



Edited by Matt Jackson  
and Paul Maltby



**“No-one believes in PLCs more than I do.  
I’ve got one that is very big in the stock  
market. But football, when you really come  
down to it, belongs in the sphere of human  
emotions. Real Madrid is a kind of religion  
for millions all over the world. You can’t have  
that in the hands of one individual. It’s as if  
the Catholic Church belonged to one person.  
It wouldn’t be right.”**

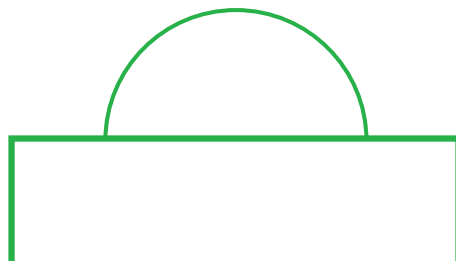
Florentino Perez,  
President of Real Madrid,  
June 2003

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The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is Britain’s leading progressive think tank. Its purpose is to contribute to a greater public understanding of social, economic and political questions through research, discussion and publication. Established as an independent charity in 1988, the ippr has developed a proud and influential record. Through its well researched and clearly argued policy analysis, its strong networks in government, academia, and the corporate and voluntary sector, and its high media profile, ippr is playing a vital role maintaining the momentum of progressive thought.





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# Introduction

Matt Jackson and Paul Maltby



**AS THE SEASON gets into its stride, two clubs, both founder members of the Premier League, are illustrating the dichotomy that exists in football today. Chelsea have spent over £100 million in assembling a team to win them the Champions League. Meanwhile, Oldham Athletic have become the 34th Football League club in 11 years to be declared insolvent and are struggling to find £1.2 million to stay in business (Conn, 2003).**

At the top end, English football has never looked healthier. A host of world-class British players and managers mingle in a cash-rich Premiership alongside international stars of the game. English clubs compete with the best in Europe and are amongst the leading world brands. There are impressive modern stadiums with outstanding safety standards and huge numbers continue to attend games, watch their teams on pay-TV, and purchase the inevitable merchandise.



**At the top end, English football has never looked healthier... but scratch beneath the surface and there is plenty of evidence to suggest all is not right with the beautiful game.**

But scratch beneath the surface and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that all is not right with the beautiful game. The collapse of ITV Digital exacerbated the fragile state of many clubs' finances, and teams with household names were forced onto their knees. The standard of corporate governance in too many clubs is shockingly poor, and owners are too often forced to risk all on desperate bids for promotion.

## Trust in Football

It is this basic inequity in the game that prompted IPPR to put together this short report. Football is much more than a regulated private entertainment industry. There are parallels with other public services and privatised enterprises in how the game is regulated, financed and governed, and it shares with public institutions like the NHS



**There is scope for redistribution of other resources such as player talent and management expertise.**

a degree of public attachment that goes beyond questions of performance, profit and efficiency. Football is perhaps closer to IPPR's traditional areas of inquiry than it might first appear.

IPPR is particularly attracted to the concept of the Supporters' Trust Initiative, now known as Supporters Direct. These are organisations of fans formed to improve governance and with the aim of becoming the owners of their clubs. This initiative, created with the support of the Government, is one of the good news stories emerging from the lower leagues. The trusts provide an instructive lesson in the positive opportunities possible when the public seizes direct power over institutions they care about passionately.

Our report kicks off with **Dan Corry and Paul Williamson**, authors of the 1993 IPPR report into the state of football *A Game Without Vision: the Crisis in English Football*. They look back to discover whether their decade-old prophecies about the game have come true. They find there have been a number of positive changes: the increased crowds, the improved quality of the football and an introduction of leading foreign players. However, the underlying problems they exposed years ago have arguably become more entrenched. Weak regulation in the form of the Football Association (FA) has allowed the top clubs and the Premier League to concentrate power, leaving no one in the position to look after the interests of the game as a whole.

**Andy Burnham**, MP for Leigh, former Special Advisor to Chris Smith MP when Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and a key influence in the formation and growth of Supporters Direct takes these issues further. Andy argues that football and specifically the FA have forgotten their roots, allowing clubs and their assets to be sold off and left bankrupt. He highlights the paralysis in the industry as the power and influence of the FA and Football League has been usurped by the elite clubs, and the historic system of income redistribution dismantled. All this alongside the increased feelings of alienation in those supporters who have no option but to watch as the clubs they support suffer financial ruin. But like the game, Andy argues the solution is simple and offers a three-step plan to save football: stronger regulation; increased redistribution; and supporter ownership of clubs in the form of supporters' trusts.

**Dave Boyle**, Deputy Manager of Supporters Direct, takes us to the frontline and shows a movement that has in a short time become a real agent for change in the game. He sets out the difficulties in mobilising supporters and keeping them



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interested. He looks at what happens when a supporters' trust takes control of a club, arguing that supporters are more interested in the long-term survival of the club than in short-term glory. Dave shows that democratic accountability in the form of supporters' trusts can not only bring change at a club level but can also change the way in which football as a whole operates.

**David Conn**, football journalist for *The Independent* and author of the best selling *The Football Business* (1997) takes the ball from Dave and assesses the potential for Supporters Direct to affect the problems currently facing the game. David examines successful supporters' trusts at Northampton, Lincoln, Swansea, and more famously AFC Wimbledon. He brings a dose of reality to Andy and Dave Boyle's enthusiasm, pointing out that while supporters' trusts may offer an answer to those in the lower divisions, they are unlikely to have a big impact on clubs in the Premiership. This is especially likely to be the case when there are billionaire 'sugar daddies' with money to spend.

## Recommendations

Football has come to a crossroads. Decisions need to be made about the long-term future of the game. Before this season is over there will be more clubs in the same situation as Oldham Athletic, quietly sinking into financial meltdown while we are all dazzled by the stars in the Premiership. Our four contributors have presented us with some similar assessments of the problems currently facing football and have offered up some common solutions.

There are three key recommendations to emerge from this report:

### 1. Redistribution

Football has at its heart the dream of promotion and real competition. The continued success of the game depends on a competitive league structure. The present system has allowed this competitive structure to wither away, leaving only a small number of teams with the financial clout to compete for the game's top honours, whether domestic or European. This small number of successful clubs takes away the bulk of the financial spoils, buy the best players and thus maintain the status quo. It is becoming increasingly difficult for those outside this elite to compete on anything like a level playing field, unless like Chelsea, you have a wealthy benefactor, or like Leeds United, you are prepared to virtually bankrupt yourself in the process.

