official figures suggest passenger numbers have risen since the Bee Network was launched, while passenger satisfaction has also increased. [Metrolink](#) trams also form part of the Bee Network, with integrated tickets available, and local train journeys could soon be included too.

Bus franchising has been so successful and popular that other city-regions are following Greater Manchester's example. Mr Burnham has also followed in the Mancunian tradition of working cross-party, and cross-sector, in order to secure investment.

Mayoral development corporations tackle regeneration projects in targeted areas, such as [Stockport](#) and [Middleton](#). Meanwhile, the £1bn Good Growth Fund is using cash raised by more lucrative projects in order to finance schemes in other parts of the region that are considered 'left behind' - with the potential for tens of thousands of new jobs.

Some of the projects funded might be unattractive for private developers or fail to meet Treasury criteria on for investment - but could be crucial in turning places around. It's hoped that in the years to come, projects like the Atom Valley between [Bury](#) and [Rochdale](#) will help to drive down economic inequalities within Greater Manchester.

If Mr Burnham was to swap Greater Manchester for Westminster now, he would not have seen his regional vision through to completion. But with a strategy set in stone through to 2035, the plans would be in place for his successor to pick up the reins - while they would have gained a willing supporter in the House of Commons.

'It's no mean feat'

As chair of Rochdale's branch of the Greater Manchester Tenants Union, Mark Slater has fought many battles on behalf of people facing difficulty with their living situation - most notably at Seven Sisters. He believes Mr Burnham, and his brand of Manchesterism, has been 'absolutely' on the side of working people.

"I would hope that he would not lose sight of what he has achieved in Greater Manchester, and continues to take that forward," he said. "What he's done with the Bee Network, that's a benefit to working people who can get about, it's a benefit to the environment because more people are on buses, and it's a benefit in terms of the economy.

"It's no mean feat to say that Greater Manchester has the fastest growing economy in the country. We've got good mayors in the rest of the country, but Andy is on top of all of them.

"He's got a great mayoral management skill - pulling people together, getting people to work together, developing the economy, transport, jobs. I'm a big fan as you can probably tell, but it's there for everybody to see."

It's understood that those who have worked closely with the mayor believe that Manchesterism could work in other parts of the UK. It could provide cities and towns with additional powers to 'fix the foundations' which allow people to live more prosperous lives, build a stronger community and enable the economy to grow.

Mathew Lawrence, director of progressive think tank Common Wealth, goes even further with his beliefs. "Manchesterism is not only nationally scalable, it is the plan the country needs," he said.

"Regaining public control of essentials can fix our broken foundations. It helps make life affordable for ordinary people, and supports businesses to thrive. The Bee Network shows what can be done at a city level. That same ambition at a national scale can bring the change people are clearly desperate for."

Manchester would pose a radical departure from the UK's largely centralised economy, which has seen London dominate for the last 50 years. Its thought that in turn, it could also reduce pressure of the country's stretched public services, which would work closer together and more proactively - without having to step in to fix problems all the time.

"Manchesterism is saying, other parts of the country can generate prosperity too," said Professor Marc Stears, director of the Policy Hub at University College London. He says Manchesterism is about a 'commitment to collaboration' which can 'unlock new opportunities - alongside less short-term thinking and the building of more long-term partnerships.

While Mr Burnham may have followed the path of former Manchester council leader Sir Richard Leese on this, Prof Stears says Mr Burnham has added 'a personal style'. "He is happy to walk in the street with people from across different walks of life," said Prof Stears.

"That personal touch is really important in the way he has tried to run Greater Manchester. One of the things supporters say is that we need to see more of that in politics generally."

That 'personal touch' has certainly not gone unnoticed with Greater Manchester residents. As the Manchester Evening News [spoke to voters across the region ahead of the local elections](#), Mr Burnham's name regularly came up in glowing terms.

It stood in stark contrast to the views people had of Sir Keir Starmer - yet Prof Stears says the Prime Minister had tried to include elements of Manchesterism in the 'missions' that made up his 2024 manifesto. "But certainly they have struggled to have the same impact," he said.

"Is that down to leadership? Is it the way Number 10 works? Is it fundamental problems in the economy that we have not fixed?"14 pt

'An uphill struggle'

Those questions could pose a major challenge to the idea that Manchesterism could turn Britain's fortunes around. Andrew Carter, chief executive of Centre for Cities - a think tank focused on the economies of cities and towns - acknowledges that bringing Manchesterism to Westminster could be an 'uphill struggle' - but one which would be worth embarking on.

"In some respects, the fact it's an uphill struggle is a symbol that this is quite a big project and a big change," he said. "It's not small-scale stuff on the margins. We're asking pretty fundamental questions about how the country functions, how it operates.

"Those are big questions that are not easily resolved. It's a big and important thing. If it was straight-forward, I would suggest that it's a marginal thing, and it would not make much difference... Hopefully if we do it, it could have big benefits for all parts of the country - or more parts of the country at least."

At least until now, Greater Manchester has also benefitted from relative political stability. The region isn't entirely Labour-led, but Mr Burnham has worked collaboratively with [Liberal Democrats](#) in Stockport, plus former Conservative council leaders in [Bolton](#) and [Trafford](#).

With many left-leaning voters moving towards the Green Party and right-leaning voters backing Reform UK, the political landscape looks increasingly uncertain, both locally and nationally. Dr Sarah Longlands, chief executive of the Manchester-based Centre for Local Economic Strategies, believes that picture could make the national success of Manchesterism 'a challenge for anybody'.

Manchesterism could still be regarded as being in its early stages. The 'trailblazer' deeper devolution deal dates back less than three years - while the Greater Manchester strategy, which outlines plans to spread the benefits of economic growth across all 10 boroughs, runs through to 2035.

Clearly, the job Mr Burnham began hasn't been finished. Dr Longlands believes that, for all the benefits devolution has brought, Greater Manchester still remains a 'tale of two cities', with a divide across the region over income and opportunities - something which hasn't been helped by the cost of living crisis.

She said: "There are positives, but on the other side we have still got more than one-third of children growing up in poverty. That figure has risen with the cost of living. We've got a very significant number of people on social housing waiting lists.

"There is a question about the extent to which the growth we have seen in the city and the levels of private investment we have seen, how much people benefit from that growth... Growth in Greater Manchester has to be for everybody - otherwise, what's the point?"

For Mr Burnham, Manchesterism holds the key to building the 'solid foundations' that could lead to a 'higher-value, future-facing, more productive economy'. Whether he will get the chance to take it to Downing Street remains to be seen.