

Maurice Glasman - Andy Burnham's Faith in Tradition might just save Labour

Northern Catholicism was a huge driving force in the formation of the Labour party and profoundly shaped our PM's politics



Andy Burnham lights a candle in Manchester Cathedral after the Queen's death in 2022

One of the unique features of the Labour tradition is the role of the churches in its formation, Catholic and non-conformist. European social democracy was anti-clerical and republican. Labour, in contrast, was monarchist and Christian. Clement Attlee went as far as to argue that monarchy was a condition of socialism as it provided the stability and legitimacy required for radical change.

It is often said Labour is "*more Methodist than Marxist*", and that is true. The role of the dissenting congregations was a vital source of Labour's leadership formation and ethos.

It is also true to say Labour was more Catholic than Methodist, particularly in Scotland, the northeast and northwest.

When Harold Wilson said Labour was a "broad church" he was not speaking metaphorically. In Edinburgh and Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester, Labour created a common institution built by Catholic and Protestant where there was none before, and through that a common good. In such divided cities, this was some accomplishment. They buried each other's dead through the Co-op burial societies, thus saving each other the indignity of a mass grave. They built each other's houses through the building societies and retrieved a home in the world. Contribution, locality and mutuality defined the institutional structure.

Catholic Labour proved to be a durable tradition as it was built on a particular body of thought initiated by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 through his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. The "new thing" he was talking about was capitalism, the idea that human beings and nature — creation itself — could be turned into a commodity subject to fluctuating price on the open market. Catholics taught, in contrast, that there was more to being a person than that. The present Pope took his name to honour this inheritance.

In England Cardinal Manning was an inspiration for this and he marched at the head of dockers in their strike of 1889 along with William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. The Times expressed its outrage at Catholic and Protestant marching together in common cause. Nonetheless, the strikers won their "tanner" and the Labour Representation Committee they established led directly to the formation of the Labour Party.

Catholic social thought resisted the dominion of capital, not in the name of a collective socialist state but as a defence of private property, the family and freedom of religion. Its experience of the French Revolution was of dispossession, persecution and exile. As an alternative to class war it promoted the "common good" and this underwrote its support for the monarchy rather than republics. There was no Christian-Democrat Party in Britain because Labour had already resolved the division between social and Christian democracy within itself.

Catholic teaching was built around three fundamental assumptions: the "dignity of labour" — that the worker was not merely a commodity to be used and discarded; subsidiarity — a Latin way of

saying that place mattered and the centralising state was as much a threat as concentrated capital; and solidarity — that all are responsible for sharing the burdens of association through the provision of common goods.

Perhaps the greatest embodiment of this was Derek Worlock, the archbishop of Liverpool from 1976 to 1996. His time included the horrors of Heysel and Hillsborough, the Toxteth riots and the capture of Liverpool council by Militant. Along with the Anglican Bishop David Sheppard, he built a public defiance of both Marxism and Thatcherism. They convened regular meetings with businesses, unions and government to renew the docks and build houses, to reconcile estranged interests and renew civic pride. The dignity of Labour, local associations and solidarity were the foundations of this. When he died, local people paid for a statue of him and David Sheppard that was placed half way down Hope Street, between the Anglican and Catholic cathedrals.

What is of interest is that the altar boy whose job was to press “play” on the cassette recorder that amplified Worlock’s sermons to the local congregation was Andy Burnham. And then he had to press “stop”. The boy was on his own, there were no mobile phones and he had no choice but to listen. And now, when he speaks, his words echo those written by Worlock and Sheppard in *Faith in the City* and *With Hope in our Hearts*.

He talks about the importance of place and of home. His first initiative was on homelessness, and it wasn’t just about houselessness but about lonely, unstable, estranged individual lives. Home, family, work, place, these are the sublime catechisms of Catholic social thought. The basis of solidarity. And the significance of his renunciation of Thatcherism is that she initiated an era in which “*political power was centralised, economic power privatised, large parts of the country deindustrialised, and they still haven’t recovered*”.

Burnham thinks Thatcher’s pursuit of markets led to the abandonment of a sense of right order. Nothing was sacred and entire regions degenerated. In short, she liquidated solidarity by degrading work and industry. He wrote in *The Times* that over the past 40 years, “*local apprenticeships faded, technical education was pushed into the background and practical skills came to be seen as somehow second class*”. And the remedy requires “*a wholesale change in the architecture and culture of the British state recognising the primacy of place*”.

Worlock was close to Frank Field, MP for Birkenhead, who more than anyone in Labour warned of the dangers of a welfare system without contribution and accountability. Burnham has retained Pat McFadden, graduate of Holy Cross Roman Catholic primary school in Glasgow, as work and pensions secretary. James Purnell is chief of staff and Graeme Cooke is head of policy, both experienced and expert state reformers. Shabana Mahmood puts security and civic order at the centre of her calling. John Healey is deeply aware of the ineffectiveness of the state from his time at the Ministry of Defence.

Under Sir Keir Starmer the Labour Party was in real danger of losing the trust of the working class and its relevance as a political party. It was a crisis of identity: it could no longer say what it believed in or was for and became afraid of the future. It had become a legalistic procedural liberal party without a notion of nation, class, place or the common good. It became part of the polarisation that still defines our time and not its reconciliation. At its moment of existential peril Labour turned to a neglected but profound aspect of its tradition.

At a moment of national malaise, it turned to its roots as a guide to its renewal. In all he has said so far Andy Burnham is channelling the voice of Derek Worlock. Whether he serves as a ghost or a guide will define the fate of his government.

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