

Want Starmer out? Vote Labour. Think he should stay? Vote Reform. My poll proves it's a funny old world

WITH the launch of Andy Burnham's by-election campaign, Britain entered a sort of political limbo.

Only six people in a hundred think Keir Starmer will still be Prime Minister after the next election, but even more uncertain is whether he will still be in No 10 in a few weeks – and if not, who will?

The electors of Makerfield find themselves in an unusual position. Those who want to oust the PM and bring down the Labour Government in its current form will have to vote... Labour. Any who think Starmer is unfairly maligned, is doing a reasonable job in impossible circumstances and deserves more than two years in office after a decade and a half of the Tories (and such people exist in greater numbers than you might think) would be best advised to vote for Reform UK.

It is, as the philosopher said, a funny old world.

We will know in just over a fortnight if the Wigan constituency has agreed to serve as the vehicle for Burnham's ambition or whether – from despair with Labour, the lure of Reform or sheer British bloody-mindedness – they decide to throw a spanner in the works. There is, after all, something about the spectacle of politicians carving things up among themselves that rubs people the wrong way ('it would be very funny if he didn't get in,' chuckled someone in my focus groups last week).

If Makerfield declines to comply, the threat to Starmer persists. Wes Streeting has declared his intentions, after all. In my groups, those who had a view of Streeting at all rather liked him. He seemed to them less argumentative and more approachable and 'normal' than most politicians, although some wondered if a 'nice man' was what Britain needed at the moment. For those with better things to do than follow the political soap opera, he was a blank page ('I only heard of him on the news on the way here just now,' another remarked).

Angela Rayner, also a possible contender if Burnham is sent



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

PHILANTHROPIST, AUTHOR AND POLLSTER

packing to his mayoral parlour, continues to provoke strong views on both sides. But if she thinks being cleared by HMRC over her £40,000 stamp duty underpayment

‘If Makerfield says yes to Burnham, then what?’

is the same thing as being cleared by the voters, I fear she is mistaken. 'She lost her job because of the tax dodge, and suddenly she's back in like it never happened!' observed one of our participants.

Others sensed a stitch-up: 'They don't clear anybody normally, do they, once HMRC get hold of you. That wouldn't happen for a normal person if they hadn't paid their taxes.' The mistrust lingers.

Rayner's supporters would no doubt point to Green leader Zack Polanski, his apparent failure to pay council tax while living on a houseboat and the bizarre embellishments to his employment history. Green partisans, in turn, would deflect the conversation to Nigel Farage and his £5million gift from crypto entrepreneur Christopher Harborne, which would prompt Reform UK enthusiasts to revive tales of PPE contracts for Conservative cronies, and so it goes on.

As we have seen time and again with Donald Trump, partisans are

unmoved by their heroes' flaws, not least because they care more about what they will do than about how they behave.

The main effect of these stories is that outsiders hoping to seem new and different soon look like any other politician.

My polling finds both Streeting and Rayner behind Kemi Badenoch in the best PM stakes, while Burnham would lead by 13 points.

If Makerfield says yes to Burnham, a successful challenge to Starmer has become the expectation. But then what?

Just under four in ten Labour voters – a fair chunk, but by no means all – think the Government would change for the better if Starmer were replaced.

In my groups, impressions of Burnham tend to be positive; people say his administrative experience, election-winning record and evident popularity must count for something.

But for voters as a whole, the most likely outcome of a change of Labour leadership is that things will continue pretty much as they

are. Tony Blair won't be thanked for pointing out that Labour's problem is not the personality of its leader but that it lacks a 'worked-out, coherent plan for the country' (the party will seemingly never forgive him for being the most successful leader in its history), but he's right.

Not only that, people fear a resumption of the endless leadership circus they thought they had thrown out with the Tories.

This is also part of the reaction when we talk about rejoining the EU, as favoured by Streeting and once (until he had a Brexit-voting constituency to contend with) by Burnham. Just over half say life in Britain since we left has been worse than if we had stayed, and the same proportion said they would vote to return. But dig deeper and there is little appetite to restart the Brexit wars, or to comply with the likely conditions.

