

The Kirkby Stadium Debate, Everton Supporters, and the Commercialisation of the Game

The Game's Up (?)

English Premiership clubs have recently experienced another ratchetting up of financial pressure with Dimitar Berbatov joining Manchester United for £30.7 million, and Robinho joining rivals Manchester City for £32.5 million prior to the formal takeover of the club by the Abu Dhabi United Group. Swept along by high finance, open competition is in grave danger of being finally usurped as money fast becomes the determinant of onfield success and failure. Culture Secretary and lifelong Everton supporter, Andy Burnham, underlined that point most recently when urging the need for football 'to reassess its relationship with money'¹. Implicit to Burnham's remarks is the familiar belief that "football is more than a business" – something that may now exist within the framework of a £billion industry, but where identity and tradition and the art and craft of football in open competition are the bedrock upon which all structures are erected.

But there is a tension inherent to this state of affairs which manifests itself in the contradictory ways supporters are now approaching the game: at once concerned with football as an emotional asset *and* mindful that, as a business, their club must place heavy emphasis on commercial strategies². Football supporters who underline the importance of tradition in ways that are perceived to challenge their club's economic progress are now likely to be upbraided by business-minded fellow supporters. Of late, such fans are in the van in urging their own clubs to sell out to the super-rich - no matter the origin of their fortune or what their long-term intentions might be. This

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/7610007.stm> See also the report by Politics for People. The Cooperative Party, Enterprise and Accountability, 2008, 'Burnham launches big debate on football', September 13th, <http://politicsforpeople.blogspot.com/2008/09/burnhams-launches-big-debate-on.html>

² There are a number of accounts of how supporter's genuine interest in football matters can be usurped by business matters, see for example Tapp, A, 2004, The loyalty of football fans —We'll support you evermore?, *Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management*, Vol. 11, 3, 203–215 and Kennedy, D & Kennedy, P, 2007, Preserving and Extending the Commodification of Football Supporter Relations: A Cultural Economy of Supporters Direct, *Sociological Research Online*, Volume 12, Issue 1, January.

viewpoint is a close relation to another, perhaps less enthusiastic, viewpoint that has it that if “football is f**ked”, and if the game is now a commodity, why shouldn’t their own club make some hay while the sun shines?

These points of view may have a certain appeal amongst supporters at present, but how entrenched are they? Clearly, there is a concern abroad that fans’ emotional connection to their club is being eroded as the commercial ethic penetrates further into the game³, but just how deeply is the erosion felt among supporters? With this question in mind, we examine the view of Everton supporters by focussing on attitudes toward the Kirkby stadium proposal. Though the club, for one reason or another, has up until this point stood outside the Premiership bonanza of takeovers, the Kirkby stadium proposal has seen the struggle between a moral economy model and a business model approach to football landing with a thud on Evertonian’s own doorstep, and it is having a profound effect on all supporters of the club.

Despite the clear encroachment of business interests into the game, the Kirkby stadium debate demonstrates just how difficult it is to expunge a non-market outlook from football supporters. There *is* a clear divide between Everton supporters regarding the wisdom of relocating to the proposed new ground, and the language of commercialism *is* a feature amongst supporters both for and against the ground move. However, the conclusion arrived at here is that, although Everton supporters often use the language of the market place, they do so with a mixture of pragmatism and cynicism within a wider and more complex process of accommodation and resistance to the ongoing attempts to commercialise the club. What we find also is a number of supporter positions on the move to Kirkby *within* the broad ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ camps, something which suggests to us that more common ground exists between pro and anti Kirkby lobbyists than is maybe appreciated in the cut and thrust of debate.

This is clearly, then, more of an overview of the Kirkby stadium debate in order to draw out – in relation to what’s been written above – the extent of the colonisation of the business ethic at one Premiership club. We don’t include any in depth discussion

³ As the 2006 EC ‘Independent European Sports Review’ indicates, if these issues are not urgently addressed there is a real risk that the ownership of football clubs will pass into the wrong hands, the true values of the sport will be eroded, and the public will become increasingly disaffected with the “beautiful game”, www.independentsportsreview.com, p14.

of the finer detail of the proposed move or the myriad arguments both for and against the club's continued involvement in the Destination Kirkby project - suffice it to say that, in this respect, the contributors to Toffeeweb have already given an unrivalled expert and forensic account. However, this is not a value-free exercise on our part. As football supporters we feel that football is not something that so easily or naturally lends itself to being produced as a package to be sold to 'consumers' or 'customers' as most commodities are⁴. Football has to be moulded, beaten and bent into shape before it takes on the form of a commodity. As Everton supporters, we feel the move to Kirkby is an attempt by the club to do just that: to mould, beat and bend our traditions, identity, and tribal-like affiliation to Everton into the shape of money, and to have money-making as the club's central abiding objective.