It is therefore necessary to look at the current system and investigate ways in which a better redistribution and pooling of resources, specifically financial, will allow those clubs outside the elite a realistic opportunity to compete. One option as, Andy Burnham suggests, is for the Premier League to donate a further five per cent of its TV revenue to the Football League, on top of the existing parachute payments given to relegated teams and the five per cent to the Football Foundation. Other options include the FA administering a rescue fund for clubs in financial difficulty (Binns et al,

## Trust in Football

2003), or for visiting clubs once again to have some share in the home teams gate receipts. Clubs should be encouraged to share physical resources, such as stadiums, where practical, as they do in Italy.

There is scope for redistribution of other resources too, such as player talent and management expertise. This already exists to an extent in the player loans system, especially where younger squad players from top Premiership teams gain valuable first team experience with those lower down the league, who in turn get promising players without having to pay exorbitant transfer fees. This has become more formal in some instances, through strategic alliances, for example that between Liverpool and Crewe Alexandra. There is an opportunity for the FA to play a leading role in brokering these types of deals between the leagues. This will become increasingly important, as the recent decision to allow loans between Premiership clubs will inevitably lead to a decline in the number of loan players going to lower league clubs.

### 2. Governance

There needs to be a step change in the quality of corporate governance of football clubs. Less than a quarter of clubs have an internal audit committee, and of these only seven per cent pass a report from their audit committee to their Annual General Meeting (Binns et al, 2003). The FA needs to take a stronger lead in reforming corporate governance. This means encouraging internal audit committees, providing training and disseminating best practice from elsewhere in the private sector.

Another way to improve the corporate governance of clubs lies in Supporters Direct. This supporter-based movement has already transformed the fortunes of a number of lower league clubs and continues to grow at a pace. More supporters are realising that the only way they can save their clubs is to take control themselves. Making use of supporter's skills, knowledge and passion as opposed to just their wallets can



**The FA should require all clubs to have a democratically elected supporter on the board.**

provide a useful check and balance on the sometimes unrealistic and indulgent ideas of club chairmen. Supporters Direct seeks a place for fans in the corporate governance of clubs, and ultimately aims to form not-for-profit democratic and supporter owned clubs

Supporters Direct not only aims to improve corporate governance but also seeks a different foundation for clubs. It aims to help resolve the

conflict within football clubs between having a community based organisation with sporting goals, and a company format which must have profit-maximising goals by law. Becoming not-for-profit mutual organisations could help reduce the leakage of resources from clubs, allowing more investment within the game.

The Government should continue its initial good work supporting Supporters Direct and extend it by encouraging more trusts through financial incentives, such as tax



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breaks and better access to public funding. The Football League should also encourage this new movement and as a first step should scrap the regulation that requires all clubs to be private companies and recognise mutual ownership. This will be particularly relevant if the Government's current proposal for a new legal form for not-for-profit and mutual organisations, the Community Interest Company, comes into law. Finally, the FA should require all clubs to have a democratically elected supporter on the board. With these small steps, we would see an increase in the numbers of supporters' trusts, an improvement in the corporate governance of clubs, and a closer relationship between clubs and their fans.

### 3. Regulation

Although it has shrugged-off aspects of its 'blazer brigade' mentality in recent years, football's governing body, The FA, has demonstrated it has neither the strength nor the independence to act as a regulator should: making the tough long-term decisions that will benefit the whole game. It has stood by in recent years without the will to use the powers it possesses, and watched as the game has been hijacked by Premier League clubs. It now finds itself in a position where it is no longer able to challenge their decisions.

Football requires a single, independent governing body to oversee the whole game. This governing body should have the authority to act in a similar way to the Federation International de l'Automobile (FIA) in Formula One motor racing, actively taking on the dominant teams to provide a level playing field for all and a more competitive sport for the spectators. It should act in consultation with all stakeholders in the game, but ultimately it needs to have the will and power to make its voice heard. It should not include representatives of the powerful clubs on its governing board, able to dictate decisions, as the FA has presently.

A more powerful governing body would be able to make strategic decisions about redistribution and corporate governance that would benefit all those in the game, not just the Premier League. It should also look at difficult questions such as the financial sustainability of the current structure of 92 professional clubs. For example, there is an argument that a smaller number of professional clubs with a semi-professional structure lower down the league might be a more financially viable alternative. At present the Football League will only allow fully professional teams and considering the high cost of player wages, allowing lower league clubs to employ players on a part-time basis will ease their financial burden, although this may result in accusations of a 'two-tier' workforce.



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### Next steps

It is always easy to offer simple solutions to complex problems and we recognise that there are difficult trade-offs in any reform of the game. Our emphasis on redistribution and regulation should not be seen as an attack on the achievements of the top clubs. Success should be rewarded, and the full participation of top English clubs in the European game is a vital part of football's future. Our recommendations are designed to allow football to continue to reward success while insuring a fair deal for less successful clubs. We are not calling for a peevish Scargilite attack on the rich, rather an end to the Thatcherite survival-of-the-fittest attitude, which is currently endemic in the game. It could be said that football needs a period of 'social democracy', mixing economic success with equality of opportunity.

We are also aware that the calls for reform, although echoed by many in the game, are likely to continue to fall on deaf ears. As highlighted in the chapter by Andy Burnham MP, this will inevitably lead to calls for government intervention. We believe that this is undesirable. Although it may become necessary if the trends we have seen develop over the past ten years continue, it should only be considered as a final option. The challenge for all those involved in running and regulating the game is to achieve the necessary evolution in its structures through consensus while managing the individualistic impulses that come from both financial success and failure.

The work of Supporters Direct runs as a thread throughout this report. This initiative is one of the most exciting developments in football in recent times. However, trusts



**Supporters Direct is one of the most exciting developments in football in recent times but is no panacea**

should not be seen as a panacea and are likely to bring with them their own difficulties. IPPR has analysed this type of organisational structure in relation to the delivery of public services, for example through Foundation Hospitals and Network Rail (Maltby, 2003). Our report on Public Interest Companies suggested there was a role for such organisations, but highlighted a number of difficulties, particularly with regard to maintaining effective corporate governance through mutual structures. For example, the initial interest in the project could fade and governing bodies run the risk

of getting taken over by fringe groups. In addition, the decision-making process can become paralysed by a lack of consensus, and fans may not have the specialist skills necessary to help the club through times of difficulty. Moreover, democracy in football, as elsewhere, has its downsides: even well-meaning politicians and officials in mutual football clubs can find themselves having to use the media to help in their re-election by promising outcomes that may not be realistic, or by highlighting issues that grab the headlines but are somewhat peripheral. Elements of this were seen in the 2003 Presidential election campaign of Joan Laporta at Barcelona, a football club with a long history of mutual ownership. There was much more to his campaign than



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the focus on David Beckham that was reported in the British press at the time. However, Laporta used the media power of Beckham to boost his campaign with promises of bringing the English player to the club if elected, even though Laporta probably knew there was little prospect that Beckham would eventually join the club.