A clear majority oppose adopt-

‘The likeliest outcome is that things continue as they are’

ing the euro, a legal prerequisite for countries seeking to join. Even more say it would be unacceptable to pay the higher membership fee that Brussels would surely demand.

The parallels between Brexit and the Labour leadership are striking. Rejoining the EU is no more the answer to Britain's woes than replacing Starmer is the answer to Labour's. Neither addresses the real problems: an unproductive economy and a state that spends more than the country can afford.

The leader who grapples with those things – from whichever party – will deserve to win.

● Lord Ashcroft is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His research is at LordAshcroftPolls.com. X/Facebook @LordAshcroft.

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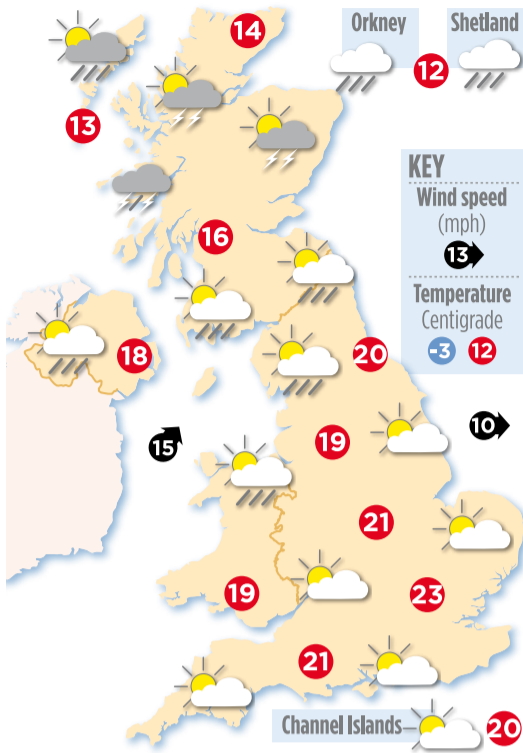
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Weather



UK FORECAST

REGIONAL FORECASTS

London, South East, South, South West, Channel Islands: Morning cloudy with occasional sun, afternoon mostly cloudy and breezy, evening clearing with sunny intervals. Max 22C 72F.
Wales, Midlands, East Anglia: Morning cloudy with light winds. Afternoon sees sunny intervals with moderate breezes. Evening mostly clear skies. Max 22C 72F.
North West, North East: Morning rain clears to afternoon clouds with sunny spells and breezy. Evening sees clearer skies and calming winds. Max 20C 68F.
Scotland: Morning: Rain easing to mostly cloudy. Afternoon: Breezy with sunny intervals. Evening:

Clear skies with light winds. Max 17C 63F.
Northern Ireland, Eire: Morning cloudy with rain showers. Afternoon brings steady rain with windy conditions. Evening mostly cloudy, light winds. Max 19C 66F.
YESTERDAY (24 hours to 6pm) - **Warmest:** Frittenden, 27c. **Colest:** Aboyne No 2, 8c. **Wettest:** Achnagart, 14.00mm. **Sunniest:** Valley, 13.2hrs. **Barometer** (6pm) - 1016.83mb. **Falling.** **Humidity:** 40 per cent.
WEEK AHEAD
 Monday brings widespread rain, easing to showers by Tuesday. Wednesday sees scattered showers, with winds picking up. By Thursday, it's mostly cloudy with lingering rain in some parts.

