Building the Progressive Bloc. Challenges for the Burnham Project

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Conceptual guide and glossary

Term	Definition
Bloc connective architecture	The structures, relationships and mediating processes through which fragmented progressive forces are aligned around common purposes and missions.
Bloc alignment	The process of bringing diverse social forces and interests into constructive relationship around a common project.
Bloc asymmetry thesis	The proposition that the New Right derives strength from concentration of power while the PHB derives strength from connection, alignment and collective intelligence.
Bloc contestation	The struggle between competing political blocs for legitimacy, leadership and social direction.
Bloc ecosystemic development	The long-term strengthening of the PHB through learning, innovation, alignment and increasingly dense connective relationships.
Collective intelligence	Knowledge generated through collaboration across institutions, sectors, communities and networks.
Connective Sub-Bloc (CSB)	A strategically organised configuration that aligns actors, institutions, interests, expertise, leadership and knowledge around a shared mission.
CSB constellation	An alignment of multiple Connective Sub-Blocs organised around a common challenge, mission or transformative objective.
Organic intellectuals	Individuals, groups or institutions that interpret, connect and align societal forces around a common project.
Political terrain	A geographical and institutional arena within which politics is organised, interpreted and contested.
Progressive hegemony	A condition in which progressive ideas, institutions and alliances achieve broad legitimacy and social leadership, leading to a progressive settlement
Progressive historical bloc	A progressive alignment of social, political, economic, civic and ecological forces organised around a common transformative project and direction of travel.
Progressive settlement	A relatively stable political, economic, social and ecological order resulting from successful progressive bloc formation.
Regressive bloc	The contemporary political expression of regressive and right-populist tendencies operating within the wider neoliberal order.
Societal forces and factors	The social, economic, political, cultural, technological, ecological and historical conditions that shape political possibilities.
45-degree politics	A form of politics that seeks to connect and transform the horizontal energies of civil society and the vertical capacities of political institutions and government.

Executive summary

1. An era of bloc politics begins with a political crisis-opportunity nexus

Britain has entered a new era of 'bloc politics', shaped by the long-term erosion of the neoliberal settlement, the fragmentation of traditional political loyalties and the emergence of competing Progressive and Regressive Blocs. It is an era in which no progressive political party can go it alone. The central challenge is whether these conditions will strengthen regressive and authoritarian tendencies or favour progressive renewal – the political 'crisis-opportunity nexus'.

2. The Burnham Project represents an important political opportunity

Emerging from Manchesterism and the practical experience of devolved leadership, the Burnham Project combines territorial empowerment, civic partnership, democratic renewal and institutional reform, thus occupying a possible transitional position between an open civic Labourism and the possibility of a wider Progressive Historical Bloc. Of course, he may not wish to take this step, and if he does, there will be resistance. But these caveats do not remove the observation of an important political opportunity.

3. Integral Progressivism offers a response to the weaknesses of contemporary progressivism

Progressive politics has often oscillated between fragmented civil society activism and centralised state-centred politics. To address this dilemma, the paper develops the concept of 'Integral Progressivism', combining a strong ethical-political dimension with a 45-degree strategic organisational dimension.

4. Six Common Values provide the ethical foundations of the Progressive Bloc

Six common values are identified, capable of uniting diverse progressive traditions while preserving plurality:

- Democracy and collective control;

- Social justice, equality and solidarity;
- Ecological civilisation and respect for nature;
- Health, care and human wellbeing;
- Learning and collective intelligence;
- Collaborative security and peace.

These common values provide the ethical horizon of the Progressive Bloc and the foundations of what Compass describes as the Good Society.

5. 45-degree politics provides the practical means of transformation

Drawing on Compass's concept of 45-degree politics, it is argued that successful progressive politics requires a productive relationship between the horizontal energies of civil society and the vertical capacities of governmental institutions, through which ethical aspirations can be translated into durable political projects. Particular attention is paid to the horizontal terrain of 'radical civil society', since it is through this dimension that the vitality of new ideas and transformations emerge.

6. The Progressive Historical Bloc is reinterpreted for 21st-century conditions

Building on Gramsci's concept of the historical bloc, an expanded framework is developed comprising:

- Structural relations;
- Political terrains;
- Connective Sub-Blocs (CSBs);
- 45-degree mediation;
- Transition towards new settlements and the Good Society.

Together these dimensions transform the historical bloc from a relatively static alignment into a dynamic socio-political ecosystem characterised by connection, learning, capacity formation and societal transition.

7. Connective Sub-Blocs are the principal organisational innovation

The central conceptual contribution is the development of 'Connective Sub-Blocs' (CSBs**)**. These are mission-oriented formations that align actors, institutions, knowledge, resources and leadership around common purposes. CSBs function simultaneously as the constituent building blocks of the broader bloc and as generative mechanisms through which new relationships, capacities and forms of collective intelligence emerge, and thus operate as developmental ecosystems capable of producing long-term transformation

8. Five mission-oriented CSBs provide a roadmap towards a new settlement

Five strategically significant CSBs are developed:

1. Democratic Renewal and Territorial Empowerment;
2. Inclusive Sustainable Economic and Social Development;
3. Health, Care and Wellbeing;
4. Education and Collective Intelligence;
5. Collective Security and International Solidarity.

Each addresses a distinctive societal challenge while simultaneously contributing to the development of a broader Progressive Historical Bloc. Together they offer a roadmap towards a new progressive settlement and a practical framework for evaluating political development.

9. Democratic renewal is the foundational CSB

The Democratic Renewal and Territorial Empowerment CSB is emphasised, arguing that democratic reform, proportional representation, territorial devolution, civic participation and constitutional renewal are not simply policy objectives but foundational conditions to support the development of all other CSBs.

10. The Burnham Project as Progressive Historical Bloc depends on the development of the five CSBs

The final part of the paper argues that the Burnham Project faces five major developmental challenges corresponding to the five mission-oriented CSBs. These concern democratic renewal, sustainable development, health and wellbeing, collective intelligence and international solidarity. These challenges should not be viewed simply as policy issues but as developmental tasks associated with the construction of a wider Progressive Historical Bloc.

11. The central question concerns political leadership and historical ambition

The argument concludes that the Burnham Project remains strategically open. It may consolidate as a nationalised form of civic Labourism focused primarily on competent governance and reform. Alternatively, it may also contribute to the construction of a broader Progressive Historical Bloc capable of aligning diverse social forces around a common historical purpose. The decisive challenge is therefore not simply the exercise of political power but the cultivation of connective power: the capacity to build alliances, develop collective intelligence and align institutions, values and social forces around a shared vision of the Good Society. Ultimately, a political party becomes hegemonic when it recognises that it is not the only solution, but a leading part of a wider historical project requiring alliances, collaborative spirit and sacrifice of some immediate self-interest. This is the transitional challenge facing the Burnham Project.

Part 1. Context: Crisis, Fragmentation & Emerging Bloc Politics

1.1 Our organic crisis – the retreat of the neoliberal order

Contemporary Britain is experiencing not a single crisis but a chronic organic crisis of economy and society that has become expressed at the political level. At the deepest historical level lies the retreat of the neoliberal settlement in which the 2008 financial crash exposed fundamental weaknesses of the Anglo-Saxon political economy model[1]. A conjunctural expression of this historical crisis has been a growing crisis of society and politics. Since 2008, the policy of austerity, the erosion of public services, Brexit, political scandals and widening territorial inequalities have contributed to a widespread sense of economic insecurity, social fragmentation and institutional decline, with a public perception that problems accumulate while solutions remain elusive[2]. These crises have been further intensified by an emerging global polycrisis in which the interaction of multiple strands – the chaotic retreat of neoliberal globalisation, the climate/nature emergency, AI disruption, demographic pressures, mass migrations and geopolitical instability - increasingly shapes domestic and wider political life[3].

1.2 The failures of centrist social democracy

These multiple crises have become refracted through the crisis of centrist social democracy itself, as it fades from the European political map[4]. In the UK context, the Conservatives have undoubtedly been the principal political agents of economic and social decline over the past decade and a half, associated with austerity, deteriorating public services, widening inequalities and stagnant living standards. Yet reasons for the crisis cannot be placed at their door alone. Responsibility must also be borne by the dominant forms of centrist social democracy that have shaped politics not only in Britain (e.g. Blairism and Starmerism), but also in the United States and Germany. Faced with the interlocking crises of inequality, economic insecurity, democratic disaffection, climate change and geopolitical instability, this 'moderate' strand of social democracy has offered neither a convincing critique of the neoliberal order nor a compelling alternative future[5]; a profound failure that has weakened it politically and, particularly its relationship with traditional working-class constituencies.

1.3 The New Right fills the void

As history tragically shows, crisis can more easily lead to regressive rather than progressive outcomes. Amidst the deepening crisis of neoliberalism and the failures of centrist social democracy, chronic dissatisfaction has fuelled the rise of the regressive bloc with its cynicism, authoritarianism, racism, incompetence and a cruel politics[6]. The 'New Right' - a convergence of strands of traditional conservatism and a fascist Far Right[7] - even though deeply aligned with fractions of Big Tech and neoliberal capitalism[8], seeks nevertheless to project itself as a 'third force' fighting the 'establishment' of mainstream political parties[9].

