

Politicians are trying to reform football – there must be a general election on the way

Nonetheless, if the current proposals to include fan reps on club boards go through, it will be a significant breakthrough for the sport.

By [Martin Cloake](#)

Proposals to put elected fan reps on the boards of football clubs, to give fan groups the right to purchase up to 10 per cent of a club's shares in the event of a sale, the establishment of an expert group to examine ways of removing barriers to supporter ownership... all of this can only mean one thing. There is a general election in the offing. The history of attempts to reform football being talked up when the leading parties need the votes of football fans, then being kicked over the stand and into the allotments beyond when the election is over means it's easy to be cynical about the latest flurry of activity. But that easy conclusion overlooks the significant breakthroughs that are occurring right now.

[As I said last week, the debate is no longer about whether](#)

[football should be reformed, but how](#). There has simply been too much mismanagement, incompetence and downright crookery in the game over a prolonged period for the argument that the system does not need fixing to retain a shred of credibility. Since 1992, 36 Football League clubs, half the membership, have gone in to administration. The fact that, in many cases, it is the fans themselves who have rescued clubs from the brink of oblivion and then run them sustainably and successfully removes credibility from those who would argue that fan involvement at board level is unrealistic.

Football's governing bodies, the Premier League, the Football Association and Football League, have in modern times stuck to the line that they are "ownership neutral". The Premier League has, since it was formed in 1992, worked exceptionally hard to rebuff any attempt to intervene in an unrestricted free market model. Those who proposed intervention were variously dismissed, marginalised or monstered, with one of the most common rebuttals being that reformists did not understand the workings of business.

But the presentation of economic choice as scientific fact has always been a favoured tactic of those who seek to convince us that there is no alternative. The 92 professional football clubs in the English leagues are private limited companies because that is what the rules of membership of the FA and FL demand. Those rules came about on the back of moves in wider society in the late 19th and early

20th century to limit the liability of certain businesses and the people they traded with. It was a choice, and the choice can be made to change those rules.

So ownership neutrality is in fact a myth – you can't be neutral about something you require a position to be taken on under rule. And there is no legal requirement for those rules to stay unchanged.

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The proposals issued by shadow sports minister Clive Efford MP change the terms of the debate. Because the proposals take football's oft-repeated claim that it is "a business like any other" and turn it back on itself. The proposals accept football is a business, but seek to regulate the conduct of that business on the basis that clubs are more than just commercial businesses. And they seek to do so by enshrining the role of the significant stakeholders so far excluded from the running of that business – the fans.

Note the proposal is for "up to one quarter and not less than

two" fan reps to be elected to club boards by a properly constituted and representative supporters Trust. Not a majority, not a complete takeover – just the fans as a part of the corporate body. This would be backed by the issue of a special share that entitled the Trust to obtain financial and commercial information about the club.

Labour's proposal comes after Efford spent a long time consulting with supporters, and he says: "We will now consult further on proposals to enshrine on the statute books the idea that fans should have a voice and a stake in the way football clubs are run because we believe they are more than just commercial businesses". That idea of some businesses being more than simply commercial enterprises is a key part of the message Ed Miliband is trying to articulate in the wider economy. It addresses one of the major senses of disquiet about the modern economy, but it's not an easy, or sexy, message to put across. And that's why it's easy to overlook its significance.

Some have said, over the past few days, that this is just more hot air. They evoke the failed commitments of the past, and point to the massive financial power of the top clubs. They portray Labour's proposals as just a pea-shooter when we need an elephant gun. And it's true that the other main proposal put forward by Labour's football group, giving the fans the right to buy up to 10 per cent of a club's shares in the event of a change of control, is pretty useless if you're fan of Manchester United wanting to buy in when the Glazers put the club up for sale at the £2bn price

they value the club at. Having the right to buy doesn't mean you have the ability to buy.

But just because the 10 per cent proposal is largely useless at the top level, that doesn't mean it could not be very useful indeed further down the scale. Which is why it would be foolish to dismiss the proposal out of hand.

It's the remodeling of the game's governance structures, represented in this case by the proposals to enshrine fan representation at board level, that is such an important step forward, and should be supported by everyone who wants reform within the game. Of course it is an indication of how bad the situation has got that this most mild of social democratic proposals would represent a radical change, and of course there must be worry that Labour's proposals currently explicitly rule out elected supporter reps from making efforts to "change corporate strategy" – not only is that precisely what should happen in many cases, why should elected fans on the board not be able to do what any other board member can? But we have to work from where we are, refusing to start the discussion gets us nowhere.

The football authorities, with the executive committee of big clubs in the Premier League to the fore, will no doubt rail against "restraint of trade" and invoke terrible images of the threat to commercial security the prospect of the mug punters getting their hands on the books represents. But, as business has found elsewhere, more diversity on boards can be good for business. These proposals bring supporter

reps into the corporate structure, giving them responsibilities as well as rights, but importantly making them accountable to a wider membership too – as football clubs should be.

The detail of how this could work are, of course, important, but Efford has gained respect from a supporters movement stuffed with veterans of many a past broken promise, because he has properly consulted and listened. And he continues to do so.

Those proposals must have come as a shock to the football authorities, which have run such an effective campaign to keep the politicians away. Other politicians, too, have been prompted to act. Just days after the Efford proposals were made public, Helen Grant MP, the minister for equalities and sport, unveiled plans for an expert group to look at ways to “remove some of the barriers to supporter ownership”. The fact that the Coalition agreement stated that the government would “encourage co-operative ownership of football clubs by supporters” but had done precisely nothing to advance that ambition until the setting up of the expert group inevitably prompted suspicions that this was just another talking shop, set up because the Coalition needed to look as if it was doing something in the wake of Labour’s proposals.

But the group is to be chaired by Joanna Manningham-Cooper, a marketing professional who is a member of the Portsmouth Supporters Trust and well-respected in the

supporter movement, and it has been something that Supporters Direct, the umbrella body for the Trust movement in England and Wales, has been pushing for hard. SD has already achieved a significant victory by keeping the group's focus narrow. There was some initial criticism of this, understandable because there are so many issues that need to be addressed. But, as Efford recognised too, governance is the key. Get that right, and we can properly start to address the other issues.

For years, football fans have asked, pleaded, begged to be consulted, and had to show enormous gratitude when the football authorities have deigned to listen. Too often consultation has been defined by those who run football as telling the fans what's already been decided. What's now been proposed is making fans part of the business, not just as a token gesture but a measure required by law. Two fans on the board is, as one seasoned observer of the game said to me this week, the very opposite of a token gesture. It's about re-establishing clubs as clubs.

Of course the devil will be in the detail, and the Premier League especially will be preparing to deploy the full force of its lobbying machine to ensure it all goes nowhere. But opponents of the measure face a tough challenge. For they will effectively be arguing that they don't want to work in a grown-up partnership with the people whose money they want to keep taking week in, week out. If clubs see fans on the board as a problem, then the problem is all theirs.

That's why there is no harm in continuing to apply pressure from the grass roots, and an active, experienced and battle-scarred supporters movement is willing and able to continue to bring pressure to bear in order to ensure the politicians realise it is not in their interest to fail to deliver on this.

So by all means let's not see what is being proposed as the whole solution. But failing to recognise the potential would be foolish.

Martin Cloake's book [Taking Our Ball Back: English Football's Culture Wars](#) is out now