SIX-DAY FORECAST

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
LONDON	☁ 20	☁ 21	☁ 20	☁ 20	☁ 20	☁ 22
ABERDEEN	☁ 14	☁ 14	☁ 15	☁ 15	☁ 14	☁ 15
BELFAST	☁ 18	☁ 17	☁ 16	☁ 15	☁ 15	☁ 16
BIRMINGHAM	☁ 18	☁ 19	☁ 19	☁ 18	☁ 18	☁ 20
CANTERBURY	☁ 21	☁ 20	☁ 20	☁ 20	☁ 19	☁ 21
CARDIFF	☁ 18	☁ 17	☁ 18	☁ 17	☁ 17	☁ 19
GLASGOW	☁ 17	☁ 17	☁ 17	☁ 15	☁ 15	☁ 17
LEEDS	☁ 18	☁ 19	☁ 19	☁ 17	☁ 18	☁ 19
MANCHESTER	☁ 18	☁ 18	☁ 19	☁ 17	☁ 18	☁ 19
NEWCASTLE	☁ 18	☁ 18	☁ 19	☁ 17	☁ 17	☁ 19
NORWICH	☁ 22	☁ 21	☁ 21	☁ 21	☁ 20	☁ 22
PLYMOUTH	☁ 18	☁ 18	☁ 18	☁ 17	☁ 17	☁ 18

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By **Gabriel Millard-Clothier** and **Brendan Carlin**

LABOUR was last night accused of political 'paralysis', with its lame-duck leadership dithering over the defence of the nation.

With allies of the deeply unpopular Prime Minister drafting plans that would see him limping on in No 10 until Christmas, senior opposition figures demanded action on a vital – but long-overdue – military spending plan.

The Mail on Sunday can reveal that Sir Keir Starmer's allies are planning to keep him in power for a six-month interim period before handing over to leading challenger Andy Burnham.

But critics fear the slow transition – including one final Budget for Chancellor Rachel Reeves – will only result in more government dithering.

One of the most pressing concerns is the Defence Investment Plan, setting out military priorities amid wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. It was due to be published last year, but has still not seen the light of day.

Last night, Tory party chairman Kevin Hollinrake blasted the indecision, saying: 'Dither and delay have become the

LORD ASHCROFT

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hallmark of this Labour government. They can't agree on when the Prime Minister finally goes, they can't publish a defence plan, and they can't decide what the Labour Party even stands for.

'The reality of Labour in power is paralysis at the top and chaos all around.'

Sources have told this newspaper that Sir Keir has privately accepted that he would have to make way for Mr Burnham if the Manchester mayor wins the Makerfield by-election next month.

Allies of the PM say he has now accepted such a victory would mean he will be left with little choice but to allow Mr Burnham to succeed him without a full-scale contest, in a so-called 'coronation'.

However, they insist the handover should be an extended one, to allow Sir Keir to 'cement his legacy' – albeit with Mr Burnham consulted over key decisions, such as the Budget, as a Prime Minister in waiting.

But one senior Labour source said last night: 'Why on Earth should we have a lame-

Labour in 'paralysis' over its leadership... and vital defence plan



KICKER: Xyt yxt yxt yxt yxt yxt xy xyt xyt xyt yxt xyt xyt

duck PM in office for six months with his successor waiting on the No 10 doorstep? 'This is madness.'

His decision comes after Sir Tony Blair triggered a fresh round of Labour in-fighting last week with a bombshell intervention that, among many stinging criticisms, accused the Prime Minister of having no 'coherent plan'.

However it was yesterday reported that the former PM had previously advised Sir Keir to fight on in a private

phone call some weeks ago.

Delays to the Defence Investment Plan have been blamed on the Chancellor's alleged refusal to find an extra £18billion for defence – a claim sources close to Ms Reeves have denied.

There have also been suggestions that publication of the plan should be put off until after the June 18 Makerfield by-election.

Last night a new poll gave Mr Burnham's leadership ambitions a renewed boost. A total 32 per cent of voters

BEST PM RATINGS

Andy Burnham	32%
Kemi Badenoch	19%
Nigel Farage	17%

WOULD A NEW PM CHANGE THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT FOR THE BETTER?

YES	21%
NO	57%

IF STARMER IS REPLACED AS PM, SHOULD THE NEW LEADER CALL A GENERAL ELECTION?

Yes	49%
No	35%

IS THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT BETTER OR WORSE THAN THE LAST TORY GOVERNMENT?

Better	31%
Worse	40%

SHOULD ANY DECISION TO REJOIN THE EU BE SUBJECT TO A REFERENDUM?

Yes	67%
No	17%

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