Those on the progressive centre-left in politics will watch the future of Supporters Direct with interest, and not only because of their potential impact on football. There have been hostile debates throughout 2003 regarding the use of not-for-profit Public Interest Companies such as Foundation Hospitals in the NHS. However, these discussions are often coloured by previous experiences of privatisation and public private partnerships. Supporters' trusts provide an example of a not-for-profit mutual model being used in an environment free of these previous ideological battles. As a result they could help shed greater light on some of the advantages and disadvantages of this type of organisation when used to provide public services.

## Conclusion

The evidence suggests that supporters' trusts have a bright future. It is a shame that many of the clubs they are associated with do not share such a positive outlook. Clubs at the top of the Premiership grab our attention as they strive for financial and sporting excellence. However, they cast a shadow over teams such as Notts County, the world's oldest professional League club, which has been in administration for over a year and is perilously close to extinction. The current polarisation in football is unprecedented and without reform is only likely to get worse.

Football is undergoing a grassroots revival, but it needs full-scale reform of its governing bodies and financial structures if it is truly to repay fans' commitment to the game and to their teams.

## English Football: the vision's not much better

Dan Corry and Paul Williamson



**PREDICTIONS ARE NEVER easy. Nevertheless, ten years ago we tried to make a few about English football in a paper written for IPPR (Corry and Williamson, 1993).**

We guessed correctly that the concentration of power and money in a handful of clubs, as all the mechanisms that had avoided this were lifted, would lead to an increase in predictability of results and league outcomes. We also thought it would mean more clubs struggling financially. We could see that football would continue to prostrate itself in front of the TV money, allowing fixtures to be moved in time and other gimmicks to be introduced. We talked about moves to what might look like a Euro Super League. Given the way The Champions League is treated by clubs this has now come about. Indeed, Liverpool's biggest games of the last few years have been Premiership matches that determine Champions League qualification, not cup finals. We also feared that high prices would mean that football would become more of a



**Money is no longer invested in football: it goes straight through the clubs to the players.**

'fashion' and middle class game and might lose touch with its core supporters (Arsenal and Chelsea season tickets can now easily cost £1000+). And we predicted that club versus country disputes would get more intense. The transfer window did arrive.

Well done us! But we also got quite a lot wrong and it is instructive to think why. We guessed that the trend of the best English footballers going abroad that happened after the 1990 World Cup would continue. In fact, arguably, we have become

importers of pretty good talent, although the very best still goes to Spain or Italy. This has turned out to be the case because English football has a safer, stronger Sky TV contract than is the case in Italy or Spain, so higher wages attract players here rather

## English Football: The vision's not much better

than them chasing the Euro abroad. We thought saturation TV, higher prices and more predictable leagues would mean crowds and therefore the very roots of football support would start to diminish. In fact crowds have been increasing – every year across both the Premier League and the Football League. The quality of the 'product' is now higher than ever before, as is the quality of top stadiums. We feared that the increasing commercial orientation and power of the leading clubs would seriously damage the strength of the national side with negative feedback effects to football's general pulling power. In fact, despite the debacle of failing to qualify for the 1994 World Cup, England has not done too badly in recent years.



**Our main critique still stands; that is the game in England is drifting.**

Much of the reason for our wrong predictions probably rests in a failure to realise how quickly some of the trends we got right would happen. At least the initial effect has been to make football in England a big draw both for foreign players and fans and even for those only peripherally interested, attracted by the celebrity status and massive media coverage of people like David Beckham.

We also failed to predict some of the newer aspects of the game, like just how much wages would soar on the back of the Bosman ruling. Money is no longer 'invested' in football; it goes straight through clubs to players. The Premier League is now more powerful than the FA. Players are even more powerful, so long as they are internationals. And even more powerful still are agents. A football club administrator remarked that if his son could not play for the club he should become an agent and get rich. Players now are split between being multi-millionaires and facing redundancy at the end of short-term contracts.

When we wrote back in 1993, we compared the way English professional football is run with the way that things work in most US sports, where the interdependency is more explicitly recognised. For instance, in American Football the draft is used to try to help even out success. The draft system allows the teams with the worst records in the league to have the first pick of the emerging new talent and players that are out of contract from other teams, leaving the previous season's SuperBowl champion with the last pick. Although there are disputes and problems, this philosophy still holds today. In addition, it seems to work: in the past ten years eight different teams have won the SuperBowl.

We also compared English football to Formula One where despite arguments and big money invested (and made) by individual 'teams', there are efforts to act in the good of the sport overall. Again, this continues to be the case. The FIA have recently made significant rule changes (tyres, pit stops, qualification, possibly engines next), to reduce costs and increase competition. As a result we have the most open championship for years.

## Trust in Football

So some right, some wrong on our predictions. But our main critique still strongly stands: that the game in England is drifting. There are no structures that look after the good of the game as a whole, and each club more or less slugs it out for its own interests. Our argument was that while such competition was exactly what we wanted in most markets, it was a dangerous road to go down for professional league sports.

### Events over the last decade

When last we wrote, the Premier League was quite young and had been formed as the top clubs increasingly refused to share their money or power with anyone else. Meanwhile there was a struggle between the Football League and the FA for supremacy. Broadly speaking, this latter situation still stands. The Premier League in fact is much stronger as it has benefited from large TV deals. The Football League has severely diminished in strength and the FA has been close to a shambles at times.

Meanwhile club versus country fights over players have intensified with the England Manger (a Swede) virtually having to beg the Premiership managers (few of them English) and chairman to release players. This gets particularly intense over friendlies which are vital for building team spirit – especially given the wages of the players are paid for by the clubs.



**Some pooling of monies needs to return to keep the structure of football alive.**

Finally, on the financial front, the Bosman ruling and transfer windows have changed the dynamic of player movement, mostly at the expense of the lesser clubs. Many clubs have gone into administration, 20 in the last four years, while the first attempt at ‘moving’ a club as a sort of franchise is being played out as Wimbledon tries to move to Milton Keynes.