1.4 The loss of historical compass

Repeated political and economic failures have produced what may be termed a **'**loss of historical compass'. Following the crisis of state socialism and the collapse of many of the certainties that had previously oriented political action, Mark Fisher has argued that contemporary societies can become trapped in a condition in which insecurity, anxiety and decline are more readily imaginable than collective progress[10]. In a period that Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor characterise as one of 'End Times Fascism'[11]**,** marked by an apocalyptic alliance of religious fundamentalists, billionaire Silicon Valley technology elites and fascistic movements, it becomes imperative to reclaim the 'deep common values' that can constitute the ethico-political foundations of a Progressive Bloc. Through renewing these fundamental values, societies can recover a sense of historical direction and reopen the horizon of collective hope, democratic agency and transformative change (see Part 3).

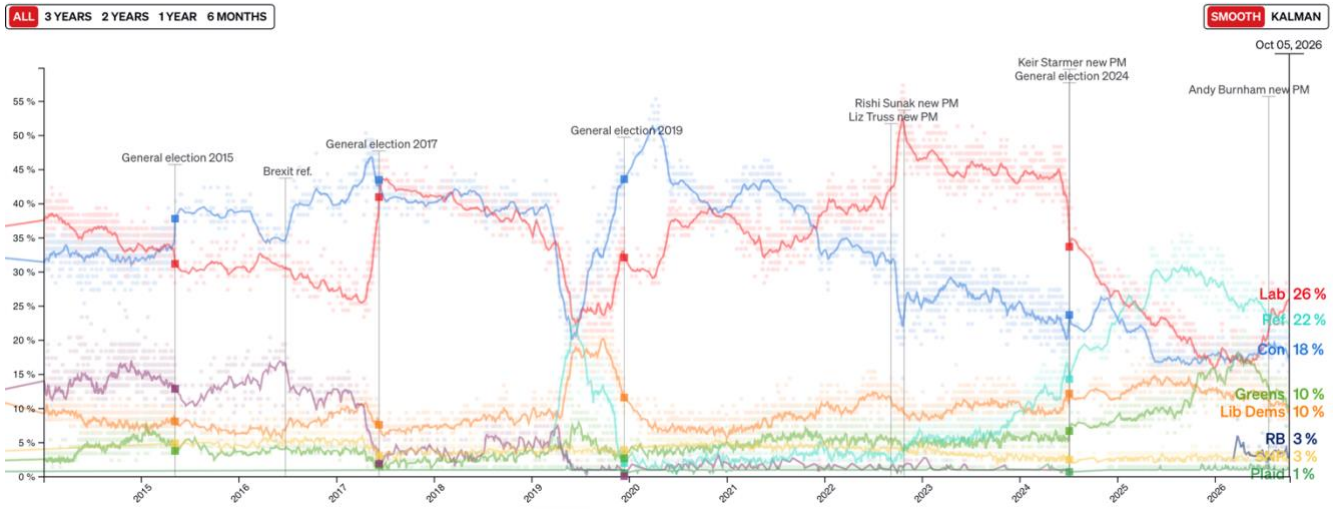
1.5 The emergence of UK political bloc era

The end of the duopoly results in electoral compression

Overlapping crises are not only destabilising the neoliberal settlement; they have also begun to reshape the nature of political competition itself. As the Labour-Conservative duopoly has weakened in the post-Brexit period, a wider array of political forces, on both the left and right, is 'compressing' the electoral map, reflected in a convergence zone in polling data since 2024 (see

Figure 1 below). As Sara Hobult of the LSE notes, this political fragmentation has been growing in the post-Brexit decade and could now become a defining feature of the UK political landscape[12]. Unlike in previous decades, when the winning political party at a general election would normally command about 40 per cent of the vote, it now looks like a winning party could enter government with less than 30 per cent, thus fuelling the call for electoral reform[13].

Figure 1. The convergence zone of political affiliation in 2026



Source: Politico EU[14]

Divided political blocs – progressive and regressive

The compression of the electoral map does not signal a movement towards the political centre – much the opposite. Recent polling trends and by-election results increasingly suggest the emergence of two broad antagonistic political blocs. On one side sits a 'Regressive Bloc' comprising Reform UK, the Conservatives, Restore Britain and associated right-wing media and social media forces, together representing different tendencies within what is increasingly described as the 'New Right' in British politics[15]. On the other side sits a 'Progressive Bloc' comprising Labour, the Green Party, Liberal Democrats, progressive nationalist parties, the Labour and Trade Union Movement and the diverse forces of radical civil society.

Current polling intentions suggest the two blocs command broadly comparable levels of support. Aggregated polling in September 2026 typically places Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Greens and progressive nationalist parties on a combined vote of just over 50 per cent, while Reform UK, the Conservatives and Restore Britain together command just under 50 per cent. Additionally, there is evidence of a 'Burnham bounce'. Labour is now polling at around 26-28 per cent, almost 10 points higher than the nadir of the Starmer period[16]. There are, however, two cautionary observations. First, despite repeated scandals, Reform's declining vote remains at a stubborn 23 per cent. Second, the Burnham bounce has been derived largely from the marginal switching of Green and Lib Dem voters. If this pattern were hold in the coming period, according to a recent YouGov mega poll[17] Labour would become the largest party at the next election but would have to rely on support of other progressive parties to govern effectively. Reflecting on these shifts, John Harris argues that the era of Labour's electoral monopoly is over, contending that it is increasingly untenable for the party to insist that its members cannot vote for other progressive parties, regardless of local circumstances. Instead, he argues that the wider 'progressive majority' should work together to confront the defining political challenges of the present[18].

Voter behaviour not parties is presently driving bloc politics

Within these changing electoral patterns, the emergence of bloc politics has not arisen primarily because voters consciously identify with progressive politics, but because of opposition to Reform candidates. Recent polling by 'More in Common' reported that nearly one-third of British voters were prepared to vote tactically against Reform UK, with the majority of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green supporters expressing a willingness to do so[19]. As shown in a recent Survation/38 Degrees poll, tactical voting could push Reform into fourth place[20]. While a *de facto* 'progressive alliance' may be emerging, the central political challenge is to transform this 'reactive' electoral coordination into a 'proactive' coalition organised around a common progressive project.

The Progressive and Regressive Blocs compared

The significance of competing bloc politics lies not simply in the evolving balance of electoral support, but in the different sources of strength (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key characteristics of UK Progressive and Regressive Blocs

Dimension	Progressive Bloc	Regressive Bloc
Principal political forces	Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens and allied progressive movements	Reform UK, most Conservatives, Restore Britain and associated right-populist movements
Wider socio-economic base	Trade unions, civic organisations, community groups, universities, public services, environmental movements and parts of the knowledge economy	Sections of capital and Big Tech, right-leaning media, socially conservative constituencies and nationalist networks
Main political themes	Social justice, democratic renewal, sustainability, inclusion, devolution and participation	Sovereignty, immigration control, national identity, security, cultural grievance and anti-establishment politics
Organisation	Broad but fragmented ecology of organisations and institutions	Concentrated messaging but organisationally divided between political parties

Following the collapse of the Conservatives in the 2024 General Election, leadership of the Regressive Bloc (RB) has passed to Reform UK, marking a significant realignment of the political Right in the UK. In this new form, the RB derives its power from the 'concentration' of economic resources, media influence, political messaging and disciplined cultural narratives. However, Reform UK, the Conservatives and Restore Britain do not currently constitute a coherent political bloc. Despite substantial alignment around immigration, national sovereignty, cultural conservatism and opposition to progressive social and ecological change, these forces remain divided by leadership rivalries, organisational competition and electoral calculation. What exists, therefore, is not a unified political formation but a fragmented field of right-wing forces competing for hegemony within a broader regressive tendency[21].

The Progressive Bloc (PB), by contrast, derives its potential strength from 'connection'; the potential capacity to align a much wider ecology of civic organisations, local authorities, trade unions, communities, universities, public institutions, businesses, and social movements around shared missions. Its weaknesses stem from the very nature of this diversity - fragmentation.

Additionally, it is important to consider the differing locations of the two blocs within political and civil society. The emerging Progressive Bloc currently commands the institutions of government through Labour's occupancy of state power. Yet, following Gramsci, political rule and hegemony are not identical. The Regressive Bloc, while excluded from government, continues to draw support from powerful fractions of capital, influential media networks and wider transnational political and economic formations and, as a result, may remain more deeply embedded within civil society.

Strategic challenges in the emerging bloc era

Two strategic challenges arise from this comparative bloc analysis. First, the goal of progressivism should not be to replicate the concentrated power of the RB, but to exploit its own asymmetrical advantage by developing stronger forms of connective and transformative power through alliance-building. Second, progressivism needs to convert Labour's electoral and parliamentary advantage into broader forms of societal influence – hegemony - through bold programmes of democratic renewal, social justice, and economic/ecological innovation to produce the foundations of a new political settlement. These strategic challenges provide the primary lenses through which to examine the Burnham Project.