Everton Supporters and the Kirkby Debate

To demonstrate the attitude of Everton supporters concerning the proposed stadium move, we looked at the flow of debate on fan websites. Websites have been the premier source for commentary and discussion of the club's Kirkby ambitions, with forums, mailbags, and fan articles recreating the different voices of Everton supporters on the stadium issue. Though most of the fan input below was taken during and just after the ballot conducted in August 2007 it's fair to say that positions have, subsequently, been relatively fixed in terms of core arguments for and against Kirkby. Based on what we read, a number of common attitudes emerge amongst the variety of motivations fans have to the proposed move to Kirkby, and the selected quotations used are thought to be typical of these attitudes.

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⁴ For another vantage point on how football supporters struggle with and against processes of commodification see Giulianotti, R., 'Sport Spectators and the Social Consequences of Commodification: Critical Perspectives From Scottish Football', *Journal of Sports and Social Issues*. Vol.29, No.4, 2005, pp.386-410.

Looking first at fans broadly in favour of the move, there is widespread acceptance that a new stadium is essential for increasing club revenues and that the Everton board are acting in the club's best interests by seeking a partnership with Tesco to explore that possibility. As one supporter commented:

Why would the club plump for an option as unattractive as Kirkby if Tesco were not offering huge incentives... There must be a significant contribution from 'our favourite supermarket' to make it an option worth going for otherwise there'd be no point even considering it.⁵

While revealing a degree of cynicism towards corporate involvement, this response nevertheless demonstrates *market realism* with respect to possible financial benefits accruing to Everton Football Club as a result of the club's partnership with Tesco. In other words, such a standpoint is taken less out of principle and more out of a pragmatic or realist attitude concerning what the club may get out of a move financially. Also common to those in favour of a move away from Walton to Kirkby is the claim that the move is a once in a lifetime offer set against the "inevitable decline" of the Goodison Park "money pit". Again, though, it is the language of realism and pragmatism rather than market principle which dominates the discussion, as the following statement indicates:

Will Knowsley Council and/or Tesco seek a share of the stadium revenue in return for their contribution to the scheme? Of course Tesco will want their cut, what do you think they are... some f**kin' charity case like Bestway?⁶

Overall, there is a kind of paternal trust that underpins this market realism: a tendency to defer to the patronage of the Everton board as responsible custodians. For example, the "deal" has "many costs" but Bill [Kenwright] can surely be trusted to exact financial sweeteners to negate such costs. This trust in the board and the chairman in particular, while not unequivocal, is enough to offset any concerns about the loss of tradition and identity that the move will potentially bring about.

⁵ 'Stuey', The People's Forum, Aug. 15th 2007

⁶ 'Mike H', The People's Forum, Aug. 19th 2007

However, it is also the case that amongst some pro-Kirkby supporters the rhetoric of commercialism *is* to the fore. Here there is little or no sympathy toward arguments against the shift to Kirkby that puts forward the case for historical traditions, as represented by Goodison Park. Instead, there is a tendency to rationalise the necessity to move from Goodison in terms solely based on economic considerations. The view that Goodison is central to Everton's identity and tradition - part of what it means to be Everton and to be Evertonians - is either ignored, marginalised or judged by these post-traditionalists as cloying sentimentality:

If we continue with this ridiculous “emotional” reluctance to embrace the future (a problem that was one of the major causes of our great city's overall decline in the 70's and 80's) then we risk seeing our club having to scrap for its survival – and being even further away from the vague possibility of recapturing the glory years.⁷

And even when Goodison Park *is* recognised as a special place with a history and atmosphere all of its own, this pales into relative insignificance when taking on board the ‘customer’ and financial constraints which Goodison is argued to epitomise and Kirkby, apparently, promises to break through:

