



PROJECT ROME

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Editorial

As Labour MPs, Mayors, councillors and party activists return from their conference in Liverpool the party's chances of forming the next government would appear to depend upon which faction of the party you speak to.

After speaking to people from across Labour's political spectrum as they return to their constituencies across the North we have identified three distinctive tendencies within the party: the Corbyn loyalists; the Corbyn Accommodators; and the Anti-Corbyn forces.

For the Corbyn loyalist faction this was their "1996 moment", as one veteran leftist told Northern Agenda; a reference to the last Labour conference before Tony Blair's landslide victory the following year. Although lacking Blair's 20-point poll lead, the army of Corbyn supporters believe that they are on their way into government. This conference was undoubtedly the moment that Jeremy Corbyn's control of the party was complete.



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The second tendency, the Corbyn Accommodators – those who may have policy disagreements with the leader but have put aside their differences to try and get a Labour government elected – are not so forthcoming in their assessment of the conference. They're keeping their heads down in the hope that something, anything, happens and that this will not end up as badly as they fear.

For the anti-Corbyn forces this was a bad week, and one at which few of them were present. Many moderate MPs and activists simply stayed away. One told Northern Agenda, "It's the first conference I've missed for 25 years. But why should I attend just to be abused and disheartened."

How these factions (and the myriad sub-factions within) resolve their differences remains to be seen. There doesn't seem to be any enthusiasm for a new, centrist party from the people that we spoke to, and there appears to be a concerted effort to deselect MPs seen as disloyal to the leadership. A number of moderate Labour MPs in the North are now resigned to their fate. Others are concerned that the shift in Brexit policy not to rule out a second referendum could damage their chances in constituencies that voted heavily to leave the EU. One senior activist told Northern Agenda, "The new Brexit policy might not lose us any Labour seats, but it could prevent us winning in key marginals like Pudsey and Morley and Outwood."

The Labour party conference wasn't the only gathering of political significance held in the North recently. The first meeting of the much-vaunted Convention of the North was held in Newcastle in early September. Bringing together the North's cross-party political leadership, business, academia and civil society, it was hailed as a game changer for the North, as it seeks to speak with one voice on issues such as skills, transport, infrastructure and Brexit.

The key driver of a Convention of the North has been Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham. Keen observers of politics in the North have noticed a subtle shift in Burnham's priorities since he was first elected as Mayor in May 2017. He was elected on a specific set of manifesto policies specific to Greater Manchester – a promise to end rough sleeping, a commitment to subsidised bus travel for young people, promises to improve public transport etc. – but two issues appear to have broadened his outlook.

Firstly, what he sees as the ongoing threat to the economy of the North by Brexit, and in particular a no-deal Brexit. Burnham has made a number of recent interventions in the Brexit debate, arguing that the North potentially faces a "double-digit damage" to its economy and urging the government to further involve Northern political leaders in the Brexit process.



Andy Burnham

its bandwidth struggles to cope with the challenges of leaving the EU. He has called for an extension to Article 50, effectively postponing Brexit, until a “common-sense deal” can be negotiated.

Burnham’s promotion of the Convention of the North can be seen in the context of his new focus on helping the English regions, and the North in particular, negotiate new devolution deals and further powers from Whitehall. One observer told Northern

Secondly, as previously reported in Northern Agenda, Burnham has become increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of progress in delivering his own manifesto commitments; a mixture of local political opposition, bureaucracy and a government legislative programme consumed by Brexit.

Both of these challenges appear to have persuaded Burnham that only by advancing the cause of further devolution to the English regions can real change be affected in areas like Greater Manchester. In a recent speech in Westminster, Burnham set out his vision that devolution is the only policy area that attracts a wide consensus in Britain. He went on to argue that only by devolving further power to the English regions can the government make their Brexit policy work; the regions effectively helping out the government as

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Indeed, it is noticeable that he has recently dropped some of his more tribal anti-government rhetoric in favour of a more considered tone. He used his Westminster speech to praise the David Cameron and Theresa May Conservative government’s for pursuing devolution policies, adding that he wished Labour had done more on devolution when in government.

Burnham has set out his shopping list of further devolution powers, arguing that by devolving further powers to the regions the government could free up the machinery of Whitehall to better negotiate a Brexit deal that benefits the whole country.

Meanwhile back in Liverpool there was no conference speaking slot allocated to any of Labour’s three directly elected Metro Mayors – Sadiq Khan, Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram – the snub to Liverpool host Steve Rotheram seen as particularly churlish. As one disgruntled campaigner told Northern Agenda, “Four full days of speeches and debate and I don’t recall hearing the word ‘devolution’ spoken from the platform once, not even in the speech by our own Shadow Secretary for Local Government, and he’s a Yorkshire MP. It’s just not on their agenda.”

Although there were many fringe events that discussed devolution, there was little discussion of a specific devolution deal for Yorkshire, with South Yorkshire Mayor Dan Jarvis speaking at just one fringe event.

Indeed, many One Yorkshire campaigners have echoed Andy Burnham’s complaint that as the government’s legislative agenda has become pre-occupied solely with Brexit, the devolution agenda has ground to a halt. The last Conservative election manifesto promised to publish its devolution framework in the summer of 2018, but it appears no closer to appearing. The leader of Leeds City Council, Judith Blake, recently said that many council leaders were “incredibly disappointed” in Communities Secretary James Brokenshire as he was “clearly” putting up barriers to the One Yorkshire devolution proposal.

The One Yorkshire campaign appears to be split between the pessimists who see their historic chance of a county-wide devolution deal slipping through their fingers, and the optimists who still see an opportunity to bounce a distracted government into agreeing a deal. Expect a major push by the optimist wing of One Yorkshire.