The general trend then has been as we predicted, although we should note that outside the Premiership there has been a slight revival (or birth) of fan power with fan representatives on boards and some attempts at fan ownership of clubs, while attendances have been surprisingly resilient.

### So what should happen next?

Stefan Szymanski has recently suggested that in the US the willingness of major clubs to ‘share’ in the name of the collective good is because they can see that it will clearly benefit them and that the downside from so doing cannot be total catastrophe (Szymanski, 2003). But the reason they see this, where our clubs do not, is because there is no relegation (or promotion) in the US major leagues, whether basketball, football or baseball. In our system helping your fellow club could just lead to your relegation, which – now that the sums are so big – could mean financial disaster. The rational conclusion is to do nothing that helps your fellow teams.

If Szymanski is right then a clear option is before us – and no doubt the major clubs would welcome this. But the degree of interest and feel of 'fairness' that exists would be badly damaged. This must surely only happen in extremis and only in return for very major redistributive actions amongst those in the 'no-relegation/promotion' league. It might be that the creation of a Premiership '2nd division' as mooted from time to time, could allow some of this to happen.

For the moment though, we should try and make the current system work better. The need at present is to help those with fewer resources. That means that some pooling of monies needs to return to keep the structure of football alive, given that the old route of selling players upwards is drying up.

Several of our original recommendations are certainly still relevant – and equally far from happening. One is a reduction in clubs in the Premiership to 18 in order to combat fixture congestion and player fatigue. Another is the development of 'nursery clubs', which still seems to be a way forward to keep small clubs in existence and provide a clear link from bottom to top of the game. This already occurs informally, for example between Liverpool and Crewe Alexandra with player exchanges between the two teams.

It would also help to give focus if there was an annual report on the state of football (as we proposed) ideally done by an independent body to act as a focus for discussion and for the trade-offs we are discussing here. There are now a number of regular reports on the game, including the *State of the Game* report from the Football Governance Research unit at Birkbeck University and the *Deloitte & Touche Annual Review of Football Finance*. However, what is needed is a comprehensive report that considers issues beyond just governance and finance, including the quality of the game, training and crowd behaviour. Moreover, the report needs to be independent but it also needs buy-in from all levels of the game. It should be seen as a report that could herald important changes in the way the industry is run, much like the report of a regulator of a privatised industry, or in the way a National Audit Office report relates to government.

In terms of the structure of the governing organisations, the uneasy balance will probably remain. That means the club versus country disputes will continue. But there needs to be a concordat between the big sides and the FA on the release of players for internationals, plus some payment to the clubs for the use of their assets.

To help keep international football strong through countries developing their own talent, FIFA have floated the idea of '6+5' for domestic leagues, so six players would



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**There needs to be a collective body that can take on the biggest clubs to act in the long term interests of football.**

have to be eligible to play for the national team. Great – instant relegation for several leading teams! However, this is unlikely to resolve the issue, causing problems for numerous Premiership teams who rely on cheap foreign imports to keep them in the Premiership. Moreover, the success of Manchester United over the last ten years is arguably down to nurturing their own home grown talent such as Beckham, Giggs, Scholes, Neville and Butt.

Above all there needs to be a collective body that can take on the biggest clubs to act in the long term interest of football, the national team and ultimately – we believe – the clubs themselves. Coercion is unlikely to work here and exhortation falls on the deaf ears of the moneymen that run the clubs – often PLCs – today. Yet the basic effort must continue and the hope must be that wiser heads from the club level than there have been of late become involved in guiding the Premiership.

### **Recommendations from, A Game Without Vision (1993):**

- ⚽ A unified ruling body so that a better and more consistent steer is given to decision making
- ⚽ Some explicit subsidisation by the bigger clubs of the smaller clubs – probably extending only down to the bottom of the present first division
- ⚽ The possibility of establishing nursery clubs part-funded by the bigger clubs
- ⚽ An investigation as to whether a draft system could operate in some form in this country to distribute talent and build on existing youth teams and clubs, including nursery teams
- ⚽ Widening negotiations on television coverage so that the game as a whole benefits



## Regulation, redistribution, and mutualisation: a red-in-tooth-and-claw cure for football's ills

Andy Burnham MP



**SPEAKING IN JUNE 2003, shortly after signing the biggest name in world football, the President of the world's biggest club made an impassioned defence of its mutual and democratic status. The words of Florentino Perez, printed on the inside cover of this report, stand in stark contrast to the utterings of your average English Premier League chairman.**

'You can't have that in the hands of one individual' – 'that' being not just the name, squad, bricks and mortar but the history, character and soul of every football club. The President's words will resonate powerfully with supporters of York City, Wimbledon and Carlisle United (to name but three), but to some degree with every paying football supporter in Britain. That is because, in our game, the precious 'that' has become something to be traded and abused in the name of private gain.

It is now 11 years since the FA Premier League began. Without doubt, grounds are safer and better. At the top, the quality of football has improved and is underpinned by a more professional youth academy system. Three huge TV deals have brought in more than £2.5 billion and a further £1 billion is promised. Five per cent of that is trickling down to the real grassroots through the Football Foundation.

To much of the media, this makes football officially good news in much the same way that it was officially bad news in the 1980s. But look up at the FA Premier League from below and the picture is very different.

A decade of greed, profiteering and excess has given rise to a tawdry money culture that pervades our game. A host of talentless



**The huge financial divide between the top and the rest threatens the integrity of football's competitions.**

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hangers-on have cashed in on the TV money, sold off clubs' family silver and walked away with huge personal fortunes. At the same time, once-great clubs are on their last legs and nobody cares. The huge financial divide between the top and the rest threatens the integrity of football's competitions.

It is all wrong, but nobody in a position of influence in the game does or says anything about it. Last year, the FA surveyed a wide range of football stakeholders and found that nine out of ten thought the FA Premier League kept too much of the TV cash (FA, 2002). A clear verdict but nothing has happened. That's because the same people who run the game also control its biggest clubs and they are doing

nicely. For 11 years, football has been run for the few, not the many.



**For most supporters, the fact that their clubs are private companies is irrelevant. It is when things start to go wrong that the contradiction reveals itself; community built but privately owned.**

It is not too late for football to recover its soul. But, if that is to happen, those in charge need to be reminded of what made it great in the first place.

Football's social roots lie in Victorian working class communities. Today's global 'brands' grew out of humble town, factory and church teams. Thousands flocked to watch these new clubs and they became a focus for civic pride.

Right from the outset, the game's authorities saw the twin dangers to football from unregulated market forces and private ownership of clubs. If the big were left to get bigger, there would be no competition. If the profit motive ruled, grounds would be sold and clubs destroyed.

