

Football found itself as front page headlines in late April when news broke of the plan to set up a European Super League (ESL). Some aspects of the proposals were surprising, not least the inept way in which the idea was presented and that its proponents were apparently taken aback by reaction to the concept. More surprising was that so many people – supporters, pundits, commentators, politicians – seemed shocked that the idea was being put forward at all. As far back as 1998 a proposal for a Super League was put forward by the Italian company, Media Partners, and it is clear that the idea has been discussed frequently by major clubs since then. Public reaction to the proposals and the emphasis on sporting merit and football's wider social significance was welcome and powerful. But elements in this reaction were also surprising, specifically the impression given that financial and market interests had suddenly and unexpectedly appeared in professional football and were now threatening the concept of merit-based competitions and financial equity. This is patently absurd to anyone who in recent decades has observed the setting up of breakaway Premier Leagues in England and elsewhere, or witnessed changes to the structure of UEFA's Europe-wide club competitions. Many of England's biggest clubs are now owned by investors steeped in US professional sport with its closed leagues and highly regulated structures, or owned by individuals or families funded by oil money, or supported via private equity investors. That such individuals might be interested in removing business uncertainty and in maximising revenue (and possibly profit) is entirely predictable.

To date structural change within the European football field has been stimulated by adjustments to its financial arrangements and by the desire of bigger clubs for further and wider ranging adjustments. Many of these changes have had a particularly marked impact on clubs in smaller countries within that field. But the distribution of power within European football means that there has been limited discussion about the iniquitous financial and sporting consequences of these changes. In that context, one good thing that may arise from the misguided ESL proposal and subsequent period of public outrage is if it acts as a catalyst for genuine and inclusive debate about the structure of football in Europe, at transnational and national level.

Arguably nowhere in Europe needs this debate more than Scotland. As readers will be only too aware, we have a long history of two clubs dominating club football, both in footballing terms and financial terms. But the present situation is worse now than ever. It is 36 years since a club other than Celtic or Rangers won the Premiership title or any previous equivalent; Aberdeen in season 1984-85. The pre-pandemic home attendances of Celtic and Rangers represent 47% of attendances across the Scottish Professional Football Leagues (SPFL) overall, and around 56% of the SPFL Premiership home gates. The two clubs' pre-pandemic turnover accounted for approximately 70% of the turnover of clubs in the SPFL Premiership.

For a number of years these two clubs have been linked with a move out of Scottish football, either to a league organised in England, or to some form of pan-European league. The idea of Celtic and Rangers moving south was mooted again in post ESL coverage, notably by West Ham United's Scottish manager David Moyes. A little further back in time it is worth remembering that when the Football League was set up in 1888, the Anglo-centric title given to it by its founder, a Scot called William

McGregor, reflected his hope that in future Scottish clubs would be admitted as members. Important though the future of these two clubs is, however, it is essential that any discussion on structure is not focused solely on what is best for Celtic and Rangers, with the rest of the Scottish game being treated as a by-product. As we have seen in the ESL example, if wider sporting and social considerations are ignored then any change is likely to be driven solely on the basis of financial power or logic. A related, but to many more fundamental question, is to ask what is best for Scottish football in terms of its future club structure? This question requires consideration of economic and sporting issues as well as wider issues of social and cultural significance. On these matters many constituencies or stakeholders have legitimate concerns. What is required is consideration of the benefits and losses that may arise from league restructuring, taking into account the preferences of all those affected including owners, supporters, employees, governing bodies and the wider community. Central to this is the notion of Pareto improvements wherein a change is potentially good as long as the improvement in welfare or utility of those who gain from a change is more than sufficient to compensate for those who lose.

There is an opportunity for an open and wide debate, leading to an evidence-based policy response, into how football should be structured, taking into account the preferences of as many of football's stakeholders as possible. The wishes of some stakeholders can be determined quite easily. As a members' organisation, SPFL clubs are able to discuss their views on optimal structures, and as necessary the Board can canvas its member clubs. But at the same time we cannot allow this to be a discussion involving only clubs, or more specifically current club directors or executives. Important though our club directors and executives are to the game, these individuals are not Scottish football. Moreover, the events of last summer - when the SPFL and its member clubs wrestled with the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of sporting merit and relatedly league structure - demonstrated that, perhaps understandably, clubs cannot be expected to do other than adopt self-interested positions.

