

The real deal for football's future

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On this weekend in 2003, the president of Real Madrid, Florentino Perez, gave an interview to this newspaper. He had just swiped David Beckham from under Barca's nose, and it was natural to ask one of Spain's leading industrialists whether he had plans to de-mutualise Real and take the club to market. In the light of events at Old Trafford, his reply bears reading and re-reading.

'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.'

Our clubs inspire devotion, too. But, after last week's events, football's Church of England (to extend the Perez analogy) is all but in the hands of one individual.

English football has an ownership crisis and it is unlikely to end here. More 'investors' are circling, their interest aroused by suspicions that the Premier League's collective TV deal will soon unravel. When clubs' media rights can be sold individually, there are big profits to be made. It's a terrifying prospect.

In this context, Perez's socialist view of football will strike a chord with millions of supporters here. Not necessarily because they hold left-of-centre views: it's more that people of all political colours are united in regarding their football club as a club, not a business. It does not exist to make money: money is made to further the interests of the club.

Perez's comments are borne out of a different football tradition. Spain's 'big two' have grown as mutual organisations, owned and controlled by their extensive supporter bases, with profits reinvested in the club. They are emphatically not for sale.

England's clubs, by contrast, are up for grabs. For decades, their status as private companies didn't cause a problem. Shares were closely guarded as family heirlooms and financial predators could find no easy way in. Benign local businessmen kept the shop. It was only when the TV cash came in that the private company model was found to give no protection against predators. Malcolm Glazer is the focus for today's protests,

but United fans have long memories and many will be reflecting on the role of Martin Edwards in all this. Control was lost on the day MUFC floated on the market.

Throughout the lower divisions there have been a string of hair-raising examples of private companies ransacked. Questions are being asked in Parliament about whether the law needs to change to protect vulnerable clubs, perhaps a special public-interest test for football take-overs. There is a strong case. The game needs an altogether new direction, to rebuild according to its founding principles from the bottom up.

It is already happening today beneath the media radar. For the past five years, a quiet revolution has been going on in English football. It is an amazing story and now is the time to shout about it because this movement is making clubs what most fans want them to be: democratic, not-for-profit, not for sale.

In 1998, I was working on the Football Task Force. We had seen how the creation of a mutual supporters' trust at Northampton Town had transformed the club, bringing bigger crowds and community engagement. We recommended that a unit should be set up to replicate this success and promote wider supporter ownership of football clubs.

In late 1999, the then culture secretary, Chris Smith, announced the creation of Supporters Direct. Reactions from the football world ranged from derision to outright hostility. 'What do supporters know about running a club?' spluttered one chairman.

Quite a lot, as it turns out. Five years on, 129 democratic supporters' trusts have been established. They make up 129 inspiring stories of football supporters reclaiming their clubs. Most own a substantial shareholding; 12 own their clubs outright. They operate at all levels of football: six in the Premiership, 18 in the Championship, 15 in League One, 19 in League Two and 28 in the Scottish leagues.

These trusts are changing the way football business is done. The involvement of supporters at board level brings better decisions. Experience from the supporter-owned clubs shows that trusts are not prepared to gamble with the club's future in the way that a host of isolated and embattled chairmen have done. Lincoln City's chairman and trust representative Rob Bradley, a real pioneer of the trust movement, took the Red Imps from administration to a £700,000 profit and three play-off appearances.

Perhaps, most importantly, trusts have introduced the concept of democracy to football: if your representative on the board has got too big for his or her boots, they can be voted off.

It is perhaps the biggest explosion of mutual ownership this country has seen. And recent developments gives me a strong sense that the concept of supporter ownership is about to move up a level, from the margins into the mainstream.

First, there is Philip French's symbolic switch from the FA Premier League to become Supporters Direct's new chief executive. It is a major coup and he is well placed to make the most of Labour's little-noticed manifesto pledge to find 'innovative ways to help Supporters Direct'. Second, the number of supporter-controlled clubs in England will

reach double figures in July when trusts at Rushden & Diamonds and Stockport County take control. The owners of those clubs - Dr Marten's mogul Max Griggs and Brian Kennedy - deserve immense credit for transferring their shareholdings to the trusts.

I predict that, by 2020, the majority of English clubs will be supporter-owned. Supporters' trusts are no gimmick; most will sit quietly building up influence and ownership. But, more than that, football can only bend so far to the brutal logic of the market. A crash is coming and share values will drop. Supporters are ready and waiting to pick up the pieces.

All this might sound pie-in-the-sky. But then the cynics said that about Supporters Direct. As Florentino Perez said, we're all football socialists at heart.

Andy Burnham is MP for Leigh. He stepped down yesterday as chairman of Supporters Direct, having been made a junior minister at the Home Office.

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