It is hard to believe, judging by today's standards, but the authorities of the day took decisive action and brought in measures that would stand the game in good stead for decades. Strong systems of income sharing were developed to maintain competitive balance. The principle of the rich subsidising the weak to maintain the fabric of a competitive national sport was not questioned.

The corporate structure of clubs was trickier. Such were the size of the crowds and money changing hands with the advent of paying players that the directors needed to limit their liabilities. Nearly all incorporated as private limited companies.

For most supporters, the fact that their clubs are private companies is irrelevant. It is when things start to go wrong that the contradiction at the heart of almost every professional club reveals itself: community-built but privately owned.

## Regulation, redistribution, and mutualisation: a red-in-tooth-and-claw cure for football's ills

The FA foresaw this conflict between profit and sporting motives and passed Rule 34 not long after its formation preventing, amongst other things, the sale of football assets and payments to directors.

Looking back, a much simpler solution to this tension would have been to recommend that clubs incorporate as not-for-profit mutual organisations, as county cricket clubs and football clubs in other countries did. But football has never been comfortable with democracy and the club-company route was preferred.

That was the basis on which football was run and regulated for decades. On the whole, it worked. Then came Heysel, Hillsborough and Italia '90 in quick succession and everything changed.

Without doubt, the old ways of running the game had led to disinvestment and indifference to the paying punters who clicked through the gates. Change had to come and should have led to an overhaul of the governing body with supporters' interests placed at its very heart.

Instead, the old collective, 'one-game' principle was replaced by a rampant market culture in keeping with the spirit of the times; the biggest clubs decided they had had enough. Football's time-honoured principle of income sharing was dismantled. It had begun in the early 1980s with a decision to allow home teams to keep all gate receipts. The final nail was driven in the coffin, however, with the formation of the Premier League in 1992 and the decision to share out TV rights. Not equally, between each team as had been the previous way, but based on league position and TV appearances, allowing those at the top to further entrench their position (Conn, 1997).

Eleven years on, we are witnessing the results of these changes. As the wealthy have got wealthier, the great game has become less and less competitive. The moneymen will never admit it but the essence of English football's appeal – the 'dream factor' and the possibility of 'doing a Wimbledon' – has gone forever.

But the changes in money flows created another, more serious problem. As a glut of cash suddenly showered down on the lucky few in the right place when Gazza cried, financial predators woke up to football. These club-companies with their old-fashioned and amateur ways – now awash with TV money – were ripe for picking off.

Just when Rule 34 was most needed, its custodians simply abandoned it and let the predators trample over 100 and more years of football history. Clubs were floated on the stock market through holding companies outside of Rule 34 right under the nose of the FA. Personal fortunes were made on the back of community-built assets (Conn, 1997).



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In the lower divisions, it was far cruder. The 1990s saw blatant plundering of club assets by unscrupulous individuals who knew their actions would put them on the brink of extinction. On each occasion, the FA was found painfully inadequate: a regulator no longer prepared to bite.

Writing at the start of the 2003/4 season, the outlook is bleak. With every year of market madness, football becomes more divided and less like a coherent and competitive national sport. How long will it be until one of the 92 goes into administration and never comes out?

That said, football is a simple game and, in my view, the answers to its ills are equally simple. We need a return to the old collective ways and the correcting of a historical



### **How long will it be before one of the 92**

### **clubs goes into administration and never comes out?**

mistake by making 'clubs' act like clubs, not companies. In other words, there are three easy steps to save football: strong independent regulation; systematic redistribution of resources; and supporter ownership of clubs.

It all has to start with root-and-branch reform of the FA and, specifically, the separation of the narrow interests of the clubs from the regulation of the game as a whole.

As well as taking over the finances, the big clubs have slowly manoeuvred themselves behind the game's levers of power. For example, the participation of four Premier League club chairmen on the FA's all powerful Professional Game Board, was seen to hasten the demise of the FA Chief Executive Adam Crozier in November 2002, when he was perceived to have impinged on Premier League club's territory by negotiating lucrative sponsorship deals for the FA. In theory, football's supreme court is the 92-member FA Council. It still has a permanent place for Cambridge and Oxford Universities but not the Football Supporters Federation – a damning indictment.

Such is the seriousness of the game's condition, the time has come for the administrators' turf wars to end and the good of the game to take precedence over everything else. The FA, Premier League, Football League and Conference should merge to form a single English Football Federation running all competitions and regulating the game. No professional club should be represented on that body's main board; just independent and experienced people elected by all of the game's constituencies, including its supporters. Each individual would be charged with upholding the best interests of the whole game. It would be powerful and strong enough to stand up to any club.

Only recently, there was the perfect example of how football's flawed regulatory structure produces flawed decisions. To ease its financial problems, the FA cut £6 million from the FA Cup's prize money. Unbelievably, the axe fell on payments in the

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early rounds – a crucial source of income for Football League, Conference and Non-League clubs.

Better policy would follow if the regulatory structure was right, and there were no conflicts of interest. This brings us to step two. Anyone charged with upholding the interests of the whole game would quickly conclude that, to save a 92-club national game, systematic redistribution from top to bottom must be reintroduced. The next TV deal promises £1 billion over three years. It is realistic to suggest that a full five per cent of that – or £50 million – should be set aside for the Football League, in addition to the five per cent for the Football Foundation and funding for the Professional Footballers' Association. It would not close the gap but would take immediate threat of closure off Football League clubs.

Simple and necessary as they are, steps one and two are not going to happen. There is no driving force from within to start the momentum. In this vacuum, calls for state regulation will be renewed and the case for that is growing. The game's power brokers will gamble that no government would do it and hope that, if they tried, FIFA would step in to stop it. I have my doubts that state regulation could work and would much prefer football coming together to regulate itself. But in the almost certain knowledge that it will never do that, public debate will grow on how we save football from itself.

This leaves us with step three – and it is the one area where things are moving in the right direction.

Amidst the gloom, the story of Supporters Direct is genuinely uplifting. Slowly but surely, many of our clubs are being rebuilt bottom-up as supporter-owned not-for-profit mutual organisations.

Four years ago, the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Chris Smith MP visited Dean Court, home of AFC Bournemouth, to highlight the nascent idea of community and supporter ownership. The principal inspiration was Brian Lomax, English football's first supporter-elected director. The beauty of Brian's vision for football was its simplicity: football clubs should be owned and democratically controlled by their supporters.