Part 2. The Burnham Project – Civic Labourism at a Crossroads

2.1 The crisis-opportunity nexus and the Burnham Project

Gramsci's observation that '*the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born*[22] captures the enduring strategic dilemma confronting both revolutionary post-WW1 politics of his day and progressive politics today. What distinguishes the present conjuncture are overlapping economic, social, political, technological and ecological crises that have weakened established political models - both Centre Left and Right - while simultaneously creating growing demand for new forms of leadership, organisation and political imagination- both regressive and progressive.

More recently, Barack Obama's adviser Emanuel Rahm famously declared in relation to the 2008 global financial crisis, *'You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is it's an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before'*[23]. In an era of global polycrisis, this insight carries even greater force. The political, economic and ecological landscape comprises a combination of profound challenges and enormous political opportunities, constituting a 'crisis-opportunity nexus'.

The nexus presents a twofold challenge in the UK context. First, to transform political polarisation through the patient alignment of diverse political and social forces around a shared mission and direction of travel capable of constructing a progressive bloc. Second, to enable the Labour Party to move beyond the narrow confines of electoral and managerial politics towards a more connective and mediating role within this broader process of bloc formation. The central strategic question becomes whether Andy Burnham and his allies can marshal the political, organisational and intellectual resources required to break with an increasingly exhausted model of centrist social democracy to convert the crisis-opportunity nexus into a durable progressive settlement for the 21st century?

2.2 The Burnham Moment and the Burnham Project

The 'Burnham Project' can be interpreted as both a response to crisis and a product of it, emerging from the exhaustion of centrist social democracy, the chronic economic and social crisis, growing

public dissatisfaction with conventional politics, and the search for alternative forms of leadership. At this point it may be helpful to distinguish between two related observations - the 'Burnham Moment' and the 'Burnham Project'. The Burnham Moment refers to the political conjuncture in which Andy Burnham swiftly emerged as Labour Leader and then Prime Minister, shaped by the crises of centralised governance, regional inequality and democratic disaffection that characterise contemporary British politics. The Burnham Project refers to the strategic effort to translate this conjunctural opportunity into a sustained governmental programme.

Through the Moment and the Project, Andy Burnham has emerged as a distinctive political figure with an extraordinary 'relational capacity' to connect people, political terrains and social forces through a positive politics. This 'relational localism' was on full display in the Makerfield by-election campaign, where Burnham sought personally to engage voters who had abandoned Labour in the local elections. Through these personal capacities and his experience as Mayor of Manchester and as a previous Labour minister, he has come to occupy a unique position between local and national politics and between economic development and social justice. Now Andy Burnham is Prime Minister, a key question is how far Westminster might alter this perception, in that the public could come to see him not as an outsider but an insider. A likely strategy of the political Right will be to recast Burnham from a trusted regional insurgent into 'just another Westminster politician', seeking to undermine the outsider identity that has, thus far, been central to his political appeal[24].

2.3 Experience rather than ideology

Where it could be said that Keir Starmer entered government without a clear governing project, Andy Burnham certainly has a plan. At its centre lies what is termed 'Manchesterism' - a local governing model that is evolving into a broader political approach, seeking to align economic development, social justice and territorial empowerment around a common project of regional renewal[25]..

Before attempting to situate Manchesterism and its evolution into the Burnham Project, it is important to consider the political formation of Andy Burnham himself. He joined Labour at age 15 and has remained within its political tradition throughout his adult life, spending more than four decades as a party member operating through Labour's institutions and networks. Burnham's politics have progressed through a combination of deeply held values and successive formative experiences. His North-West upbringing, attachment to place and community, Catholic social values, involvement in the campaign for Hillsborough justice, frustration with Westminster centralisation and, most importantly, his practical experience of governing Greater Manchester, have all contributed to a political outlook centred on fairness, solidarity, democratic accountability and territorial empowerment[26].

One of Burnham's most distinctive characteristics, and something seemingly rare in Westminster politics, appears to be a willingness to learn through practice. Many of the ideas associated with Manchesterism, including civic renewal, integrated public services, place-based development and cross-sector collaboration, have emerged from practical attempts to solve real governing problems. The experience of exercising devolved power, developing the 'Bee Bus Network', reforming public services and building public-private partnerships across sectors, appears to have shaped Burnham's political outlook perhaps more deeply than his earlier experiences in Westminster[27]. His worldview, therefore, appears more experiential than ideological.

That said, when Andy Burnham sat down with Steve Rotheram in 2024 to write what can reasonably be interpreted as a shared manifesto, this personal and experiential politics assumed a more developed political form. 'Head North' is less a work of ideological exposition than a hybrid of memoir, diagnosis and political argument, grounded in the lived experiences of its authors and organised around a set of recurring themes - the redistribution of power, the importance of place, democratic accountability, regional inequality, electoral reform and constitutional renewal[28].

While these themes vary in scope, the most expansive concern is the restructuring of the British state itself through a rebalancing of powers and voting reform. The argument goes that devolving power, resources and democratic agency to cities, regions and localities leads naturally towards wider questions of constitutional reform, governance and the territorial organisation of the state, linking the renewal of place to the renewal of Britain's wider democratic architecture.

Burnham now believes that Manchesterism can be expanded onto the national stage, reflected in the creation of 'No 10 North' with plans for devolution of powers to regions and a new wave of reindustrialisation[29]. However, this devolution strategy is not without risk. IPPR North, which has worked with the Burnham team on devolution plans, cautions that newer and smaller combined authorities may lack the capacity to take on expanded powers and will require national oversight and support[30].

2.4 Burnham's hybrid civic Labourism

The significance of Burnham's Labour politics lies in its values-driven yet pragmatic approach to political life, drawing eclectically from a range of traditions - social democracy, communitarianism and localism – making it difficult to situate within conventional Labour political categories. What commentators have variously described as civic socialism, municipal social democracy[31], or even 'woke Blue Labour' - his commitment to place allied to a progressive outlook on gender and race[32] - can be understood as retrospective attempts to classify a political project that has evolved primarily through political practice.

Looked at more broadly, Burnham's political orientation suggests a project that stretches beyond conventional Labourism while remaining firmly rooted within it. This creative ambiguity is reflected in the political thinkers and strategists that Burnham has assembled. As Hettie O'Brien of *The Guardian* reports[33], the Burnham Project is increasingly supported by a broad intellectual and political coalition of political advisers, policy thinkers, organisers and institutional allies, suggesting that the Burnham Project draws upon multiple Labour traditions, policy networks

and civic influences, with cohesion deriving more from a shared commitment to practical reform, devolution and institutional renewal than from adherence to a common ideological doctrine.

2.5 The Burnham Project and 'Mainstream' Labour politics

Related to this is an attempt to move beyond the factional and 'machine capture' politics that characterised both the Corbyn and Starmer leadership periods. Burnham has generally avoided direct criticism of either former Labour leader, preferring instead to present himself as a unifying figure capable of drawing together different strands within the Party through a renewed centre-left politics. This orientation is reflected in his support for the emerging 'Mainstream' platform, established with the support of figures associated with Compass, Open Labour and a range of Labour traditions, which describes itself as a broad coalition of Labour's 'radical realists', seeking to provide an open and inclusive space for policy development and debate[34], an approach consistent with the wider logic of progressive bloc politics.

2.5 Burnham's 2026 Labour Conference speech – on the cusp of a new progressivism?

Burnham's 2026 Labour Conference speech marked an important evolution in the Burnham Project. While many of its themes remained consistent with the civic, territorial and democratic impulses that characterised 'Head North', the speech moved beyond a primarily localist and devolutionary framework towards a broader programme of national renewal, with its headlines of proportional representation, an adjustment to the pension 'triple lock' to financially contribute to a new settlement in social care, closer and more pragmatic relations with the European Union, moves to increase public control over key utilities, and an argument for what might be seen as a 'social democratic family' of UK regions and nations[35].

Equally important was Burnham's repeated argument that Britain was living through the consequences of 40 years of neoliberal policy and that 2026 offered the possibility of a new historical turning point. By explicitly locating his project alongside the transformative Labour governments of 1945, 1964 and 1997, he sought to situate his premiership within a longer tradition of national reconstruction and institutional renewal. Yet the scope of the speech arguably

extended beyond the ambitions of previous Labour modernisation projects. Its emphasis on democratic reform, intergovernmental cooperation, social care, territorial empowerment and international partnership pointed towards a politics of alliance-building that reaches beyond Labour itself.

Reflecting on the speech, Andrew Marr characterised Burnham's vision as a radical centre-left programme capable of reaching beyond Labour's traditional electoral coalition, suggesting that Burnham's willingness to embrace electoral reform, social care reform and a closer relationship with Europe, could resonate with the Liberal Democrats and therefore pointed towards a new pluralist form of progressive politics[36].

