

What Next in Politics 2

Brighton and Hove Compass Coffee Morning, 18 July 2026

The meeting at Friends Meeting House packed the room with an audience of sixty-five. Our speakers were political scientists **Tim Bale** (Queen Mary University) and **Paul Taggart** (Sussex University) discussing the state of British politics, Labour's prospects under Andy Burnham's leadership, the rise of Reform UK and other right-wing populist movements, and the wider challenges facing progressive politics in Britain..

Tim Bale: Can Labour Win Again?

Tim Bale presented recent YouGov polling showing that Labour has lost significant support since the 2024 election:

Only about 40% of 2024 Labour voters would currently vote Labour again.

Most defectors have moved to:

Green Party (17%)

Liberal Democrats (9%)

Reform UK (6%)

Undecided (12%)

The main reasons for leaving Labour were:

Cost of living

Failure to deliver promised change

Lack of clear direction

Concerns over Keir Starmer's leadership

Tim argued that:

Labour's best chance lies in rebuilding a **progressive coalition** with Green and Liberal Democrat voters rather than chasing Reform voters.

Andy Burnham's emphasis on council housing, social care and public ownership could help regain progressive support.

However, Labour risks appearing nostalgic rather than future-focused.

He suggested Andy Burnham:

Connects well with ordinary voters.

Projects optimism and purpose.

Could reunite progressive voters behind Labour.

However, he warned against:

Becoming too nostalgic for "old Labour".

Focusing too heavily on northern identity.

Over-promising, and then U-turning when policies become difficult.

He suggested Labour needs three things to win a second term:

Improve economic growth while reducing the cost of living.

Deliver visible improvements to the NHS.

Show competence on immigration, especially small boat crossings, without making unrealistic promises.

He argued voters will accept gradual improvement if they believe progress is genuine.

Paul Taggart focused on Reform UK and newer right-wing movements.

His main arguments were:

Reform should not be viewed simply as Nigel Farage's party but as part of a broader shift in British politics.

The Conservative Party has moved significantly to the right, helping normalise more radical positions.

British politics is increasingly shaped by emotions, identity and distrust rather than detailed policy.

He argued that:

Immigration continues to dominate the right's agenda.

Debates around sovereignty and opposition to international institutions remain influential.

Labour should avoid copying Reform's positions because voters generally prefer the "original" over an imitation.

He suggested that politics are increasingly emotional

Progressives often respond with facts when voters are reacting emotionally.

Politics now operate differently than many politically engaged people assume.

Labour cannot simply copy Reform's positions because evidence suggests that strategy rarely succeeds.

Forty-five people in the audience submitted written questions. The key themes were -

Devolution & the Burnham/Mayoral Model

Several questions probe whether devolution genuinely delivers on growth and cost of living, whether it's viable within a system still centrally controlled by government, and the risk of decentralisation “backing” — for example, a Reform mayor emerging in a devolved authority.

Immigration — Narrative and Strategy

Multiple questions focus on how Labour is “losing the narrative” on immigration, how to shift public attitudes, and how to reconcile firmer immigration control with courting Green and Liberal Democrat voters.

Winning Elections and Appealing to the Electorate

A cluster of questions on strategy: whether to chase “Red Wall” voters or those who have drifted to other progressive parties, how to engage young people and the large non-voting population, whether Labour should be “more radical” since the right won't be won over, and whether emotional (rather than evidence-based) voting requires new tactics.

Funding, Wealth, and Economic Power

Questions repeatedly ask how Burnham/Labour would actually fund their policies — wealth taxes, fiscal rules (“the Black Cloud”), local authority resourcing, and the broader question of how any UK government can counter the power of markets and big business.

Power of Tech, AI, and Oligarchs

A strong thread on who “really has the power” — tech giants, financiers, and oligarchs — plus specific concern that AI hasn't been sufficiently addressed as both a major threat and opportunity, and how progressive politics can influence or regulate it.

Democratic Reform and Participation

Questions on electoral reform (proportional representation), automatic voter registration, votes for 16–17 year olds (and whether they're politically educated enough), and use of citizens' assemblies to strengthen democratic legitimacy.

Leadership Viability and Party Direction

Questions about Burnham's personal prospects (replicating his “electoral magic,” the pattern of “disposable prime ministers,” the Boris Johnson comparison of popular mayor vs. failed PM) and broader concerns such as private-sector involvement in the NHS and Labour's stance on Palestine Action and Gaza.