There was no shortage of small-town businessmen in boardrooms up and down the land ready to condemn such loony-leftism. 'What do supporters know about running a business? They can't be trusted to come into the boardroom', they spluttered.



**The FA, Premier League, Football League and Conference should merge to form a single English Football Federation running all competitions and regulating the game.**

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In under-estimating the appeal of this idea – and the talents and commitment of their own supporters – Brian’s case was made for him.

When Chris Smith spoke to the 1999 Labour Party Conference, he launched the idea of the Supporters’ Trust Initiative, which became known as Supporters Direct. It was a



**Slowly but surely many of our clubs are being rebuilt bottom up into supporter owned not-for-profit mutual organisations.**

government-funded support service to replicate what Brian and others had achieved at Northampton Town. An off-the-peg model constitution for a supporters’ mutual was developed and central advice given to supporters’ groups wanting to set up trusts. Outright club ownership was the long-term goal but trusts holding significant shareholdings and boardroom representation was felt more achievable in the short-term.

The response was mixed. Nice idea but pie-in-the-sky, said the commentators.

As Labour returns to Bournemouth in 2003, over 100 supporters’ trusts have been formed at clubs at every level from the Premier League down to the feeder leagues. The ultimate has already been achieved four times with Lincoln City, Chesterfield, York City and AFC Wimbledon all supporter-owner clubs. Many others have a significant shareholding and supporter-elected representatives on club boards. Not pie-in-the-sky but the right idea at the right time.

Supporters Direct’s rapid success is partly due to weak regulation, failure to prevent abuse of club assets and the collapse of ITV Digital. These have all combined to create crisis situations at many clubs. But its success is also down to that fact that it is true to the way many supporters feel their clubs should be – not-for-profit, democratic and supporter-controlled.

Mutual ownership of clubs is English football’s best hope. Progress has been most dramatic in the lower leagues but I hope that the next four years will bring a breakthrough in the Premier League with a trust gaining a significant shareholding. If that happens, the idea will gather yet more momentum and I see no reason why there should not be a supporter-owned Premier League club in 15 to 20 years time. There is nothing incompatible with mutual ownership and having the financial size and clout to bid for real success on the pitch. Indeed, if more of our top clubs had been not-for-profit mutuals in recent years, much more of the game’s new-found wealth would have been reinvested in teams and facilities rather than seeping out in payments to individuals who have made little or no contribution to the game.

In the next few years, I hope to see the emergence of the country’s first full football mutual. At present, Football League rules require clubs to be private companies and do not recognise mutual organisations. A simple change is needed but, if and when

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it comes, it will be symbolic of the acceptance that mutual ownership has a much wider role to offer football in the future.

Where trusts have been formed, I expect them to grow steadily and increase influence year on year. In an era when it is hard to keep track of the comings and goings from boardrooms and dressing rooms, the only constant is the supporter base.

With just a small nudge from the centre, football has become the country's most fertile ground for the advancement of mutual ownership. In an age of low turnout at elections, hundreds of people – many of them young men – are turning out at public meetings to launch supporters' trusts and are staying actively involved.

Political interest is rightly building in the concept of local and community ownership as a route to the renewal of civic institutions and society itself. I hope the supporters' trust concept has played a part in stimulating this debate. There are two fundamental reasons why mutual ownership is succeeding in football: it is dealing with institutions that people care about; and those institutions are facing a fight for survival. In taking the concept of community ownership to other areas – and it should be – a key question is how to build and maintain public interest where one of those fundamental reasons is not in place.



**There is nothing incompatible with mutual ownership and having the financial clout to bid for real success on the pitch.**

With more help from the centre, Supporters Direct could extend its influence so much further. There is a strong case for supporters' trusts being given special tax status and more access to public funding. Where they are involved, trusts bring a range of community benefits and the mutual structure provides guarantees against asset-stripping and future misuse of public funds.

After 11 years of markets and greed, football needs a dose of socialism, red-in-tooth-and-claw. It needs to rediscover the old way of doing things and assert the common good over and above private gain. But, while right in principle, we know that football's fat-cats will never vote for stronger regulation and more redistribution. Supporter ownership is the only real option.

## Dispatches from the front line of supporter democracy

David Boyle



**SINCE SUPPORTERS DIRECT was launched four years ago, the response has been phenomenal, with 102 supporters' trusts formed at every level of the game, forty-five of these have a shareholding in their clubs and 30 have a supporter-director.**

The language of the game has changed to recognise this. Three years ago, reports would talk about the supporters club rescuing a club, but now supporters' trusts are sufficiently widespread and their achievements sufficiently well-known to make them a part of the lingo.

This has been achieved on the back of hard work by thousands of volunteers up and down the country, working tirelessly in the evening and at weekends to get trusts up and running and the message across to fellow fans. It is not always easy, as many



**People want change and the lesson is that people will join organisations they see as relevant to something they care passionately about.**

fans – like many of their non-supporting fellow citizens – do not seem to be life's joiners. It is reasonably easy to motivate people when the club is staring extinction in the face and a trust offers a positive way of helping and doing your bit. Memberships are taken up in massive numbers and the difficulty is in processing them all and finding rooms big enough to hold public meetings. Those meetings are a phenomenon in themselves, with 3,000 turning out at Luton Town, and 1,500 at Chesterfield. Councillors invited to lend their support comment

repeatedly that they have never seen anything like it. Teenagers come forward, offer their help, and join working parties in an eloquent rebuttal of blanket claims about apathetic youth.



However, trusts are not just there for the nasty things in a club's life. For many clubs who have not yet had to be taken to the brink by their inability to manage finances, it is a long haul. It is unrealistic to expect to repeat the stunning growth of a Wimbledon, or a Chesterfield at a club that is not in crisis. You cannot expect people to change the habits of a lifetime and become interested and involved citizens overnight. The lesson from trusts is that people will join an organisation that they see as relevant to something they care passionately about. There is a feeling held by many fans that the game has changed, and that something is not right. Many though do not see what they can do about it and resign themselves to shrugging shoulders. That feeling has been tapped into by trusts who are offering a solution to many of those ills.