2.7 Burnham and Mamdani – social democracy and democratic socialism

Given the emphasis on place-based politics and social justice in their respective politics, it is worth briefly comparing Andy Burnham and Zohran Mamdani (the Democratic Mayor of New York). Both have emerged as prominent progressive figures associated with powerful urban territories, and both seek to reconnect politics with citizens' everyday experiences. In this sense, each can be seen as attempting to develop a political project that extends beyond conventional party management and points towards wider societal renewal.

The significance of the comparison lies less in ideological similarity and more in the contrasting routes they represent. The significance of the comparison lies less in ideological similarity and more in the contrasting routes they represent. Mamdani's politics are rooted primarily in democratic socialism, grassroots mobilisation and social movement activism. Emerging from tenant organising and the Democratic Socialists of America, his political trajectory has been shaped by movement-based campaigning, volunteer mobilisation and the construction of broad coalitions around housing affordability, public services and economic justice[37]. Burnham's social democratic politics, by contrast, have evolved through experience, governance and institution-building, with their centre of gravity lying in devolution, civic renewal, public service reform and territorial development[38].

This comparison between social democracy and democratic socialism helps clarify the two-fold challenge facing the Burnham Project. First, to turn a project that has grown primarily through institutional innovation and civic partnership into transformative national governance and, second, to lay the foundations for deeper forms of democratic participation and civic mobilisation required for progressive political transformation.

2.8 Project deepening and project extending

The rapid evolution of the Burnham Project can be understood in terms of a distinction between 'deepening' and 'extending'. Thus far, Burnham has sought to 'deepen' Manchesterism to become a national governing project, evidenced by assembling a diverse coalition of ministers and advisers drawn from different Labour traditions and by extending nationally the collaborative relationships developed between government and local/regional authorities.

On the other hand, building a more explicit progressive politics points to the need to 'extend' civic Labourism beyond its established boundaries. Political extension is driven by political conjunctural and societal organic challenges. The 'political conjunctural' challenge concerns the fragmentation of the contemporary electoral landscape that increasingly suggests Labour may struggle to secure and sustain governmental power without cooperation with other progressive political forces. The 'societal organic' challenge refers to the accumulation of national crises and global polycrisis that exceeds the capacity of any single party, government or institutional network to resolve. Therein lie the core arguments for new progressive politics and the development of an alliance-based Progressive Bloc.

Part 3. Building the Progressive Historical Bloc: an Integral System Framework

3.1 The Progressive Historical Bloc System

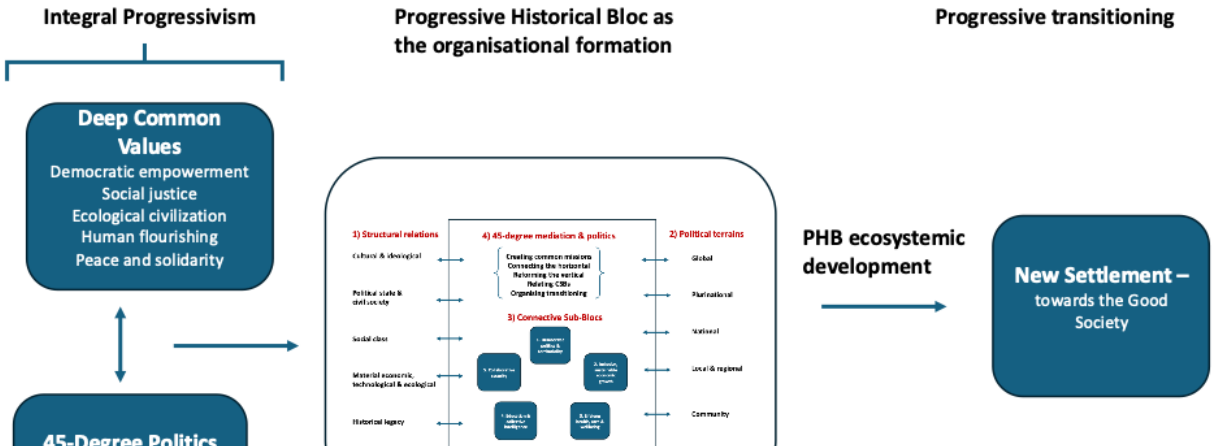
The Progressive Historical Bloc must be built on a distinctive moral and political approach to compete successfully with the Regressive Bloc. Figure 2 illustrates the 'Progressive Historical Bloc System' constituting such an approach, beginning with 'Integral Progressivism' that, through its combination of 'Deep Common Values' and '45-Degree Politics', seeks to remedy the weaknesses of contemporary progressivism.

This foundation provides the ethico-political basis of the Bloc. Subsequently, through the process of bloc building and its ecosystemic evolution, the Bloc System will be able to transition towards a 'New Settlement'[39] and to what Compass refers to as 'The Good Society'[40]. As Table 2 shows, the common values of the progressive historical bloc are compared with the original Good Society criteria of 2006, demonstrating ethical continuity.

Table 2. The Good Society and Progressive Bloc values compared

Compass Good Society (2006)	Progressive Bloc Values (2026)
Equality	Social justice, equality and solidarity
Democracy	Democracy and collective control
Sustainability	Ecological civilisation and respect for nature
Wellbeing and care	Health, care and human wellbeing
Participation and learning	Learning and collective intelligence
Global responsibility (implicit)	Collaborative security and peace

Figure 2. The Progressive Historical Bloc System



3.2 Progressivism and its dilemmas

Progressivism, with its concern for social justice, democratic pluralism, civic participation and ecological transition, draws strength from a diverse range of traditions including socialism, social democracy, liberalism, feminism, environmentalism, humanism and civic republicanism in which each contributes distinctive values, forms of knowledge and repertoires of political action[41]. Likewise, progressivism takes a variety of organisational forms, including political parties, trade unions, social movements, campaigning organisations, civic innovators, community networks and knowledge institutions, providing a rich reservoir of ideas, practices and social energies[42].

Yet, as Geoff Mulgan's 'The Progressive Puzzle' reminds us, progressive politics suffers from persistent tensions between plurality and collective purpose, innovation and scale, participation and power that inhibit its ability to mobilise majorities and shape the future[43], weaknesses that can be understood as its 'horizontal' and 'vertical' challenges. Horizontally, social movements such as *Occupy*, *MeToo* and *Black Lives Matter* have shown an impressive capacity to enter public consciousness but have often struggled to develop permanent organisational forms capable of sustaining influence over time. At the same time, the wider ecology of progressive organisations lacks the connective mechanisms needed to generate scale, coordination and strategic alignment[44]. Vertically, progressive party politics has often been shaped by the centralising logic of electoral competition and statecraft that, while offering organisational coherence, can weaken civic participation, relational politics and democratic engagement[45]. As Mulgan argues, progressives have too often oscillated between state-centred solutions and fragmented civic

activism, without developing durable forms of connection between the two. If progressivism is to provide an effective alliance-based politics, it will have to remedy the weaknesses of civil society fragmentation and political state centralism by a more 'integral' approach.

3.3 Integral progressivism

The concept of 'Integral Progressivism' draws inspiration from Gramsci's notion of the integral state, which sought to understand the dialectical relationship between political society and civil society[46]. However, the concept is employed here in a broader sense to resolve the interconnected dilemmas of progressivism that cannot be resolved through electoral politics, policy reform or civil society mobilisation alone.

As illustrated in Figure 2, Integral Progressivism comprises a distinctive philosophical and political approach by linking an ethical-political dimension expressed through six 'Deep Common Values' with the strategic-organisational dimension of '45-Degree Politics' and the dialectical relationship between state and civil society[47].

Deep Common Values: The ethical-political foundations of the Progressive Bloc

Building on Gramsci's conception of the ethical-political dimensions of hegemony and Compass's conception of the Good Society, this paper proposes six values that provide the common horizon around which diverse progressive traditions can align, and thus function as the ethical-political foundations of a Bloc. Social democrats, democratic socialists, liberals, feminists, greens, civic democrats, faith communities and many others may differ in their philosophical foundations, but they are also capable of recognising progressive common purpose expressed through commitments to democracy, social justice, ecological responsibility, care, learning and peace. The significance of the six values lies precisely in their capacity to provide platforms for cooperation while preserving plurality.

1. *Democracy and collective control* - extending democratic participation, accountability and popular influence over the decisions that shape collective life.

2. *Social justice, equality and solidarity* - where all people, regardless of class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, age or background, possess the capabilities, opportunities and resources necessary for human flourishing; and where social solidarity strengthens collective responsibility for the wellbeing of others.
3. *Ecological civilisation and respect for nature* - recognising humanity's dependence on natural systems and the need to live within ecological boundaries.
4. *Health, care and human wellbeing* - promoting dignity, care, solidarity and flourishing throughout the life course.
5. *Learning and collective intelligence* - expanding educational opportunity, knowledge creation and society's collective capacity to solve problems in the digital age.
6. *Collaborative security and peace* - pursuing security through cooperation, international solidarity and peaceful coexistence rather than domination and conflict.

