

# Football's love of money is root of 'inevitable' review

## Triesman pledges action to safeguard game's integrity after minister's plea to curb excess in era of billionaires

The culture secretary, Andy Burnham, will tomorrow call for football to "wholly reassess its relationship with money", paving the way for the Football Association to lead a review of the challenges facing the game. Speaking at the Supporters Direct conference in Westminster, Burnham is expected to present a list of specific issues he believes must be addressed, which is certain to include the ownership of clubs and "competitive balance" - a concept which goes to the heart of the English game's dominance by the few clubs with the most money.

Burnham kicked off the debate last month with his call for the FA to "rise to the challenge" and curb some of the game's excesses "before something really precious is lost". He believes the Premier League's booming television income should be more evenly shared throughout football, and that success should not be determined by billionaire owners funding clubs beyond those clubs' natural means.

The FA chairman, David Triesman, has given a bold sign that he is up for that challenge. His speech to the Leaders in Football conference last week made headlines for his warning about "high-risk levels" of debt at Premier League clubs, but he went much further than that, promising a serious inquiry into the issues Burnham is urging the governing body to grasp.

"I think a review is inevitable now," Lord Triesman said. "The FA and the professional game do not and cannot live as if in separate domains. We will work on the issues of club and country, the laws of the game, maintaining the integrity and competitive balance, behaviour, standards and respect, youth development and English-qualified players, agents, gambling, drug control and finance and ownership."

The Premier League, which rejected Triesman's assertion that debts are dangerously high, will resist any moves to curb commercial freedoms and assert greater governing power by the FA.

Triesman is not expected to be as forthright when he addresses Supporters Direct's conference tomorrow, but he will speak to the delegates from supporters' trusts in language they have longed to hear from the FA: that clubs are not just businesses, selling a commercial product. He prepared the ground last week when he asserted: "Football clubs are not mere commodities."

The audience for tomorrow's speeches is significant. Supporters Direct draws on the conviction that clubs are institutions of community belonging and, backed by the government, it advises fans how to form trusts and gain stakes in their clubs. The view that the current criticisms of top-level football are simply a reaction against "foreign owners" is wrong - the organisation had its genesis among fans opposed to stock-market flotations and perceived profiteering by English owners.

Burnham himself makes no secret of his

sympathy with the view that clubs would be truer to their real character if they were mutual organisations owned by supporters, along the lines of Barcelona. Supporters Direct was formed after the government-appointed Football Task Force on which Burnham, before he was an MP, worked as the administrator, and from 2000 to 2005 he was the organisation's chairman.

After early days in which fans of many clubs formed trusts and there was talk of "rolling back the plc" at Manchester United, Supporters Direct has come to terms with mountainous reality. Clubs have long been companies, usually majority-owned by an individual, and the cost of buying them, even in the lower divisions in the teeth of financial crises, is beyond most trusts.

The almost 120,000 fans in trusts at clubs throughout football have worked tirelessly, for no reward, but only 11 English clubs are owned by trusts - mostly in non-league football or, in the cases of Brentford, Exeter City, Notts County and Stockport County, in the lower divisions. Premier League clubs are out of reach, the preserve of the few richest people on earth.

Dave Boyle, Supporters Direct's chief executive, maintains that supporter ownership is still a valid aspiration but he is realistic enough to argue for wider reform of the game. "Clubs are in a race to spend the most," he says. "They reach their limit, then spend money they haven't got or look for a buyer. We believe that is not sustainable."

Triesman and Burnham's purpose goes beyond the issue that dominated fierce exchanges last week, the health or otherwise of the combined £3bn debts at Premier League clubs. A detailed look at that would open up the underlying issues, because the nature of the debts is different at every club. Chelsea owe £578m to Roman Abramovich; he does not charge interest and is not demanding it back, but Chelsea's existence is reliant on the largesse of this owner. Manchester United owe the £666m cost of being taken over by the Glazer family, and the interest on that was £81m last year. While United are hugely successful they can pay it, but they are vulnerable to rising interest rates and the difficulty of refinancing.

A genuine review could investigate central questions such as: should English football welcome debt-laden buyouts like those of the Glazers at United and Tom Hicks and George Gillett at Liverpool? Is it right for the competition to be determined according to how much billionaires such as Abramovich or Sheikh Mansour at Manchester City are prepared to spend on players? What happens to clubs who cannot find buyers?

Liverpool's midfielder Xabi Alonso pondered in this newspaper before the recent match against Manchester City whether football "needs to be regulated, otherwise

the clubs owned by millionaires will be several levels below" those owned by billionaires.

If Alonso, among many others, can ask that question, then Triesman will argue that it is his responsibility to conduct a grown-up look at where football is heading, in cooperation with the Premier and Football Leagues.

Burnham's call for football to "wholly reassess its relationship with money" echoes that of Lord Justice Taylor, who 18 years ago, after the Hillsborough disaster, called for "the fullest reassessment of policy for the game". Yet that never happened. The clubs were forced by government legislation to make the grounds safe and were given public money to help with the rebuilding. Then, in anticipation of the first big-money TV deal in 1992, the First Division clubs persuaded a weak, myopic FA to support their plans to break away from sharing the money with the other three divisions of the Football League. The FA Premier League was launched, to immediate wealth and glittering success, but was dogged persistently by unease about inequalities, over-commercialisation, high ticket prices and, increasingly, the randomness of takeovers.

Graham Kelly, the FA chief executive who backed the breakaway, has since accepted that the governing body missed a golden chance to manage the new era for the benefit of the whole game. "We were guilty of a tremendous, collective, lack of vision," he said. Triesman, an FA chairman stunning football by speaking up, appears determined that the governing body will not be found similarly wanting on his watch.

The battle for balance

The most bitterly contested area for any FA review of football is likely to be not debt but "competitive balance". Premier League success is concentrated among the richest clubs, Manchester United and first Arsenal, then Chelsea. Finding a rich backer increasingly represents the only hope of competing, or even surviving, in the Premier League. A review would also consider the gap between the Premier League and the rest.

Last week Richard Scudamore, the Premier League's chief executive, talked of the money the top clubs distribute to "good causes" - £131.5m a year currently. However, £72m of that is paid to clubs relegated from the Premier League, leaving £59.5m for the Football League generally, the Professional Footballers' Association and grassroots. That is 6% of the Premier League's £990m annual TV and sponsorship revenue. Before 1992, 50% of the TV money went to the other three divisions.

