



Never mind the rage
against Hicks and
Gillett. Benitez is
Anfield's real
problem.

Would there not be an outcry if he were the head of a failing bank rather than a team?

By James Lawton

Listening to the latest Rafael Benitez rationalisation of Liverpool's apparently unstoppable lurch towards separation from the top flight of football surely provokes one question above all others.

What, it goes, if he was the head of a failing bank rather than a moribund football team? Would there not be an outcry in the nation and impassioned questions in the House?

It is hard to see how not. Let's remember the Benitez deal before the point is lost utterly. If he is fired, as surely all among his rivals but the unassailable Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsène Wenger would have been had they produced such a chaotically assembled season, he is due £16m, no questions asked, no negotiations permitted.

If Benitez was one of those authors of the credit crunch heading for the last exit from the City of London, no doubt his situation would have been long ago pronounced as obscene.

However, in large sections of Merseyside there is to be heard not the growling of disbelief but some quasi-religious insistence that faith in Benitez can be withdrawn only at the risk of blasphemy.

This makes Liverpool, which used to pride itself on being the most intelligent football community in all the land, if not the world, either a place of uncommon generosity or mind-blowing naivety. As things stand, it is quite hard to resist the second conclusion.

Most extraordinary is the way so many of the Liverpool following have been prepared

to accept Benitez's all-embracing alibi that he has been hopelessly compromised by the financial limitations placed upon him by an admittedly dysfunctional ownership. This defence wasn't operating with overpowering strength at Old Trafford on Sunday, when in his effort to turn around a game so vital to his chances of qualifying for next season's Champions League he sent on three substitutes of a combined value of close to £40m. Two of these, Xabi Alonso's successor Alberto Aquilani and Ryan Babel, have for some time been shaping up as contenders for the unwanted title of the most unfortunate signings in the history of the Premier League.

Remember, Aquilani was Benitez's key addition of the summer and the biggest Liverpool move since another £20m misadventure in the case of Robbie Keane. Alonso, most people accept now, had an influence on the team comparable to that of Fernando Torres and Steven Gerrard. His successor was signed despite the fact that in not one season for his previous club had he made more than 23 appearances, or, put another way, half a league season and less than a full quota of Champions League group games.

At most serious clubs, this would have been considered something worthy of intense questioning, the kind which we know would have gathered around Ferguson's move for Dimitar Berbatov swiftly enough if United hadn't managed to win their third straight title and make a second appearance in the Champions League final in three years.

Unquestionably, even Ferguson and Wenger would have been under severe pressure had they produced the performance of Liverpool this season, which now includes 10 league defeats, the same number as newly promoted Birmingham City and a Stoke City widely praised for coming to terms with the requirements of survival in the top flight. Almost needless to say, managers Alex McLeish and Tony Pulis would look at the budget which Benitez so frequently complains about with the wide eyes of urchins pressing their noses against the windows of a five-star restaurant.

On top of the £40m worth of players Benitez had resting on the bench at the start of Sunday's game, he also had roughly £85m of it on the field, plus the inherited Steven Gerrard, who is rated among the world's top 10 midfielders but wouldn't have had too many suitors on the evidence of a near paralysed body language which suggested that he would rather have been somewhere quite other than the middle of what used to be one of the key battles in English football.

Throw in the most disturbing evidence thus far that Benitez has lost the dressing room, the anger of Dirk Kuyt, normally his most zealous performer, after being replaced by the inconsequential Aquilani, and the reward for failure that is beckoning to the manager as though he was some defrocked banker, becomes all the more absurd.

Just think of it. Sixteen million for effectively downgrading the most successful club in the history of English football, and if you say that

part of that legacy is Benitez's remarkable triumph in the Champions League, you should perhaps remember that it came, in the most remarkable circumstances, five years ago. Five months, even five weeks, can be a long time on the football barricades. Five years is history.

Meanwhile, Liverpool are sweating on the injection of new funds which would give 40 per cent control of the club to an American investment group, and the banners still fly in protest at the lame-duck ownership of Tom Hicks and George Gillett. However, in the lame-duck department the absentee landlords are surely rivalled by the man who is waiting for his gold-spangled handshake.

What can no longer be doubted is that if Liverpool are desperate for the oxygen of new investment and stable ownership, their need for leadership of both authority and empathy at the heart of the club, which will always be the manager's office, has rarely been more apparent.

The solution is so basic it should be invoked by the name under which the protesters against the Anfield ownership march. They call themselves the "Spirit of Shankly". And where did that particular commodity invariably express itself? Not in the board room, a place the great man hated and where he never managed to negotiate any fancy pay-off, but on the field of play. What power Shankly ever had was given by the people in response to his achievements. It was never written into a ridiculous and shaming contract.