Another distinguishing feature of the six values is that, as fundamental expansive principles, they can be extended. For example, democracy can be deepened beyond representation through new forms of participation and collective control. Their contribution to human progress, therefore, can be judged not only by their capacity to unify, but also to evolve through their application to the global polycrisis and to progressive bloc building.

45-degree politics - a dialectical relationship between radical civil society and institutions

While the six values provide the ethical-political foundations of the Progressive Historical Bloc, they require political forms capable of translating ethical aspirations into collective action, institutional development and historical change. This practical dimension is provided through '45-degree politics' with an approach aimed at resolving the political weaknesses of contemporary progressivism. As Neal Lawson states, '*The intersection between this emerging horizontal bottom-up change and the more vertical state is the diagonal fault line through which a new society can and must be born. This is 45° Change'*[48].

45-degree politics is founded on the idea of a mediated relationship between the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of social and political life. Horizontal radical civil society - communities,

social movements, civic institutions and everyday democratic participation - provides new ideas, practices and energies for change. Vertical institutional capacities and resources of the government state can provide solidity. Through their interaction, both dimensions are strengthened - civil society gains greater influence and durability, while political institutions become more responsive, participatory and democratically grounded. 45-degree politics, therefore, provides the means through which the ethical aspirations embodied in the Common Values can become the basis of a durable political project.

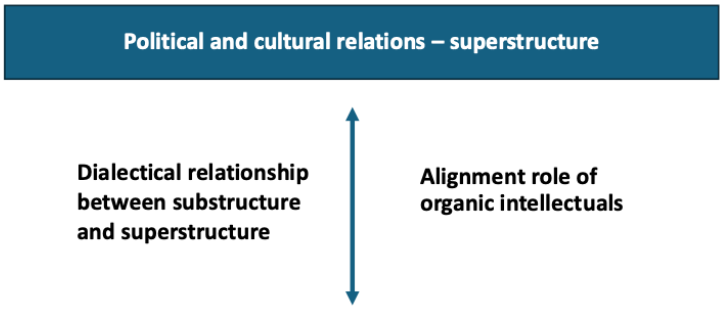
Integral progressivism is therefore more than a political strategy and more than an ethical vision. It is an attempt to connect values, politics, organisation and historical development within a coherent and mutually reinforcing project. In this sense, the Progressive Historical Bloc can be understood as the principal political expression of integral progressivism, while Connective Sub-Blocs provide the developmental building blocks through which its values and aspirations are translated into practical forms of collective action and societal transformation.

3.4 What is a Progressive Historical Bloc and why is it important?

Gramsci's original model reshaped 20th-century Marxist theory

The idea of a historical bloc comes from the Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci. At its simplest, a historical bloc is an alignment of socio-economic forces, institutions, ideas and political organisations – representing either the dominant or alternative social order - that shapes the direction of society[49]. For Gramsci, historical blocs emerged through the dialectical interrelationship of economic substructure and political/cultural superstructure, mediated by organic intellectuals, who work to align the two fundamental dimensions into a coherent political project in the exercise of hegemony (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The original historical bloc as an interrelationship of substructure and superstructure



The political economy concept of the historical bloc represented a foundational 20th-century reworking of Marxist theory, replacing dominant economic-determinist interpretations - that the economic base determines superstructure - with a dialectical understanding of the relationship between economic structures, political forces and ideological formations. In the 1980s, Gramsci scholar Anne Sassoon argued that Gramsci had created a new Marxist political theory that placed greater emphasis on the relatively autonomous political, cultural and ideological dimensions of society than had been customary within orthodox Marxism[50]. The relationship between politics and ideology with the economic realm was to be secured through the concept of the historical bloc, linking material conditions, institutions, ideas and political life within a single explanatory framework. Without this connective concept, Gramsci's emphasis on culture, ideology, civil society and political leadership could easily have been interpreted as a departure from Marxism rather than as its creative renewal[51].

Towards a 21st-century model

Beyond Gramsci himself, neo-Gramscian scholars (e.g. Robert Cox 1983 and Adam Morton 2007), while internationalising the historical bloc concept, have tended to treat sub-blocs as relatively stable alignments of social forces, institutional interests, class configurations and political actors situated within a wider hegemonic formation[52]. However, more recent interventions have moved beyond purely structural interpretations, with Peter Thomas (2009) and Panos Sotiris (2011) emphasising that historical blocs are not simply socio-economic arrangements but strategic and political projects actively forged through ideology, organisation and struggle[53]. Yet even here the

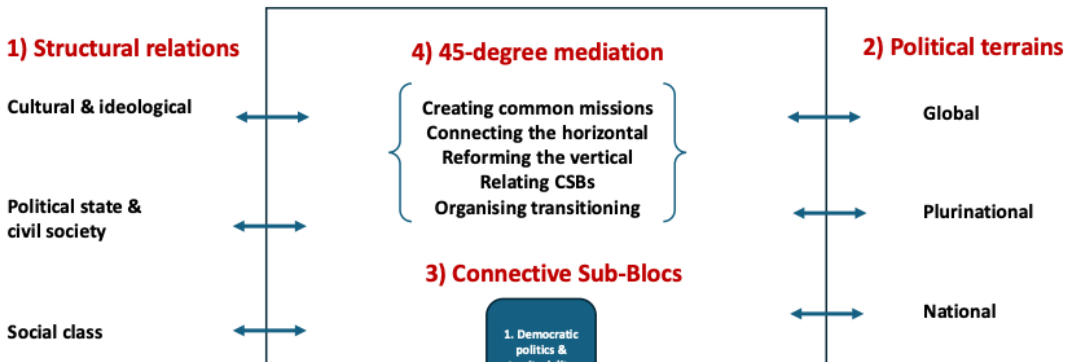
principal focus remains the historical bloc itself, rather than the internal components through which the bloc is constructed and developed.

While Gramsci's original model was part of early 20th-century Marxist debates, 21st-century globalised political economy conditions require a more multi-dimensional and dynamic conceptual approach. In this reworking, a key distinction can be made between a 'generic historical bloc' model, applicable to both dominant and subordinate social forces, and a 'Progressive Historical Bloc' (PHB) model that assists in understanding how a new progressive hegemony can be built.

3.5 The connective architecture of the Progressive Historical Bloc

The original Gramscian model of the historical bloc, emerging from the political struggles and Marxist debates of the early 20th century, has remained primarily concerned with explaining how historical blocs achieve coherence and exercise hegemony. This model offers less guidance concerning the organisational processes through which a new alternative bloc might be consciously constructed in 21st-century conditions. While the Progressive Historical Bloc (PHB) model retains Gramsci's central insight about mediation between substructure and superstructure, it focuses on how a new progressive bloc might be built amid technological transformation, ecological crisis, territorial differentiation, political fragmentation, and the growing importance of collective intelligence. As Figure 3 illustrates, compared with Figure 2, the PHB model is based on an expanded connective architecture comprising four fundamental dimensions – a more diverse range of structural relations; political terrains; connective sub-blocs; and 45° mediation.

Figure 3. Connective architecture of the new Bloc



Dimension 1. Structural relations - expanding Gramsci's original distinction between substructure and superstructure, the concept of 21st-century structural relations reflects a more globalised and complex world. This leads to a more diverse set of structural relations - material economic/technological/ecological, social class; political state/civil society; cultural/ideological; and historical legacies. Nevertheless, as in the original base-superstructure model, the key task is to cohere this expanded set of structural relations through both the general alignment of economic and political/ideological life and through the inter-relationship of the various Connective Sub-Blocs.

Dimension 2. Political terrains – progressive bloc formation will occur across multiple, overlapping and interacting political terrains - community, local and regional, national, plurinational and global. The challenge for progressive politics is not simply to achieve influence within each terrain, but to connect them around a common historical direction. Hegemony develops when economic, political, cultural and ecological relations become progressively integrated across these different scales of activity that link the micro-level experiences of everyday life with wider projects of societal transformation. The enduring contribution of the Burnham Project will thus lie in the recognition of place as a crucial starting point for this process in which the strategic challenge is to extend this territorial logic across the full range of political

terrains, thereby creating a genuinely multi-scalar project capable of exercising historical leadership.

Dimension 3. Connective Sub-Blocs (CSBs) - represent the principal organisational innovation of the new expanded model. CSBs are conceived as dynamic, mission-oriented formations that connect actors (organic intellectuals), policy, institutions, new forms of knowledge, resources and leadership around specific challenges and missions. Through this connective role, CSBs simultaneously function as building blocks of the wider bloc and as generative mechanisms through which the bloc develops. Acting as the 'connective engines' of the PHB, they create and coordinate the relationships, knowledge, institutions, resources and leadership capacities required for transformation. In this way, CSBs operate as developmental ecosystems that generate new forms of collaboration, innovation, collective intelligence and societal problem-solving.

