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Can Burnham's casual style survive contact with No 10?

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Andy Burnham has lots to think about as his arrival in Downing Street draws closer - the cost of living, the ongoing war in Ukraine, how to fund defence to name just three.

At some point though, he'll have to find time to decide what to wear.

The MP for Macclesfield has sometimes been accused of changing his political clothes, and on his journey from Manchester to London, he changed his actual clothes.

He boarded the train at Manchester Piccadilly in his trademark dark T-shirt, trousers and Adidas trainers only to emerge, more than two hours later, at London Euston in a suit.

Twenty minutes later, he turned up in Parliament, having added a tie to his ensemble.

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Was this wardrobe change a symbolic gesture - Burnham signalling that with his move from Greater Manchester mayor to prime minister he would be adopting a more formal style in the job?

Or was it a one-off, with Burnham planning to maintain his "Manchester clothes" - which have been variously described as "normcore," "centrist dad" and "The Smiths meets Britpop" - once he gets the keys to No 10.

Emma Finamore, features editor at Drapers Magazine has dubbed Burnham "the king of the casuals".

His look is considered "smart" but "less formal than other politicians", she says.

"It's aspirational but attainable. A lot of the stuff he wears isn't outside the realm of possibility."

Harrington jackets, high-street staples such as polo shirts from Uniqlo and Wallabees from Clarks, are often part of the "smart-Manc" costume, characterised by a deliberate departure from the traditional suit-and-tie uniform of the SW1 postcode.

But if he does return to ties and suits as prime minister, it will only be a regression to his previous Westminster look.

Pre-2020, Burnham was more often seen in a suit than without one.

In photos from his second Labour leadership campaign in 2015, he is suited and booted

sitting next to one of his rival candidates, the far more casual Jeremy Corbyn.

The tie-less, suit-less Corbyn romped to victory in that contest, beating Burnham into second place.



After leaving Westminster, Burnham similarly began to dispense with ties and jackets.

Speaking to the Guardian in 2022, he said: "I remember, when I left, slowly realising: 'I don't have to do this any more.'

"What I would have worn to the match at weekends, I just started wearing. It was an evolution and I'm not going back."

His Howick jacket - the one he wore when making his angry intervention in the Covid lockdown debates - has become an exhibit in Manchester's People's History Museum.

Finamore says Burnham is "a savvy enough politician to know when he can wear some things and when he can't. He will have to abide by dress codes.

"I don't think he will go back fully. He has got that confidence. He seems to have found his political identity and also his style as mayor of Greater Manchester."

One place he will have to abide by a formal dress code is in the House of Commons.

The previous Speaker, John Bercow, relaxed the rules, telling MPs they didn't need to

wear a tie, but his successor Sir Lindsay Hoyle is having none of it.

Speaking at his summer reception for Westminster journalists, he said: "King of the North or not, unless Andy Burnham swaps his dark T-shirt for a shirt and tie, in my Kingdom, he's not going to get called."

Burnham's "Manchester clothes" are also unlikely to wash at the White House.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's decision to eschew suits for military-style clothing is driven by his desire to show solidarity for soldiers fighting the Russians.

But it annoyed some Americans and his attire was a factor in the infamous bust-up between Zelensky, Trump and his Vice President JD Vance in the Oval Office.



The pussy-bow blouse became a hallmark of Margaret Thatcher's signature style, blending traditionally feminine fashion with a carefully crafted image of authority

It may seem trivial, but clothes do matter in politics.

As previous British prime ministers, particularly Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher, have showed, fashion can be used as a powerful political tool.

Renowned for her signature wardrobe of high-shoulder suits, pussy-bow blouses, and her iconic handbag, Thatcher cultivated an image that sought to project a sense of authority and purpose.

In contrast, Wilson - often anchored by his ever-present pipe and Gannex coat - was famed for a pragmatic, utilitarian wardrobe that defined the "cloth-cap" socialism of the 1960s and 70s.

The dress sense of female politicians, says Rob Ford, professor of political science at the University of Manchester, comes under much more scrutiny than that of their male counterparts.

"There's an enormous double standard with this," Ford says. "It's harder for a female politician because you've got to make choices all the time."

At least men can always fall back on suits, he says.

Image isn't everything though, as Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch argued last month, when she dismissed Burnham as "a pair of eyelashes and a black T-shirt".

In a video responding to her dig, Burnham looked down at his T-shirt before saying: "It's

not black, it's dark navy."

In a speech made after he was confirmed as the new Labour leader this week, Burnham - wearing a suit and tie - could not resist bringing up his clothes again.

Labour, he said, had worn "too many Tory clothes" in the past.

"Let me tell you - I'm quite happy that Kemi doesn't approve of my wardrobe choices – because I'm not keen on theirs either," Burnham said. "From here, we do it differently."

Ironically, Sir Keir Starmer had also embraced the dress-down spirit of his successor, with the outgoing PM sometimes seen in tracksuits, a Stone Island polo shirt, and Adidas trainers.

The difference, says Prof Rob Ford, is that Burnham's fashion choices have cut through with the public.

"The fact people have noticed he has a distinctive manner of dress is a victory for his branding efforts," Ford says.

Like Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, Burnham likes to be photographed swigging pints in pubs.

"The aim of his clothes is similar - to say I'm not a professional politician, I'm one of you," Ford says.

Retaining that approachable, homespun persona while adhering to the sartorial conventions and expectations of Westminster will be a challenge for Burnham.

In an era when politics has never been more visual, he'll need to dress to impress, whatever he decides to wear.



Burnham arriving at his campaign launch, sporting a pair of Clarks Wallabee shoes

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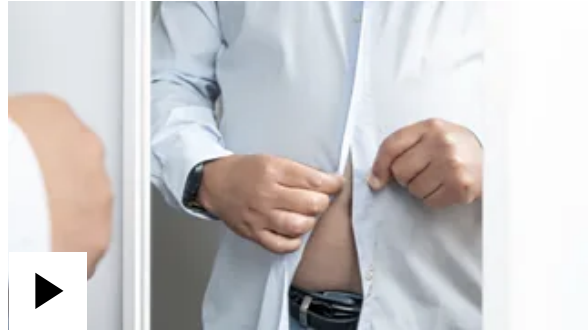


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