Supporters are, of course, indispensable to any discussion about the social dimension of football. Yet their voice was entirely missing from these Covid-related discussions. Certainly it is not easy to determine the preferences of supporters to allow them to be included in decision analysis, not least because of the diversity inherent in supporters. But it is also not impossible. Scottish football has two national supporters' organisations – Supporters Direct Scotland (SDS) and the Scottish Football Supporters' Association – which in different ways seek to be representative of football supporters across Scottish clubs. SDS contributed along with other key stakeholders – the Scottish FA, the SPFL, and sportscotland – to the 2015 Expert Working Group on Supporter involvement in Football Clubs. The SFSA exists to provide a platform for supporters to have a say in the running of the game, and claims a membership of in excess of 70,000. In addition, most Scottish clubs have one or several supporter clubs or associations. The recently established fan-led review of Football Governance in England set up under the auspices of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) may provide a template through which these voices could be heard. Other options exist too, including independent formal consultation analysis of the type carried out by the Scottish Government to

explore attitudes towards the recommendations of the Expert Working Group on Supporter involvement.

In terms of the two key questions set out above – what is best for Scottish football? what is best for Celtic and Rangers? - topics to be discussed involve matters of economics, finance and governance, along with issues of social welfare or utility and the wider societal role of professional football.

Pre-Covid 19, match day attendances contributed around 43% of the income of SPFL clubs. More people attend football matches per capita in Scotland than in any other country. Removing Celtic and Rangers' home match day attendances would still see Scotland ranked around 5th or 6th among UEFA nations, though home attendance figures of other clubs would be likely to drop were matches against Celtic or Rangers to be removed from the fixture list. Nevertheless it is clear that the demand to watch live football in Scotland is not limited to Celtic and Rangers. Moreover, an upside of any restructuring of league football in Scotland which did not involve Celtic and Rangers is that there would be uncertainty of outcome as to which clubs might be successful, coupled with genuine belief among several clubs and their supporters that they could be victorious. At present uncertainty of outcome in the Premiership is limited to which of the big two will win the league, though in turn that high level of competition between the two clubs does generate sufficient interest to ensure high attendances and media attention. Nevertheless, while no longer universally accepted in academic literature, it is still widely believed that a strong league attractive to broadcasters and spectators demands that the likely outcome of matches or the league itself is not virtually certain in advance. The excitement surrounding the forthcoming Scottish Cup semi-finals demonstrates how potent uncertainty and belief can be. However, it would be naïve not to acknowledge the centrality of Celtic vs Rangers fixtures to the media deals negotiated by the SPFL, or to the challenge of persuading broadcasters of the value of the product minus the big two, at least in the short term. But at the same time the distribution of the media income is in practice also skewed to those same clubs. Moreover this is only one factor to be considered among many in the imagined public conversation about the structure of Scottish football and its search for Pareto improvements.

In previous discussions on league restructuring, a key consideration has been the likely response of UEFA. Its structures are built around national associations and not clubs. While many of its historical public pronouncements confirm that it is demonstrably against structural change within Europe, its response to pressure from major European clubs in terms of the structure of the Champions League – past and future – suggest that the organisation is more malleable in practice. Moreover, it is clear from the ESL proposals and reaction thereto, that something needs to be done in policy and governance terms to enable UEFA to deliver on its mission 'to promote, protect and develop European football ... [and] to promote the principles of unity and solidarity ...'. An opportunity arises for both strategic and opportunistic behaviour by institutional actors or stakeholders at times when there is institutional uncertainty in the field.

Many wider questions will also need to be considered in any genuine debate about the structure. For example: Does Scottish football have too many professional clubs?

How do we reflect the social contribution and social value (distinct from financial value) provided by clubs? Is the current pyramid structure fair and sufficient? Is the relegation and promotion system between divisions fair? Should all clubs be required to formally involve supporters in their governance structure? Should clubs be obliged to broaden their ownership structure, thus embedding themselves more explicitly in their communities?

Scottish football is at a crossroads. There is much that is good about our game at present. But unquestionably there are structural weaknesses some of which arise from ongoing changes in the wider European field. Perhaps it is time for a genuine and inclusive conversation about how best to structure the game and about how contemporary football clubs interact and affect their communities, both financially and socially. If the ESL fiasco has taught us one thing it is the importance of stakeholder involvement.

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