Dimension 4. 45-degree mediation - places an expanded ecology of organic intellectuals, individual and collective, at the centre of bloc formation. Drawing on and integrating the strategic capacities of governmental organisation and civic society - universities, think tanks, social movements, trade unions, public institutions and other knowledge-producing actors - 45-degree mediation works to connect and organise horizontal and vertical structural relations across the political terrains on which they operate, while simultaneously fostering the development of mission-oriented Connective Sub-Blocs (CSBs). The significance of this expanded mediating role lies in its emphasis on reciprocal connectivity, becoming a generative process that actively creates new relationships, organisational capacities and new forms of collective intelligence. This increased connectivity serves to compensate for the relative absence of concentrated economic and ideological powers enjoyed by the Regressive Bloc even when progressive forces enter government at local and national levels.

Dimension 5. Transitioning towards New Settlements and the Good Society - places historical development and societal transformation at the centre of bloc formation. Through the interaction

of structural relations, political terrains, 45-degree mediation and mission-oriented Connective Sub-Blocs (CSBs), the PHB functions as a developmental ecosystem directed towards the creation of a Good Society, guided by the six Deep Common Values. The significance of transitioning, therefore, lies in the progressive extension of these values across society through the creation of new democratic capacities, forms of collective intelligence, caring institutions, sustainable economic relations and cooperative forms of security. The Good Society should thus be understood not as a fixed endpoint, but as evolving new settlements continually shaped and renewed through the connective, developmental and transformative capacities of the Progressive Bloc.

3.6 The Progressive Bloc as an Integral Ecosystem

The five dimensions outlined above constitute an expanded connective architecture for understanding the Progressive Bloc under 21st-century conditions:

1. Structural relations: the economic, technological, ecological, social, political and cultural foundations upon which the bloc is constructed.

2. Political terrains: the multiple and overlapping spaces in which politics occurs and through which social forces seek influence and leadership.

3. Connective Sub-Blocs (CSBs): the mission-oriented internal organisational formations through which relationships are aligned, capacities developed and collective agency constructed.
4. 45-degree mediation: the overarching dialectical process through which these dimensions are connected, aligned and developed.

Taken together, these dimensions transform the Bloc from a relatively static model of social and political alignment into a dynamic and evolving connective ecosystem characterised by territorial integration, capacity formation, collective learning and societal transition.

This broader understanding is related to the concept of integral progressivism developed earlier in the paper. Here the concept of the integral is extended beyond the relationship between governmental institutions and civil society to encompass the wider totality of relationships that constitute the Progressive Bloc. Viewed in this way, the Bloc can be understood as an 'integral socio-political ecosystem' whose development depends on the creative interaction of structural conditions, political activity, organisational formation and connective mediation. It is this concept of a connective and integral architecture that provides the foundation for the mission-oriented work of Connective Sub-Blocs explored in Part 4.

Part 4. Connective Sub-Blocs - dynamic building blocks of the Progressive Bloc

4.1 Constitutive and generative functions of the CSB

If the emergent PHB is to compete politically, it needs to be more dynamic, connective and innovative than the regressive bloc, which enjoys greater centralised economic, technological and ideological power. By contrast, if they are to avoid the political mistakes of centrist and centralising social democracy, dispersed progressive forces require an alliance-based concept that coheres their strategies, politics and structures. This is the role of 'Connective Sub-Blocs' (CSBs), conceived here as the major building blocks of the PHB with both 'constitutive' and 'generative' functions.

As a building block structure – its constitutive function - each CSB is defined and organised around four core elements:

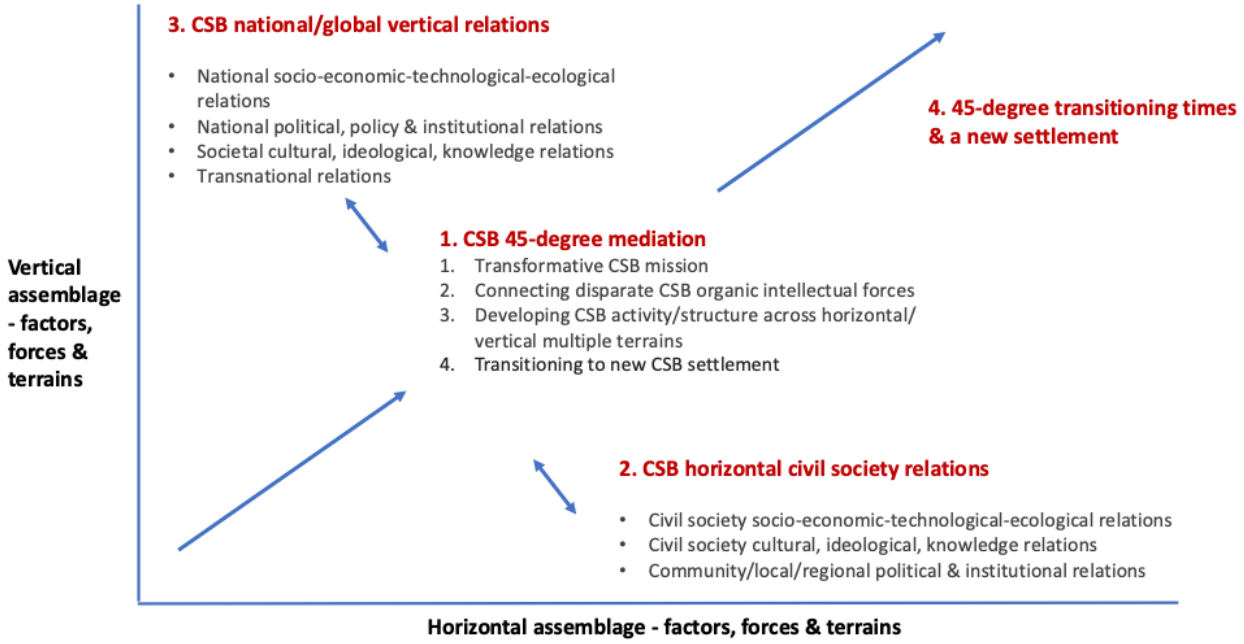
- a *transformative* mission that provides common purpose and direction;
- a *leading area of specialist activity* - economic, technological, ecological, social, political and cultural - which gives the CSB its distinctive focus;
- a *set of practical activities*, strategies and organisational arrangements through which change is pursued; and
- *engagement across the various terrains* of political life, from communities and localities to regional, national and global arenas.

At the same time, CSBs have generative functions due to the potential to create new capacities, relationships, knowledge resources and strategic opportunities. This developmental dynamic, largely absent from more static conceptions of the historical bloc, occurs both 'internally' and 'externally'. Within the CSB, generative capacity stems from a shared mission capable of aligning previously fragmented organic intellectual forces, together with 45-degree politics expressed across multiple terrains, to create positive feedback loops so that the whole CSB is greater than

the sum of its parts (see Figure 4). The 'external' generative function can arise due to synergistic relationships between the various CSBs (see Figure 5).

In its constitutive and generative forms, a CSB can be thought of as a small-scale version of the wider PHB, operating as ecosystemic 'micro-historical blocs' that bring together people, organisations, ideas and resources around a shared mission.

Figure 4. The 45-degree internal dynamics of a Connective Sub-Bloc



4.2 45-degree dialectical relations and 21st century organic intellectuals

Like in the wider PHB, CSBs can be seen to be structured around a 45-degree dialectical relationship between the horizontal and vertical political assemblages in which the horizontal assemblage relations of civil society provide energies and innovation, while the vertical assemblage relations of the governmental state provide solidity of structure, overall strategic and resourcing. A dialectical 45-degree relationship can transform the qualities of both.

As Figure 4 illustrates, the horizontal and vertical assemblages of the CSB, as in the wider PHB, are mediated by 21st-century 'organic intellectuals'. While Gramsci's original conception focused primarily on the political party, trade unions and their associated intellectuals, contemporary organic intellectual forces are far more diverse and dispersed throughout society - political activists, civil society innovators, community leaders, policy entrepreneurs, journalists, bloggers, educators, researchers, technologically skilled professionals and politically conscious specialists working across universities, public institutions, business, cultural organisations and social movements[54]. Operating across local, regional, national and global arenas, these actors (individual and collective) help connect knowledge, practice and organisation, translating social experiences and emerging ideas into collective projects (missions) capable of advancing transformative change.

4.3 Transformative missions and heroic projects

Drawing on Mariana Mazzucato's conception of mission-oriented innovation evoked by the Apollo Space Programme, missions are understood as bold, directional and societally relevant goals capable of mobilising diverse actors and institutions around complex challenges[55].

The neoliberal era, in which political leaders and intellectuals of the Right proclaimed that markets were the answer to everything, saw the decline of 'grand missions'; most notably the 'Race for Space', of the late Keynesian era. The changing cultural mood was captured early by 'The Stranglers' 1977 song 'No More Heroes', which foreshadowed the decline of heroic projects. In place of collective missions, there emerged a more fragmented political culture characterised by pragmatism and managerialism. Fast forward 40 years, the vanity space projects of Musk and Bezos, while more technologically advanced, appear puny by comparison. The task is not to recover heroes, but to reconstruct the collective capacities through which new historic projects can be imagined, organised and sustained.

