

A Matter of Trust? How supporters are democratising football

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A particular feature of the changing nature of football governance in recent years has been the increasing involvement of supporters in democratising the ownership and governance of football clubs.

The paper begins by 'unpicking' the concept of governance, which has been used both as a descriptive and a normative term – referring to the way in which organisations and institutions are, or should be, governed – as well as seeking to explain a particular set of changes.

It will then consider the notion of stakeholding as a way of thinking about the complex and intricate relationships between interest groups in the policy process – focusing specifically on how supporters' interests can be articulated.

The paper will then reflect upon the growth of supporter trusts, which are now part of the national game's landscape, and are actively providing solutions to clubs that have fallen into administration.

Thereafter the paper examines the extent to which Trusts provide a mechanism for improving the corporate governance and accountability of football clubs.

Conceptualising governance

- “Governance signifies a change in the meaning of government, referring to a *new* process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the *new* method by which society is governed” (Rhodes, 1997:46)
- Steering
- Networks
- Good governance
- “[Governance] ends up raising more questions than it answers” (Pierre and Peters, 2000:208)



Governance has broad, cross-disciplinary appeal. In the last decade, the concept has gained currency in political science, public policy, and international relations. Furthermore, in the sports arena, there are potential overlaps with sports management, sport policy and sports law.

Part of the reason for the term's rising popularity is its elasticity - to encompass the breadth of institutions and relationships involved in the process of governing. At the heart of the emerging literature on governance is a shift away from old forms of *government* based on hierarchies, towards a new, network-based form of *governance*.

Whilst governance has been identified as having multiple meanings, I propose there are three applications that enrich our understanding about how football is governed.

Governance as steering is broadly about strategic direction. It recognises that the responsibility of modern sports bodies is changing – increasingly involving ‘steering’ rather than ‘rowing’ so that the role of NGBs is to facilitate and co-ordinate rather than direct and control.

Governance as networks suggests partnership, cooperation and collaboration as an alternative to hierarchical authority. This approach focuses on relations between organisations, thereby implying that policy emerges as a result of bargaining between groups rather than as a result of authoritative decision-making by a single individual or institution.

Good governance refers to the ethical standards underpinning the relationships, methods and instruments of relationships between organisations.

Good governance

- “Basic principles of good governance will give sports bodies a point of reference to ensure they are governing their sport reasonably towards their members. It should also help in basing all actions or decisions on adequate motivation open to control and discussion” (Jacques Rogge, *The Rules of the Game*, 2001)
- Stakeholder participation
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Combating corruption
- Clear legal and ethical framework



While there may be no best way of achieving good governance, the term is essentially normative, that is founded on a number of common elements (see above).

In this way, good governance refers to ‘best practice’ within an organisation and highlights the arrangement of relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders.

Good governance may be achieved through ensuring that stakeholder groups are capable of providing an effective counterbalance to the focal organisation.

Stakeholding

- “The relevance of stakeholding for football supporters is immediate ... although their financial commitment to their club may be limited to the purchase of tickets and club merchandise, supporters’ stakeholding is based on something equally powerful and tangible, namely a long-term (possibly lifelong) allegiance to their club” (Lee, 1998:46)



Despite the increasing revenue coming into football from the sale of broadcasting rights, the game depends fundamentally on its supporters for its commercial viability.

From the sidelines: a history of neglect

- “Traditionally, football fans were largely seen as a pain in the arse. A kind of unavoidable, odd necessity that they paid everybody’s wages and then they got in the way” (Taylor, Interview, 13/12/00)



The relationships between the game’s governing bodies and supporters has traditionally been characterised by a lack of consultation and meaningful involvement.

The nature of the relationship between football clubs and their supporters has been characterised by a take-it-or-leave-it approach with the underlying assumption that fans can be expected to turn up on a Saturday afternoon regardless of how they are treated (Burnham, 2001).

This notion is manifest in the majority of football clubs failing to communicate effectively with their stakeholders (Hamil et al, 2001).

