

Football: European Super League - business as usual in the 'beautiful' game

Saturday 24 April 2021, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2021).

Things must be serious if Gary Neville and Boris Johnson are both angry at the proposal by twelve of the biggest European football clubs to set up a breakaway European Super League (ESL) writes Dave Kellaway.

The 'dirty dozen' will play between themselves, three other automatic entries and five other clubs who will enter through some still to be decided qualifying system, each season. Matches will be played in two groups of ten with the top three qualifying for the quarter finals and another two to be decided by a playoff system. The cartel wants the matches to be played midweek so that they can continue to play in their respective national leagues.

[Video]

The world (FIFA) and European (UEFA) governing bodies, as well as the Premier League and the body in charge of the national team (Football Association) have all condemned the move and have said any player or club joining the breakaway super league would not be allowed into their competitions.

Why are the big clubs doing this?

You would be better asking if the Pope is a Roman Catholic?

These are big capitalist companies which see a way of making more profit by restricting the market to themselves. This is done by keeping for themselves the huge TV and merchandising monies to be made from a competition between the biggest clubs. No longer will they have to share revenue with the smaller clubs that participate in the group or later stages of the current premier European competition, the Champions League. At the same time by eliminating any threat of relegation they can reassure their investors of a guaranteed return.

Amidst all the righteous outrage we should remember that the Premier League went through an analogous process when they split from the Football league so that the top clubs could keep hold of more of the TV and other revenues.

It is not so different from the big tech companies swallowing up any upstart competitors as soon as they look to be a potential threat to their control of the market. As long as these clubs control the top players - which is generally the case - they know they have a strong negotiating position. The way the game has become completely globalised, means the best players in the world, from Africa and Latin America in particular come to play for the mega salaries on offer here in Europe. The fans want to watch the best football so they buy subscriptions to SKY which passes on a big chunk of the money to the clubs who become even richer.

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An additional motive for these clubs at the moment is that a number of them such as Real Madrid, Barcelona and at least one English club have huge debts, partly due to the Covid pandemic. These can add up to £1 billion. This is a quick way to pay off the debts. JP Morgan one of the top investment banks is already committed to backing the scheme. It is probably no coincidence that some of the key people like Manchester United owners, the Glazers, are used to the US sports franchise systems like the NFL (American Football) which have closed groups with no relegation.

The whole sorry saga is being presented as the greedy club owners taking the game away from the fans. This is a long way from reality.

It is true that the idea of a cartel taking away the threat of relegation and limiting entry to the competition runs against a strong ideological component of all sport. It is a little bit like the meritocratic myth – everyone can make it if they have talent. So a small club from a small town can go from the fourth level up to the first – indeed my team, Blackpool have done this, both ways. Like the cup competitions, you can have giant killer teams that can beat the big boy on their day. Unfortunately this is increasingly rare. Often those teams that ascend the leagues to the Premiership often benefit from rich backers. At the same time it is rare for those teams to break into the top six or eight clubs which dominate the top honours. When a club like Leicester did do that a few seasons ago, they benefitted from massive investment from a Thai millionaire. Nevertheless fans are right to be aggrieved about the blatant fixing of the competition. The drama and uncertainty of the upset does not sit easily with the bean counters but most sports fans see it as integral to their love of the game.

The idea that the ESL is taking the game away from the fans ignores the fact that the fans never really have had much of a say in the running of football clubs. Before the Premier League with its colossal merchandising, subscription TV and the massive inflow of global capital, clubs had much smaller budgets and were often owned by local successful businessmen – many of whom had stood on the terraces when they were kids. Such owners saw them as vanity projects and there was not a huge amount of profit to be made.

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Fans did have a more direct rapport with the players at that time since the vast majority came from the local working class and would go to the same clubs and pubs as the fans. Once the maximum wage ceiling was breached in 1961 this began to change. Right up to the 60s most footballers even in the top flight would not earn as much as a high paid middle class professional. Once they hung up their boots they would look to own a pub , buy a house or two or look for a job in the game. Today the top clubs often put out teams with only one or two (or not one single) British born player.

Football remains the most popular, working class sport both in terms of participation and spectators. In fact black African and Afro-Caribbean players dominate the top levels of football even if institutional racism means hardly any have a role in management or coaching. Since the big workplaces have all closed football stadiums are now the last social space that working people get a sense of their own 'mass' or identity. A community around a football club still exists and the pandemic has seen many fans groups involved in helping out. Certain clubs like Liverpool have an even stronger 'progressive' identity tied up with local labour movement traditions as well as the role of former managers like Bill Shankly. Socialists respect this without overly romanticising such a community identity.

Today's outrage expressed by many fans on the media tends to rant about the greed of the owners and how they are taking away 'our game'. One of the vox pops was somebody from Man City supporters group. He conveniently forgot the fact that his club became revitalised a few years ago with Sheikh Mansour's 210 million oil dollars from Abu Dhabi. Hardly any of those same supporters talked then about greed and money ruining the game.

In other countries there can be more structured participation by the fans in the running of the club through membership schemes This is the case at Barcelona and Madrid and it will be interesting to see if there is any blowback there. No German clubs are in the new scheme and this could be because fans technically have a majority on their governing bodies. There are nearly 50 fan owned cooperative clubs in England but they are generally in the lower leagues - Ken Loach's Bath City is one, other famous ones are A.F.C Wimbledon, set up when the owners moved the club to Milton Keynes and F.C United of Manchester, established when the Glazers took over Man Utd.

A progressive government, maybe even a Labour one, could encourage such a new approach to the organisation of professional football. There could be a strong link with the local council and a sharing of facilities so the club can be a focal point for increasing participation in sport and healthier living.

Dealing with the huge concentration of capital at the top of the game is more difficult. One quick way would be to restore free to air TV broadcasts. It is the TV subscription rights that drive the profits. Another would of course be more progressive taxes on the both club assets and salaries. As in Rugby Union a salary cap would be reasonable as well as regulating the transfer market more effectively. By reducing the overall amount of money and increasing community involvement it would also mean the football leagues in Latin American and elsewhere would not lose all their star players to Europe. Regulations building on the German experience could be a start too.

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To some degree this issue overlaps with our ecological strategy. We need to reduce and cut back rather than create bigger and bigger clubs with players on higher and higher salaries. Of course once fans have experienced watching the best players every week it is harder to them in the benefits of a different model. Many fans outside those at the big clubs already experience a lot of enjoyment within the world of the lower leagues. We could build on that.

Certainly the labour movement and the Labour Party need to come up with a progressive programme for football and sport in general. It will always be an important human activity – think back to the Greeks and Romans – so we should work out ways of creating access for all and the best spectacles we can. Johnson is no fool when it comes to nosing out populist concerns. Labour should not allow him to make the running on this issue. Given that the initial ESL proposal is a negotiating position rather than the finished proposal, Johnson has the opportunity to make some grand gesture to block the worst version of it.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 19 April 2021:
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/european-super-league-business-as-usual-in-the-beautiful-game>
- Dave Kellaway is a supporter of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, Socialist Resistance, Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.