CSB missions in their transformative mode could, therefore, be viewed as new heroic projects insofar as they reflect ambitions to move beyond the current neoliberal settlement. Interestingly,

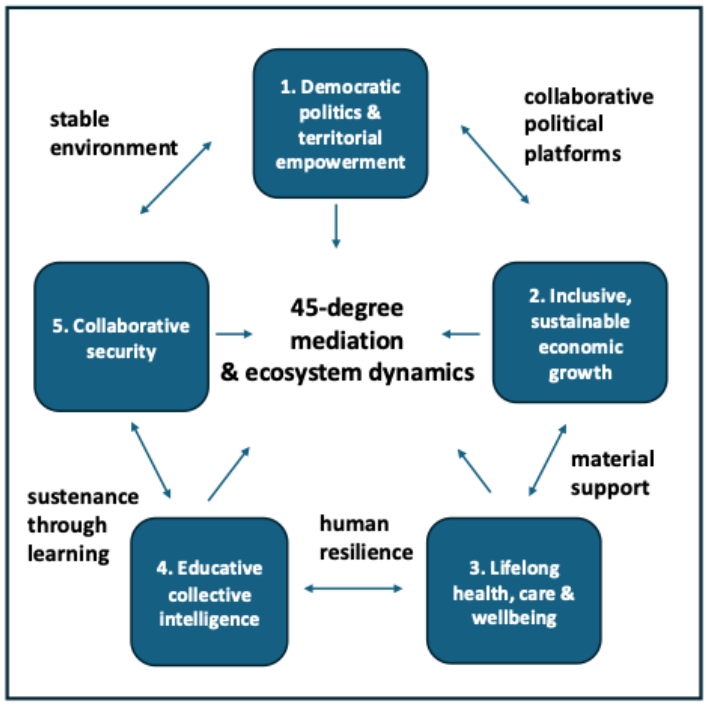
both Mazzucato and Burnham, in their different ways, both evoke the achievements of the previous era to look forward rather than to look backwards.

A historically situated CSB mission thus moves beyond a narrow collection of policy commitments, as with Keir Starmer's 'five missions for government'[56], by providing general collective purposes and new historical horizons around which diverse actors can coalesce and develop new capacities for change. In this sense, the mission gives the CSB its fundamental historical character, linking present activity to the construction of future progressive settlements.

4.4 Evolving CSBs as developmental ecosystems

The evolution of a CSB involves progression beyond the alignment of diverse forces around a common mission to a more mature condition in which the CSB develops increasingly dense relationships, institutions, knowledge resources and leadership capacities that enable it to operate as a 'developmental ecosystem' in its own right (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Reciprocal relations in the CSB ecosystem



Informed by the six Common Values and an adaptation of David Finegold's high-skills ecosystem elements - catalysts, supportive environments, ongoing nourishment, and strong interdependence among actors[57] - each CSB generates a specific ecosystem resource that serves both its own mission and the wider bloc.

1. 'Democratic Politics and Territorial Empowerment' provides the organisational platforms necessary for collective action
2. 'Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Development' generates material support within ecological boundaries.
3. 'Lifelong Health, Care and Wellbeing' fosters human resilience and continued societal contribution across the life course.
4. 'Educative and Collective Intelligence' provides ecosystemic sustenance through learning and knowledge creation;
5. 'Collaborative Security' creates the stability required for coordinated action across national and transnational terrains in response to global polycrisis (see Table 3).

Each CSB simultaneously contributes to, and benefits from, the development of the others, creating relationships of mutual dependence, co-evolution and collective learning – that can be understood as a 'constellation' of CSBs. The overall PHB thus develops as an interconnected bloc ecosystem composed of mission-driven CSB mini-ecosystems.

4.5 CSBs in action – a provisional map

Having outlined the conceptual characteristics of CSBs, this section illustrates their practical significance. The objective is not to provide an exhaustive catalogue of possible CSBs but to focus on those mission areas judged to be both foundational to the long-term development of a PHB and directly relevant to the challenges currently confronting the Burnham Project.

The five mission-oriented CSBs are more than a list of policy priorities; they are defined by an advanced strategic conception of a key societal terrain that can lead towards a series of new

settlements. Table 3 summarises the core missions, principal developmental activities and projected settlement associated with each selected CSB.

Table 3. Mission-oriented CSBs and their corresponding progressive settlements

Mission-oriented CSB	**Core mission**	**Key activities**	**Potential progressive settlement**
1**.** Democratic Renewal & Territorial Empowerment	Creating an advanced democratic system	• Building progressive alliances • Expanding devolved and place-based governance • Developing participatory democracy • Reforming the voting system	A more participatory and territorially balanced democracy, stronger civic institutions and greater democratic legitimacy.
2**.** Inclusive Sustainable Economic and Social Development	Combining social justice and ecological sustainability	• Driving a just transition to a low-carbon economy • Developing green skills and workforce transition pathways • Linking economic growth to social inclusion and regional rebalancing	A new type of green economy that combines social justice and territorial cohesion within planetary boundaries.
3**.** Health, care and wellbeing	Building an integrated system of prevention, care and wellbeing across the life course	• Integrating health, social care and wellbeing systems • Expanding prevention and public health initiatives • Addressing mental health and social isolation • Developing sustainable care and community support infrastructures	A more aring society in which prevention, wellbeing, social solidarity and lifelong support are recognised as core societal priorities.
4. Educative society and collective intelligence	Developing lifelong learning, knowledge creation and collective intelligence in the AI era	• Strengthening lifelong learning, AI and skills ecosystems • Generating collective intelligence through collaborative knowledge production	A learning society characterised by democratic access to education and the development of collective intelligence.
5**.** Collective security and international solidarity	Creating collaborative responses to national and global risks within a multipolar world	• Strengthening international cooperation and solidarity networks (e.g in relation to the EU). • Developing democratic responses to the polycrisis • Coordinating security, sustainability and resilience strategies across geo-scalars	A cooperative international order based on shared security, democratic multilateralism, ecological responsibility and global solidarity.

Together, the five CSBs provide both a strategic roadmap and an evaluative framework. As a roadmap, they suggest possible directions through which the Burnham Project might evolve from an advanced form of civic Labourism towards a wider Progressive Historical Bloc. As an evaluative framework, they offer a means of assessing the extent to which the Project is developing the alliances, institutional capacities, forms of collective intelligence and transformational ambitions associated with historical bloc formation. Because democratic renewal represents both the immediate challenge facing British progressivism and the Burnham Project and the foundational condition upon which all other CSBs depend, it is examined below as an illustrative case of how a mission-oriented CSB might develop in practice.

4.6 The Democratic Renewal and Participation CSB: An illustrative case

An expansive agenda

Among the five proposed CSBs, democratic renewal occupies a particularly significant position. Contemporary British politics is characterised by declining trust in institutions, weakening party identification, growing territorial inequalities, electoral fragmentation and the emergence of powerful right-populist currents. Without stronger democratic foundations, the wider project of social transformation is unlikely to command either sufficient public support or long-term political durability.

The Democratic Renewal and Participation CSB seeks to address this challenge by reframing democracy as a mission rather than a constitutional question alone. Its objective is not simply to reform institutions but to strengthen the capacity of citizens to shape the direction of society through more participatory, representative and collaborative forms of governance. As a connective sub-bloc, it would seek to align political parties, local authorities, trade unions, civic organisations, constitutional reform movements, universities and community networks around a shared project of democratic renewal.

Viewed through the CSB framework, democratic renewal involves several interconnected functions through providing:

1. A transformative mission capable of linking democratic reform with broader goals of social and economic change.
2. Societal alignment by bringing together actors who may differ on specific policies but share an interest in strengthening democratic participation and legitimacy.
3. By developing leadership capacities and durable alliances capable of sustaining reform over time.
4. By creating forms of 45-degree mediation that connect representative institutions with the knowledge, experiences and energies of civil society.
5. Finally, it generates developmental capacity by fostering new democratic capabilities, institutions and cultures of participation.

Steps and stages

The development of this CSB will need to occur in stages. During the initial phase, for example, between the present and an envisaged general election in 2029, priority could be given to strengthening democratic legitimacy and building alliances capable of resisting the growing influence of the Regressive Bloc. For example, a major initiative has been the launch of the 'Council for the Progressive Majority'[58], intended to bring together leading figures from Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the SNP and Plaid Cymru to discuss how the "progressive majority" might cooperate to prevent a Reform UK government. Other practical initiatives will necessarily include devolving more powers to local and regional government and could also include expanding forms of participatory governance, such as supporting citizens' assemblies. At this stage, the emphasis is less on constitutional transformation than on rebuilding public confidence and demonstrating tangible democratic benefits, although these structural transformations will have to be laid out so that the democratic direction of travel is clear.

A second phase would focus on deeper structural reform. Necessary developments would include electoral reform, which can have profound multiplier effects across the political system, the reform of the House of Lords and a new constitutional relationship with the other countries of the UK.

