

# Voters tip Burnham to succeed Starmer

SIR Keir Starmer should be succeeded as Labour leader by Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, an exclusive poll has found.

Mr Burnham, who has courted the Left by opposing the Government's welfare cuts, has nearly three times the support of his nearest rival, Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner.

The research, by Tory former deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft, puts Mr Burnham on 13 per cent among all voters, with Ms Rayner on five per cent.

They are followed by Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, Health Secretary Wes Streeting and

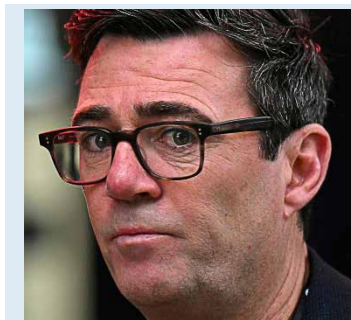
By **Glen Owen**

POLITICAL EDITOR

Energy Secretary Ed Miliband. Among Labour voters, Mr Burnham is on 20 per cent, followed by Ms Rayner on 10 per cent.

This follows him attacking Government plans, saying: 'There is no case in any scenario for cutting the support available to disabled people who are unable to work.'

Asked whether Labour is changing the country for better or worse, just 17 per cent think the situation is improving and 46 per cent say Britain is in a worse posi-



## WHO SHOULD SUCCEED SIR KEIR STARMER AS LABOUR LEADER?

Andy Burnham (left)	13%
Angela Rayner	5%
Yvette Cooper	3%
Wes Streeting	3%
Ed Miliband	3%

tion. Voters are also sceptical that Sir Keir will strike a positive deal with Donald Trump in the tariff war, with 31 per cent confident Sir

Keir will protect UK interests and only one in 20 saying they had a 'great deal of confidence'. A total of 58 per cent are pessimistic. But

60 per cent say Brexit has given the UK an advantage and was the most important factor in Mr Trump's decision to put lower tariffs on UK imports than EU goods.

Asked if strains in the Atlantic alliance meant the UK should seek a closer relationship with China, 49 per cent said Britain should keep its dealings with China as they are. Sixteen per cent want more contact and 17 per cent less.

Ahead of next month's local elections, Sir Keir remains top of the 'best Prime Minister' ratings, with 33 per cent, ahead of Reform's Nigel Farage on 20 per cent and Tory Kemi Badenoch on nine.

**A** CHANGING global order can affect domestic politics in one of three ways. Governments can be thrown out as voters are drawn to new parties and leaders more in tune with the times. Or people can get behind familiar incumbents, as we saw when the Tories rocketed in the polls during the early days of Covid.

Alternatively, things can bumble along pretty much as they were, but with extra grumbling.

Three months to the day since President Trump was inaugurated for his second stint, it already feels as though we have had a year's worth of news.

The era of globalisation, we are told, is over. True to our national character, however, there is little sense of panic.

My latest poll finds most people believing that tariffs will fall as Trump does his deals around the world. Few want Britain to

## If Labour ran an Easter egg hunt, the eggs would be tiny (and you'd have to hand half of them back)

But – sorry, Kemi – voters in my poll were just as scathing about the Tories



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

FORMER DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

**'Most expect large-scale immigration and cheap Chinese goods'**

respond in kind, or to risk rocking the boat by cancelling his forthcoming State visit. There is no clamour to rejoin the EU for greater protection, nor to seek a closer relationship with China.

Even so, people tend to see more threats than opportunities in the way the world is changing. When we ask what is likely to stay or go – and how they feel about the prospect either way – we find that the least popular features of global life are the things people think most likely to persist. Most expect continued large-scale immigration into Britain, as well as the availability of cheap goods from China (which many say they consider a bad thing, despite persistent complaints about the cost of living).

And very few think the current upheaval heralds the end of British politics as we know it, however much many voters might wish otherwise. Despite his pledge to intervene to help our industries and conclude a new trade deal with the US, few have much confidence that the Prime Minister will

successfully protect Britain's interests – either because they believe no leader could do so in the current climate or (more often) because they don't think Keir Starmer is up to it.

More broadly, voters are much more likely to say Labour are bringing change for the worse than for the better, with those who switched to the party last year evenly divided between the two views. Only a minority of 2024 Labour voters think the government is improving things.

One reason is that with a bleaker global outlook – not to mention self-inflicted moves such as more regulations and extra costs for employers – the economy is

stagnant, and Chancellor Rachel Reeves faces an ever-tougher struggle to balance the books.

But to many, including a big chunk of Labour's own supporters, tough decisions such as trimming the welfare budget look less like prudent economic management and more a continuation of austerity – and Tory austerity at that.

While Conservatives in the Cameron-Osborne years supported the 'long-term economic plan' to take a stern approach to the public finances, those who backed Starmer last July hoped for something different. As someone who had reluctantly backed Labour at the Election put it in a focus group in Scotland, choosing between the

two main parties' economic policies felt like choosing 'between gonorrhoea and chlamydia'.

When we asked what an Easter egg hunt organised by the Labour party would be like, we were told: 'They would be very, very small eggs. And you'd have to give half of them back.' (The other parties did not come away unscathed: the Conservatives would have a bouncer on the door to make sure only people with a certain income got in; the Reform UK event would be held in a pub garden and descend into a drunken fist fight; and the SNP would say: 'We haven't got any eggs because England hasn't given us the budget.') All of which helps explain why, despite

the disruptions of recent months, domestic politics looks much the same as it has for most of the year, with Labour, the Tories and Reform still within a few points of each other in the least-unpopular-party stakes. In fact, despite the multiple challenges piling up on the PM's desk, it is Kemi Badenoch who is entering a critical phase of her leadership.

Her statement that Britain should abandon the target of net zero by 2050 was well received among Conservative and Reform-inclined voters (or at least those who heard it). But when we ask Tory voters who would make the best PM, her lead over Starmer and Farage has fallen back since January – perhaps partly due to Starmer's measured response to the global dramas. The same is true when we ask who they most trust to run the economy.

That pressure will intensify with the local elections in England, 11 days from today. As I found in my

**'Few believe Keir Starmer will protect Britain's interests'**

poll, most Conservatives expect the party to make gains, no doubt on the assumption that voters will want to show their disgruntlement with an unpopular Labour government. But the General Election is the wrong baseline. These council seats were last contested four years ago – with Boris Johnson in his pomp, the Tories riding high in the polls, a world-leading vaccine rollout underway and Starmer on the verge of resignation after losing the Hartlepool by-election.

There would be no real prospect of a Conservative advance on May 1 under any leader, but when it fails to materialise Badenoch can nevertheless expect the blame. However unfair, judgments like these come with the territory of political leadership. The question is whether her party will break its recent habits and hold its nerve.

● Lord Ashcroft is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His research is at [LordAshcroftPolls.com](http://LordAshcroftPolls.com). X/Facebook @LordAshcroft