Supporters' Trusts

- **Influence** – the formation and running of representative bodies for supporters
- **Ownership** – the acquisition of shares in the football club to pool the voting power of individual supporters to further the aims and objectives of the supporters' trust
- **Representation** – securing the democratic election of supporters' representatives to the Boards of Directors of individual football clubs (Supporters' Direct, 2003)



The idea of a Trust is that it is a democratic, accountable and inclusive mechanism of organising supporters for the purposes of playing a more active role in the management of their football club.

Trusts provide a robust and representative vehicle which enables supporters to collectivise and pool their resources in return for an ownership stake in their club.

The formation of Supporters Direct – a government funded initiative that provides legal and practical advice to democratically run supporters' groups - and the subsequent rise of the Trust movement constitute an effective bottom-up mechanism for making clubs more accountable to stakeholders' concerns.

Supporters' Trusts: a mechanism for change?

- “Supporters’ trusts can play a positive role in the governance of football clubs by ensuring higher levels of transparency and accountability, by promoting links with the local community, by encouraging new support, by bringing business, legal and professional skills to the boardroom and by providing finance” (Binns, 2002:6)
- 123 Supporters’ trusts in England, Scotland and Wales
- 12 Clubs are Trust owned or controlled
- 59 Trusts have a significant shareholding in their club
- 39 Trusts have supporter representatives on the boards of their club



It is widely recognised that this new trend of supporter involvement has benefited the clubs concerned, helping to widen democracy, dilute decision-making and allowed fans to have a more responsible voice in the way their clubs are run.

Trusts can help overcome the current misalignment of interests, ensuring that clubs are run for the benefit of the supporters and the local community. Underpinning this is an explicit acknowledgment that if football is to survive its current financial crisis then clubs must enlist the support of whole communities, and explore ways in which football stadia may be used as joined-up community spaces, which can act as hubs for sport, education, health and social enterprise.

Trusts provide an instructive lesson in the positive opportunities possible when the public seizes direct power over or influence upon institutions they care passionately about.

Supporters' Trusts: challenges

- Emphasis on day-to-day firefighting
- Fundraising fatigue
- Fragile volunteer structure
- Managing supporters' expectations
- Tension between representing the Trust and the Club
- 'Management by committee doesn't work'



Supporters' Trusts: a critique

- Emotional roots of fandom
- “[supporters] have never been able to force their way in unless clubs are willing to let them in” (Nash, interview 19/12/00)
- “Football’s fans have a historical and cultural right – and a right in commonsense justice – to take a real part in the running of the game. It is also in the game’s best interests. But it is unlikely to happen without the moral and financial support of football’s administrative bodies” (Taylor, 1992: 187)



Whilst at club level, there is growing evidence to suggest that supporters have been able to articulate their concerns, it is usually highly specific to local circumstances and changes to them, and more often than not, requires the co-operation of the clubs.

Furthermore, the passion and loyalty which club allegiances generate means fans are susceptible to being exploited, ignored and taken-for-granted. Why should those in positions of influence concede ground to an already captive audience?

It has also been argued that the utility of Trusts as a mechanism for harnessing the positive role of supporters, is limited to small, community-centred football clubs. Thus, in most cases with regard the bigger clubs the role of supporters is likely to be small and relatively insignificant, whereas the reorientation of the game among the lower leagues gives far greater opportunities for well organised fans or shareholder groups to find themselves quite deeply involved in the running of their club.

Taylor’s apprehension is important: stakeholding is premised on the supposition that not only are stakeholders involved but their involvement is meaningful. Given the mutual distrust that exists between Boards and supporters, the stakeholder model seems at best, fanciful.

Concluding remarks

- Trusts represent an effective 'bottom-up' mechanism for making clubs more accountable
- However, greater consideration needs to be given to the long-term sustainability of Trusts
- Lack of supporter involvement within NGBs



The game's governing bodies have displayed a lack of enthusiasm for robust regulation and scrutiny of club's affairs.

Recommendations for compliance mechanisms in order to ensure the financial stability and integrity of the game have either been ignored or implemented in diluted form.

Interestingly where there are signs of progress, it is not amongst the game's governing bodies – which have an inherent aversion to external interference – but through the rise of the supporters' trust movement.

The growth of supporters' trusts is helping to cement and formalise fans' involvement.