The significance of the Democratic Renewal CSB extends beyond democracy itself. As the foundational CSB within the wider PHB, it creates many of the conditions required for the development of the other mission-oriented formations. Inclusive sustainability, health and wellbeing, collective intelligence and collaborative security all depend, to varying degrees, upon public legitimacy, civic participation and durable democratic institutions. Democratic renewal therefore functions both as a distinct mission and as a generative platform for wider sub-bloc development.

Part 5. The Burnham Project and the challenges of Progressive Bloc building

5.1 Can the Burnham Project progress beyond Civic Labourism?

This paper argues that the Burnham Project occupies a transitional position between an advanced form of civic Labourism and the possibility of a broader Progressive Bloc. Rooted in the practical achievements of Manchesterism, the Project has developed important strengths in territorial leadership, institutional innovation, civic partnership and place-based development. However, the Project's historical significance will depend not only on its immediate electoral success, but also on its capacity to nurture and develop the constituent Connective Sub-Blocs through which progressive bloc formation occurs.

Of course, the key question is whether Andy Burnham wants to move beyond civic Labourism. He has already declared that he wishes to move beyond the neoliberal settlement. The question remains, though, as to what he wants to move towards. Viewed optimistically, Neal Lawson of Compass has suggested that Andy Burnham is an example of Gramsci's 'organic intellectual'[59]. Furthermore, people who have met him remark on his interest in political ideas, and this was certainly on display in his 2026 Labour conference speech. While the signs are promising, if the Burnham Project is to develop further, it will require a second and broader iteration of 'Head North' – an expanded political and intellectual intervention, linked to the next Labour Manifesto and the 10-Year Plan for government[60]

As part of this longer-term perspective, five major developmental challenges emerge, viewed through the lens of CSB development over 10 years. These missions should be viewed not only as arenas for policy development, but also as a basis for a coherent and convincing political story with which to combat the destructive narratives of the Regressive Bloc.

5.2 Democratic renewal and territorial empowerment

The first, and most significant, challenge concerns democratic renewal and territorial empowerment. For this reason, the Democratic CSB has been chosen as an exemplar case. Throughout his political career, Andy Burnham has argued that economic and social renewal depends upon a substantial redistribution of power away from Westminster through devolution, territorial empowerment and civic participation. The challenge is whether these innovations can be translated into a wider democratic project that moves towards a more pluralistic and representative democratic settlement.

At the same time, the Burnham Project retains a strongly personal character. While he enjoys broad support across different wings of Labour he remains, in important respects, a 'political lone gun', assembling around himself figures from different Labour traditions[61]. This informal approach generates a strategic dilemma, highlighting the need to develop a more durable 'Labour internal progressive alliance' that can transform a leader-centred coalition into a collaborative internal coalition required to move beyond established Labourisms[62].

Externally, democratic renewal will depend on constitutional reform, including the introduction of proportional representation, the further decentralisation of power within the British state, stronger regional and local governance, and the creation of new mechanisms through which citizens can participate more directly in democratic decision-making. In terms of bloc building, the Democratic Renewal and Territorial Empowerment CSB represents the challenge of constructing the democratic foundations upon which all other forms of transformation depend.

5.3 Inclusive growth and ecological sustainability

The second challenge concerns the relationship between economic-social development and ecological transition. Contemporary politics is increasingly shaped by tensions between economic security, industrial renewal, environmental sustainability and energy transition. The Burnham Project is attempting to address these concerns through a combination of reindustrialisation, green investment, territorial development and social inclusion[63].

However, this remains one of the most difficult tests of progressive politics. Maintaining support from environmentally conscious voters while simultaneously addressing the concerns of organised labour, industrial communities and economically vulnerable regions requires the successful mediation of potentially competing interests and priorities, a complex issue that the New Right are very willing to exploit. Moreover, the ongoing debate over North Sea oil and gas represents a prime 'Burnham dilemma'[64] as to whether the Project can develop a credible pathway that combines ecological transformation with economic security and thereby sustain a broad progressive bloc.

5.4 Lifelong health, care and wellbeing

A third challenge concerns health, care and wellbeing. The pressures associated with demographic change, public health inequalities, mental health, social care provision and fiscal sustainability represent some of the most significant challenges facing the Burnham Government. At its core, this CSB raises the question of whether a new progressive settlement can place care and wellbeing at the centre of social development. Success would require not only institutional integration but also the development of new political narratives capable of treating care as a productive social investment rather than simply a public expenditure problem.

5.5 Education and collective intelligence

The fourth challenge concerns learning, knowledge production and collective intelligence
As with the previous challenges, the issue of education and collective intelligence is both political and societal. The development of this mission therefore involves more than educational reform, but the challenge of developing forms of collective societal intelligence capable of operating in a digital age characterised by misinformation, fragmentation and declining trust in expertise. This would involve thinking beyond schooling and focusing on the creation of stronger relationships between universities, colleges, research institutions, civic organisations, public institutions and communities to generate the knowledge capacities necessary for societal transition.

5.6 Collective security and international solidarity

The final challenge concerns collective security and international solidarity. The original development of Manchesterism occurred largely within a domestic territorial context. National leadership, however, requires engagement with a wider set of geopolitical realities characterised by multipolar competition, climate instability, migration pressures, technological competition and international conflict.

The challenge for the Burnham Project is, therefore, whether it can develop a broader conception of security that extends beyond defence and national protection towards collaborative approaches based on resilience, cooperation and international partnership. This requires a political imagination capable of connecting local renewal with wider questions of global responsibility and international solidarity.

5.7 Connectivity and time

No single CSB can resolve the major challenges confronting contemporary society. Climate transition, democratic renewal, technological transformation, social inequality and care provision are interconnected challenges that cut across traditional policy boundaries. Successful transformation depends on the connectivity of 'CSB constellations', seen as coordinated alignments of multiple sub-blocs operating across different terrains and sectors while sharing a common strategic purpose.

A related factor concerns time. PHBs are not constructed within a single electoral cycle but will develop through stages of formation, experimentation, alliance-building, institutional innovation and public learning. In this regard, the first task of a Burnham government would be to establish legitimacy, demonstrate practical competence and build broad coalitions for change to defeat the Regressive Bloc. This harbours Burnham's pressing governance dilemma – requiring sufficient authority to enact the reforms capable of renewing public confidence, while also requiring renewed public confidence to secure and retain that authority - a 'political Catch-22'. If Burnham can escape this Catch-22, a second parliamentary term could provide opportunities for deeper

structural reforms and the maturation of more fully developed CSBs. The challenge facing the Burnham Project is, therefore, not merely to retain office, but also to create the political authority and societal trust necessary to sustain a longer process of transformation.

5.8 From Civic Labourism to a Progressive Historical Bloc

Taken together, these five challenges should be understood as the principal terrains upon which the development of a Progressive Historical Bloc will depend. The significance of the Burnham Project lies in the fact that it already exhibits embryonic forms of the capacities required for such a development. Through Manchesterism, it has demonstrated an ability to align diverse interests around common territorial missions and through its commitment to democratic renewal, social justice and territorial empowerment, it has gestured towards a wider conception of the Good Society.

One of the more intriguing features of the Burnham Project is that it appears to look both backwards and forwards simultaneously to bring about change. On the one hand, Burnham is explicit in his desire to move beyond the neoliberal assumptions that have shaped Britain for more than four decades. On the other, he frequently invokes themes, memories and values rooted in an earlier social-democratic era. What emerges is a form of 'progressive nostalgia'[65]. This is not nostalgia as retreat or restoration, but nostalgia as a source of values, memory and direction. It represents an attempt to recover what was socially valuable in the past, while recognising that it cannot simply be reproduced under contemporary conditions of technological transformation, ecological transition and global interdependence.

5.9 The Burnham Project as strategic ambiguity

The future trajectory of the Burnham Project therefore remains open, strategically ambiguous and contested. It could consolidate as a nationalised form of civic Labourism focused primarily on competent governance and institutional reform, or it could also contribute to the construction of a wider Progressive Historical Bloc. If the latter path is pursued, the decisive question will not

simply be whether the Project can exercise power, but whether it can cultivate the connective capacities required to align values, institutions, social forces and collective intelligence around a common direction of travel.

The supreme challenge, therefore, is to cultivate new forms of partnership and alliance-making, capable of connecting diverse forces across an emergent progressive bloc to advance the prospects for enduring social and political transformation.

5.10 Historical significance

This paper finishes with the question of how Andy Burnham would like to be remembered. Would it be sufficient to be remembered as a good Labour prime minister, or does he wish to be celebrated as someone who transformed the political system for the better? In this also lies a question for the Labour Party. Thus far, it has thought almost exclusively in terms of political self-interest. However, a political party becomes hegemonic when it recognises that it is not the only solution, but one part of a wider historical project requiring alliances, sacrifices and shared leadership. This is the leadership and collective mentality required for building the Progressive Historical Bloc.

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