Goodison was magical. It has hosted wonderful night games, and produces an incredible atmosphere... [but] Goodison is old, with too many restricted views. Even if you have a good view, watching the match can be uncomfortable on wooden seats with cramped leg and arse room. And the obvious lack of corporate facilities (where the real money is to be made) is strangling the club.⁸

But besides these pragmatic approaches to commerce and the stadium issue it has to be said that many supporters in favour of moving to Kirkby simply eschew all

⁷ ‘Paul R’ “Yes the move to Kirkby must happen”
http://www.bluekipper.com/emails/emails259_stadium.htm

⁸ ‘Joe Wightman’ “Why we have to move” <http://www.toffeeweb.com/season/07-08/comment/fan/article.asp?submissionID=1137>

arguments concerning finance. Supporters who prioritise memory and narrative over place and locality occupy this space – and the former approach obviously lends itself more easily to the prospect of relocation than the latter. The view that you can take our history and identity and transplant it wherever the new ground is constructed is typical:

I go to watch Everton because they are my team, not because they play at Goodison. I have some fantastic memories of GP and still get the hair standing up on my neck every week walking to the ground. But, like players that come and go, so at some point must Goodison.⁹

Overall, though, the position of those in favour of a move to Kirkby is a pragmatic, and at times cynical, acceptance of the commercial realities underpinning the logic of the move away from Goodison Park. For most there is a resigned acceptance to their own view that there is little or no alternative to relocating to Kirkby. This view is underpinned by deference towards the Everton board of directors and a trust that these custodians will get the “best deal” available. Therefore, in so far as Everton supporters broadly in favour of a ground move are concerned, it appears to us that there is more of an *accommodation* with the governance of the club, rather than their wholesale buying into a business model and viewing their relationship to the club as customer or consumer.

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As we know, the club’s proposal to relocate outside of Liverpool provoked substantial dissent amongst Everton supporters. A considerable degree of suspicion exists regarding the commercial motives of those both inside and outside the club who are proposing the go ahead for a stadium in Kirkby.

There is a deep hostility to Everton’s board of directors over the issue. Not the least of the concerns of supporters against the move is the possible financial benefits accruing to the sitting directors from the proposed stadium relocation (perceived as personal

⁹ ‘Everton’, Bluekipper Relocate Forum, Aug. 7th 2007.

gain at the expense of the club losing its identity as a city-based cultural icon). Some supporters resisting the move are adamant that the board are self-serving and driven by market imperatives over and above the needs of Everton FC:

...the board needs to be challenged as it cannot be correct; for two reasons; firstly, Everton FC...from an investment point of view, is a permanent fixture in the top flight with one of the most consistent and loyal supports, irrespective of form...Secondly, and this is by far a more salient point, Everton FC are currently 18th on the Deloitte Football Money League, which is the most reputable assessment of the wealth of football clubs globally...If he (Bill Kenwright) can sell the club whilst we are residing in a new 50,000 seater stadium in Kirkby, then he is set to walk away with substantially more money than he would if we sold now, as the value of the clubs' assets would be far greater...Can we trust this businessman?¹⁰

This *sceptical* viewpoint touches upon what appears to be a strongly held suspicion commonplace amongst sections of the Everton fan-base: that during a period when the takeover of most English Premiership clubs has taken place, the current owners of the club have blocked this path, preferring to retain ownership in order to maximize the value of their shares in a future sell off. It is a charge the Everton board are sensitive to.¹¹ There is a contradiction evident here, though: a recognition that the club operates in a market environment and an implied acceptance of takeovers, accompanied by admonishment for the Everton board for their Kirkby strategy which could lay the foundations for a takeover – albeit one that sees the current board massively profiting by it.

¹⁰ 'Roy' "Don't believe the hype",
http://www.bluekipper.com/emails/emails266_stadium.htm

¹¹ As typified by Bill Kenwright's statement at a recent EGM - "I want this club to have its billionaire, but it is not me. My shareholding has been for sale from the day I bought in", Everton.com,
<http://www.evertonfc.com/news/premiership/kenwright-looking-for-billionaire.html>

Supporter hostility also clearly extends to the Everton board's partners in Destination Kirkby, and the involvement of Tesco PLC in particular. The club is portrayed as being uncomfortably bound by the requirements of their partners in the Kirkby stadium project: Knowsley Borough Council, who covet Everton's presence in their authority, and, more especially, Tesco PLC:

It seems to me that all that Tesco are "providing" us with is the opportunity to develop on some land that they will be given (not pay for) by a council that wants them there, and a "Clubcard style" note/voucher that we can take to Barr [stadium construction company] that gives us 50% off the shell of a stadium that they will build for us...As far as I am concerned that is where their involvement begins and ends - once they have done enough to get the planning permission for their store that's them done with Everton and it's up to Everton to kit out the shell of a stadium and come up with the costs of any over-runs to the project. Tesco won't be involved in any of that - why would they be? They've got their planning permission and they've got a new store to run (which will be busy whether Everton get their ground sorted out or not).¹²

And there is clearly a sense of unease concerning the club's apparent willingness to act as a Trojan horse in the interests of Tesco:

[Tesco] are not doing this to help Everton out of a hole; they are doing it because they stand to make vast amounts of money out of it themselves by having the biggest supermarket in the country on the same site. This is only possible because of the commercial power of Everton Football Club. Put simply, Everton FC are a massive brand who can make other companies.¹³

As well as a deep mistrust of the supermarket's motives, there is great alarm amongst many supporters concerned with the impact this association will have on the club's

¹² 'PabloMc2', The People's Forum, August 21st 2007.

¹³ 'Roy' "Don't believe the hype", http://www.bluekipper.com/emails/emails266_stadium.htm

status and wider reputation. Chief amongst these *brand management* concerns is that a cheaply-built, new stadium in an out-of-town retail park will diminish the status of the club *and* place increasing financial burden upon it. In an era when football is awash with money and investors, the idea that the club are being dictated to by a retail company is unappealing. This state of affairs is viewed as anathema to the club's traditions:

Frankly, Kirkby isn't good enough...the actual stadium cost at £75m suggests that it will be a pile of crap. Brighton are spending £50m on a 22,000 seater stadium FFS! Arsenal spent up to £390m on their 60,000 seater stadium scheme. Let the board know that this 'deliverable' stadium isn't good enough, remind them what Nil Satis Nisi Optimum is supposed to be about. If they can't give us a stadium to be proud of in the city then they should move on and let someone else who can.¹⁴

For other anti-move supporters the stated rationale for the stadium move (to make the club more competitive on the pitch in an effort to install the club amongst the elite of the English Premiership) will be at the expense of “the soul” of the club:

What are the disadvantages?...We become a club...with all the history and tradition of a Tesco's store...Am I crazy, or does this fill anyone else with dread? The main attractions to Everton are our fantastic and loyal support, our history, tradition ethos and culture of the club...absorbed into every brick that builds Goodison...I'll still be happy to watch Everton there. I'll still feel a shiver when I see her rise out of the urban landscape...¹⁵

These *traditionalist* sentiments have, of course, been to the fore in what is, perhaps, the most contentious issue of the whole process: to pursue a stadium plan outside of Liverpool's city boundaries. As we know, since being formed in 1878

¹⁴ 'Swerve', Bluekipper Relocate Forum, Aug. 9th 2007.

¹⁵ 'Joe Ludden' "Nothing satisfies but the best"
http://www.bluekipper.com/emails/emails265_stadium.htm

the club has had a number of grounds, but all within or at the periphery of Stanley Park. There is a clear identification with the local territory, and, in particular, a proprietary attachment to Goodison Park:

Whoever thinks that by moving out of a city into a town and onto a retail park is not going to change the identity of a club is fooling no-one but themselves. You can argue all you want that it will still be Everton Football Club, and it will, because that's the name of the club. But it won't be "Goodison Park, Home of Everton Football Club" anymore. It will be "Tesco Stadium"? "The Stadium of North Merseyside"? It's these little details which make up our identity.¹⁶

Assessment

These examples are, of course, only brief snippets of what continues to be a complex debate – a debate in which, it should be stated, some supporters have changed their outlook over time. As far as we're concerned, though, what has become clear in the Kirkby stadium debate is that only a minority of supporters amongst the 'Yes' camp defend the move, first and foremost, on principled business grounds. There is very little evidence to suggest that those supporting the Kirkby project fully embrace the commercialisation of the game and view their relationship with the club in terms of *consumer*. Although there is an undercurrent of a more principled stand towards market and commercial rationality, the language of commercialism remains mostly rhetorical and pragmatic.