Counteracting that cynicism and resignation is hard though, and like any campaign, the shorter the struggle and the easier the victory, the simpler it is to recruit. 'What do we want? Supporter Involvement! When do we want it? Sometime in the next five years, realistically speaking' is not the most rousing rallying cry, but it is a cry that is working, slowly, but surely. People are recognising that in the vacuum of football's decision-making structures, there is a place for supporters to make headway. Furthermore, people are recognising that clubs are in truth community assets, not businesses. An organisation, which can best represent that ethos, is one which appeals to supporters fed up of being treated as 'customers' and having their heritage asset-stripped into a new housing development. Even if the club is not in crisis at the moment, given the spate of clubs in administration in recent years, there is a feeling of 'there but for the grace of god go us'; an awful feeling that the issue is not if the club gets into difficulty, but when. Joining a supporters' trust becomes both an attempt at pre-emptive action and to build a strong organisation for when the awful day comes.



**Football club owners are not a natural constituency for the idea of democratic accountability and sharing decision making.**

Getting past the apathy of supporters is one thing. Getting past the existing owners of clubs is quite another. It is fair to say that four years ago, the idea of a fan on the board was dangerous revolutionary talk. Football club owners in the main are not a natural constituency for the idea of democratic accountability and sharing decision-making. Even so, the more enlightened can see the benefits of involving fans, even if many immediately look to see the financial benefits supporters' trusts can bring as fundraisers.

Many of the original sceptics have been won over by their trusts, who have made their case clearly and concisely. Their efforts have been backed up by the increasing spread of supporter-directors, who meet existing directors in the boardroom as part and parcel of the League season. Demonstrating they are serious and capable individuals with something to offer.

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At a press conference to announce a consortium he was working with to bring Leicester City out of administration in 2003, Gary Lineker made explicit reference to bringing a supporter onto the board of the club once the takeover had gone



**Ironically despite years of being told that football**

**is a business, it is the fans who are bringing in simple business practices**

through. To hear a football legend talk about this is indicative of the progress made. The battle is not yet won though, with the trust still on the outside of the boardroom at the club.

But what happens when a trust gets their hands on a club? It has been said that in such situations the club would soon be spending money they did not have and indulging a manager's every whim. Such

comments have been shown up for the nonsense they are by the instances where fans have had to roll their sleeves up and get on with piloting the club through difficult waters.

Luckily, none of them has been under any illusion about the size of the tasks facing them and the process that they have been through strengthens their resolve. Success is survival, and anything else in the short-term is a bonus. They have seen the fear that the loss of the club induces in the community, and their bottom line that the club will always be there. As Steve Beck, the new Chairman of York City FC has said, 'I just want to hand over a better and more stable football club when I step down.'

It makes a stark change to hear a Chairman indicate that their tenure will be limited, and that their aim is not unrealistic dreams of new stadiums and Premiership football, but simple stewardship that bequeaths the next generation with something better than he and his colleagues at York City Supporters' Trust inherited. That involves hard decisions though. Sometimes ticket prices need to be raised, or managers need to be replaced. But decisions are being made with an eye for the long-term, not the quick fix or short-term sop. Ironically, despite years of being told that football is a business, it is the fans that are bringing simple business-like lessons to football, such as spending the money you have rather than the money you would like to have.

Once the crisis has past, and the club is safe, what happens then to the trusts? Experience suggests that once people get a taste of being involved in decision-making, they like it, and they want to stay involved. The Dons' Trust at AFC Wimbledon has increased membership since it set up the club, whilst Chesterfield's membership remains at over 60 per cent of their home gate. While some do not renew membership, the vast majority do. They want to stay as members of an organisation that runs the club. They are proud to display the membership certificate on their wall.

Furthermore, there is recognition that in most cases, a major problem at the club was one of control. One man made all the decisions, and those decisions were

detrimental; in some cases, deliberately so. The trust is not just there to save the club but to ensure it does not happen again. In the first instance, that means an end to single owners who do as they please. It means decision-making by a collective body, discussing ideas and submitting them to analysis. It also means accountability and oversight, with the ability to bring about change through proper structures rather than regime change through demonstrations after a match. Now you can sack the board, and you are given the opportunity to do so annually. Football, as Bill Shankly observed, is a game of opinions. It seems odd that it has taken over 120 years for the game to see democracy as a way of managing opinions and arriving at decisions as opposed to dictatorship, benign or otherwise.

With that power comes responsibility, and that is what will be the defining change brought about by trusts if they are to be successful. Fans have a choice: to allow their football clubs to be the plaything for the vicarious dreams of millionaires or to be commonly owned community assets where they take responsibility. The price of making sure that the club is never again run into the ground, or the ground is turned into housing, is that the club stands or falls on the united efforts of its supporters. The signs are that this responsibility is understood. Eighty three per cent of Chesterfield Trust members voted in the referendum on potentially leaving the club's home ground. Wimbledon fans raised £1.1 million in a share issue to buy a ground in South London.

And what of the future? As football learns to wean itself off the TV fix, it will have to turn increasingly to its fans. In this new era they will no longer blindly accept what their boards tell them. More supporters will be elected to boards, and more of the game will come to be owned by fans collectively. Existing owners will sell up to fans and get out while the going is not as bad as it could be and they recognise the truth of the statement, the way to make a small fortune is to take a large fortune and buy a football club. Maybe a trust will come to control a club that is not a financial basket case. Then the talent and resources of the fans can be spent building a future from a good base, rather than managing a club through the belt-tightening years of a Company Voluntary Arrangement.



**Maybe a trust will come to control a club that is not a financial basket case and then the talent and resources of the fans can be spent building a future from a good base.**

But to give them a chance, things have to change in the wider game. Unless the serious financial imbalances within the game are addressed, the game will be in crisis. Until it re-acquires a sense of itself as a national game, linked from top to bottom structurally, it will always be harder and harder to maintain the clubs as viable entities the underlying dream factor that maybe, just maybe, a well-run club can progress through the divisions. Trusts have a role to play in that transition, bringing the sense of solidarity they feel with each other to bear in the higher councils of the game.

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However, those councils must start to act fulfilling their historic role and mandate to govern for the good of the game as a whole, not acting for the interests of the few at the very top. The game's needs become real and meaningful where relegation is a badge of shame, not catalyst for financial meltdown and where club chairmen can celebrate promotion with joy, rather than trepidation as the costs go up faster than the team. One thing is certain; you can kill a football club as a business, but you will never kill a football club as a community institution. Fans of Enfield Town, AFC Wimbledon and Clydebank have shown the truth of Jock Stein's assertion that 'Football without fans is nothing'.

Whilst the fans will always be there, and their communities will always have clubs, the football will look very different in ten years time. It could be a radically different game, emaciated and even more stratified, or a positive future that fans have helped shape. Supporters Direct believe the latter is the best for the game. We – and the thousands of fans across the country who have become active members of their communities over the last few years – will be doing all we can to help bring it about.

# Clubbing together

David Conn



**PERHAPS WE HAD** to have Roman Abramovich to put it all in perspective. You could become too immersed in the uplifting atmosphere of football fans' public meetings, celebrate supporters battling for the future of the latest lower division club, and start to believe that football is becoming more enlightened. Just three or four years ago, the idea that supporters should bother to own shares in their clubs, or even had the right to, was an exotic idea too theoretical to be true. The idea that clubs should become mutuals with fans electing officers was even more far fetched. Now, there are over 100 trusts formed, they are part of the national game's landscape, and are actively providing solutions to clubs that have fallen into administration. It became tempting to think that the movement could transform the game. However, along came a 36 year old Russian with a fifth of the Russian oil industry in his back pocket, to show that football clubs can be traded and world class players bought as easily as shopping for holiday homes.

But while a compliant sports media hypes the 'Chelski' soap opera and shines up Abramovich's international profile, supporters' trusts are making a genuine difference to football in the lower divisions. The idea has come an extraordinarily long way since Brian Lomax had a post-match grumble with three fellow disaffected Northampton Town fans in the Brewers Arms in 1991 after yet another defeat. They went on to form the first trust, and Lomax became an elected director of the club for seven years.

His idea was that when the dictatorial chairman was finally ditched the fans should collectively own shares in the club. It seemed daring but was in fact a journey to the heart of being a football fan. Support for a club is more than passive consumption of showbiz, it is about commitment and belonging. It is also a journey back to the

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origins of the clubs themselves, and we still call them clubs even if they are in reality PLCs, or playthings of Russian billionaires, or files in insolvency practitioners' offices. Almost all were formed originally as true clubs, groups of people coming together to play sport, to run a team, to see how they might get on in competition. It had nothing whatsoever to do with making money.

The keenness of the competition led to professionalism and that, together with the huge crowds, led to the clubs forming limited companies, mostly around the late 1880s to 1890s. The FA is today fond of citing criticism that the game has become over-commercialised – then springing the news, with a smile, that the words come from the turn of the century. This, however, shows only the extent of the FA's current dislocation from governing the game effectively. A less complacent body when



**Support for a club is more than passive consumption of showbiz; it is about commitment and belonging.**

reading these old observations might worry they have never successfully managed the tension between money and sporting values, rather than conclude triumphantly that any criticism is misguided sentiment.

The formation of Supporters Direct was an unusual initiative for a government. It coincided with financial meltdown in the Football League, with clubs overstressing financially, Granada and Carlton's refusal to meet the obligations of ITV

Digital, and a yawning financial chasm between the outrageous fortunes of the breakaway Premier League and the three divisions below them.

Most striking of all the activity by supporters' trusts have been those, which rapidly played a major role in actually saving their clubs. At Swansea City, a handful of interested fans formed a trust but struggled to inspire interest. Then, when the club was bought for £1 by a businessman who flew in from Brisbane, tried to sack several players, then flew back again, membership leapt to 1500. The trust led the campaign to oust Tony Petty, then became shareholders and elected directors of the club.

There have been several beacons: Lincoln City had been run close to insolvency by its former chairman John Reames, but he went out with a grand gesture, donating his shares to the new supporters' trust. Rob Bradley, fanzine editor turned chairman, had to take Lincoln into administration, but is now pioneering a model for a community football club, living within its means.

York City Supporters' Trust was inspirational. It sprang to life after the club's chairman, Douglas Craig, announced the club was to be kicked off its ground, which he and three fellow directors were to sell and keep the bulk of the money. The trust now owns the club, whose chairman is Steve Beck, another great character to be transported by the supporters' trust movement from a cherished place on the terraces to a suit and tie and place in the boardroom.

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When old-style football directors scoff about fans' ability to make tough decisions, they have it the wrong way round. The fans have supported clubs like these all their lives without ever tasting glory, and their main priority is simply that the club should survive. Directors on an ego trip or looking for money are far more likely to gamble the future than most supporters. At Bury, two supporters who joined the long-established directors on the board found themselves having to oppose the old policy of chucking money at unreliable strikers in the vain hope of promotion. The supporter-directors were more cautious, not football fantasists. They would rather, most fundamentally, that the club be safe than sorry.

Yet even where supporters' trust have managed to take over their clubs they have found the change of ownership to a mutual, however fine in principle, no answer in itself. At Chesterfield, the supporters saved the club from liquidation and the ground – one of the oldest in the League – from being flogged off for housing. Yet these heroics counted for too little given the impossible economics of football where most clubs operate at a loss, spending money they have not got paying players too much. The supporters had to fund a Creditors Voluntary Arrangement after coming out of administration, £183,000 a year on top of the club's ongoing losses. The supporters reluctantly had to call on a board of four businessmen who had the cash to support the losses, an old style structure grafted on to the new dawn of supporter ownership. It has been a source of conflict, although Chesterfield battle gamely on.

The major changes and successes of trusts have been in the lower divisions, although trusts have formed as pressure groups at the bigger clubs. The main reason is simple: the value of clubs is too high for the supporters to buy a substantial stake. At Manchester United, shareholders have clubbed together close to five per cent of the equity, but heady thoughts of 'rolling back the PLC' after the outstanding campaign to fight off BSKyB's bid for the club have melted into the realisation that mutualising the big clubs is currently impossible.

AFC Wimbledon has been the purest victory: supporters fought intelligently, brilliantly, against the directors' plan to cut the losses of the club's Norwegian owners by moving to Milton Keynes. When football's governing bodies let the fans down and allowed the move, the supporters dropped the club completely and formed their own, starting from scratch in the lowly reaches of the Combined Counties League. While the old Wimbledon have gone into administration, AFC have had a share issue, bought a stadium in South London, and thrived and inspired fans nationwide. Perhaps most interestingly the supporters have thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They have been actively involved in running a club, rather than experiencing the football support all modern fans grew up with, which in reality struggles to be more than passive consumption or being ripped off by the club's owners or directors. It is an idea of belonging too often betrayed.



**Directors on an ego trip or looking for money are far more likely to gamble the future than most supporters.**



**The remarkable progress of the supporters' trusts has been inspiring and exciting but the potential to truly transform football should not be exaggerated.**

The remarkable progress of supporters' trust from radical concept to owners of clubs has been inspiring and exciting. However, its potential to truly transform football should not be exaggerated. Maybe we needed a Russian oligarch to turn up with his unfeasibly large wallet and buy one of England's biggest clubs to remind us that reform from above is also desperately needed if we are to match the new enlightened attitudes in so many grounds.





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