Despite giving a 'Yes' vote in the ballot, the board's ability to get the most competitive deal from their project partners is an article of faith for those supporting the Kirkby scheme rather than an expectation. And reservations about the club's association with Tesco are clearly only offset by the belief that Goodison has had its day and the municipal authority in Liverpool either wont or cant furnish an alternative to a stadium in Kirkby. And it cannot be ruled out either that the language of

¹⁶ 'Filmzee', Bluekipper Relocate Forum, Aug. 8th 2007.

commercialism is being deployed by some in the Yes camp merely because it enables them to position themselves as the more “down to earth” fans – “realists” relative to those supporters in the No camp, who are then conveniently positioned as “idealists”, “football Luddites”, “traditionalists” – in short, supporters out of touch with the demands on a modern football club.

Fans against the move to Kirkby also draw pragmatically on the language of commercialism. However, here there is another purpose at work: a means of undermining the entire business plan put forward by the owners of Everton FC in relation to Kirkby. For some fans against the move the language of the market and their use of commercial strategy – including putting forward a variety of plans to reinvigorate Goodison Park or for alternative new stadia within the City of Liverpool - is a rhetorical device to gain a hearing in order to fortify traditional values, community allegiances and to underpin a moral economy of Everton FC. Scepticism and doubts concerning the motives of individual members of the Everton board and their business acumen, as well as their critique of branding by association with Tesco, is driven by a fundamental rejection of the political economy of football as it affects Everton, and an embracement of an approach to the running of the club which emphasises the importance of place and history – in its purest form by linking this with Goodison Park.

Amongst supporters in the No camp, the board’s current commercial trajectory is alien to the traditions of Everton and exposes the gulf between them. From their vantage point the world of business is an undeniable feature in football, but one that must be kept at arms length. There is, perhaps, more than a hint of irony here in the fact that those who express such views have now become (or, more precisely, have had to become) lay-experts in deploying commercial arguments to expose the corroding effects of football’s business mentality. In so doing, and despite themselves, they are drawn into the market rhetoric they struggle against.

Just to pick up on this last point by way of a conclusion, Everton supporters most organised against the move to Kirkby have developed an ever-keener eye for business logic and commercial arguments and strategy. There is, perhaps, a danger in this. The struggle over Kirkby appears now at this later stage to be galvanised in such a way

that on the one side are those in favour of a move to Kirkby, and on the other side are those against Kirkby but in favour of multiple market solutions to the club's stadium issue on alternative sites within the City of Liverpool. Both are predicated on the need for big business investment from outside, and both call, effectively, for the incorporation of Everton within either a wider retail or leisure complex.

In this sense, perhaps there is another question beginning to emerge in the ongoing Everton stadium saga: will sentiments of a moral ownership of the club become marginalized by a more market-savvy approach that argues increasingly in terms of 'cost-benefit' analysis, and which is amenable to the further incorporation of Everton into the wheels of big business – thereby drawing the club into the cycles of boom and bust economics to which big business is prone?

Such questions are crucial. As the current credit crunch attests, the stakes are high. The argument that English Premiership football offers a recession-proof home for the super-rich investor due to fan loyalty and TV money may at first sound convincing.¹⁷ However, fan loyalty is based on labour market purchasing power and TV money is derived from fans *and* the power of advertising global brands, both are just as prone to the market down turn affecting the global economy. Andy Burnham certainly has a point when reflecting that 'It is time to ask what we want our game to be before it changes around us and something precious is lost'.¹⁸ Most Everton supporters would no doubt agree with that sentiment. The difficulty, though, is coming to some agreement about what we want our club to be: community asset or a commodity pump-primed with money to purchase trophies?

¹⁷ For such optimism see for example, the recent article by Blitz, R, 2008, *The Bountiful Game*, Financial Times, September 6th, page 9: 'People said we were a bubble going to burst, They said it eight, six, four years ago... We don't see interest lessening...'. It is worth remembering however that much the same arguments about investment banks of longstanding were circulating in the City of London as little as 14 months ago!

¹⁸ Cited in Roberts, B, 2008, *Exclusive: Sports Secretary Andy Burnham: Football is in danger*, Mirror Sport, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/2008/09/11/exclusive-sports-secretary-andy-burnham-football-is-in-danger-115875-20731945/>