

UK government commits to independent regulator for English football

King Charles has confirmed that an independent regulator will be introduced by the UK government to oversee the administration of football in England.

In his first official speech as monarch of Great Britain, one of King Charles' key messages was that greater legislation would be introduced to the nation's most popular game with the aid of an independent regulator which, he said, would help "safeguard the future of football clubs for the benefit of communities and fans."

It is still not abundantly clear what shape and form the regulator will take place in, but it intends to tackle a multitude of ongoing issues from establishing greater financial balance across the leagues, improving the sustainability of football clubs, and implementing a new 'fit and proper persons' test for prospective owners.

The commitment to reform in the English game comes around two and a half years after calls for structural changes began to surface. In response to several EFL clubs facing financial turmoil, the side effects of COVID-19, and the growing economic disparity between the nation's elite and the chasing pack, a fan-led review into the governance of football was proposed to the government.

The review was headed by Tracey Crouch, the former minister for sport. Following the latest news, she released a statement on X saying she was "delighted" that the independent regulator would be coming in and added that it would be an "important step" for English football.

What are the aims of the Independent Regulator?

The fan-led review, released in December 2021, made a total of 47 recommendations, and the headline act of the proposal was the implementation of an independent regulator to take overarching control of the governance of the English game.

Currently, the English football pyramid has four separate governing bodies, namely the Football Association, the Premier League, the English Football League, and the National League. This Fragmentation allows each governing body to focus intently on the leagues and clubs they oversee.

However, the fan-led review questioned the integrity of allowing each organization to take disciplinary action against its own shareholders as the punishment of one particular club, player, or coach often has some form of economic impact on the organization. The independent regulator, in essence, would aim to enforce fair and consistent punishment without any biased decisions about the effects it may have on a league.

I was able to talk about the prospect of the new independent regulator with Derby County footballer Benjamin Radcliffe. A player who has played senior matches in three different

divisions, Radcliffe commented that he has felt “confused with the severity of punishments given out to teams.”

“I find it odd how the big teams like Chelsea and Manchester City consistently get charged with overspending but are never given points deductions,” said the ex-Burton man.

He pointed out that he has played against semi-professional teams who have been “relegated for far more minor offenses.”

“The crime and the punishment don’t seem to add up and it takes away from the integrity of the sport.”

Another landmark proposal that will be introduced with the arrival of the independent regulator is an updated owner and director’s test. Currently, the Premier League, EFL, and Women’s Super League all have their own individual test for prospective owners.

However, with the arrival of an independent regulator, there will be one singular test that all new owners of clubs in the top eight divisions of the men’s game, and the top two tiers in women’s football, will have to pass in order to be granted the license of club ownership. It is also included in the proposal that each existing owner will have to re-pass the test on a three-year review.

The premise of the owner’s and director’s test is to examine the integrity and financial credentials of the people who wish to own a club. The fan-led review highlighted the importance of “ensuring that only good custodians and qualified directors” are licensed control of the vital assets that are football clubs.

So what has prompted the calls for change?

Since the introduction of the Premier League back in 1992, the popularity of the game has soared. Audiences at home and particularly around the world have grown exponentially and the finances involved in the industry have reached astonishing levels.

Football clubs are the bedrock of local communities. The fact that the score line at 5 pm on a Saturday can dictate thousands of people’s moods for the next week emphasizes the elevated status of the sport in England and the importance of managing the institutions with care and respect.

Unfortunately, there have been multiple cases of mismanagement in recent times where the lucrative lure of success has led to owners gambling their clubs’ futures and falling into financial distress.

Derby County Football Club, the two-time English champions, are one of the most high-profile examples of this, and the peak of their plight, incidentally, was around the time of the Crouch Review.

In September 2021, the club was placed into administration by its owner Mel Morris after a repeated cycle of lavish spending and failed promotion attempts to the English top-flight. A former season ticket holder at Derby County Football Club, Morris refused to sell the club for more than his valuation and instead watched the club sink further into trouble with the League's authorities.

"His greed and stubbornness put people's jobs at risk," said Derby County supporter and BBC journalist Jude Winter when I interviewed him.

By Winter's own admission, "Derby is a one-club city" and he added that he still felt "unnerved" that one man and his reckless decisions put risk to his club's existence.

"I am grateful that we were able to save ourselves but it's frightening that other clubs may suffer worse from recklessly chasing more success," Winter said.

Is there opposition to an Independent Regulator?

When the plans for greater government intervention in English football were first discussed in December 2021, the powerful voices of the Premier League signaled their opinions loud and clear. All twenty members of the top flight, in the 2021/22 season, were united in their opposition to the plans for an independent regulator.

One noticeable figure in opposition to the proposals was Leeds United Chief Executive Angus Kinnear, who claimed that "enforcing a philosophy akin to Maoist collective agriculturalism will not make the English game fairer, it will kill the competition which is its very lifeblood."

Although some might consider that to be an extreme analogy, it is a concern shared by others connected to the Premier League.

According to the graph published by Deloitte which compared the relative revenues in major European leagues over select years, the English top division has been extending its advantage over Europe's other elite leagues ever since the Premier League became an outright entity in 1992.

This allows Premier League clubs to spend larger sums on training and stadium facilities as well as the finest playing talent across the globe and sure enough, that repeated investment has led to rich reward.

Manchester City won the Champions League in June to complete a historic treble - a victory that made them the third European champions from England in five years.

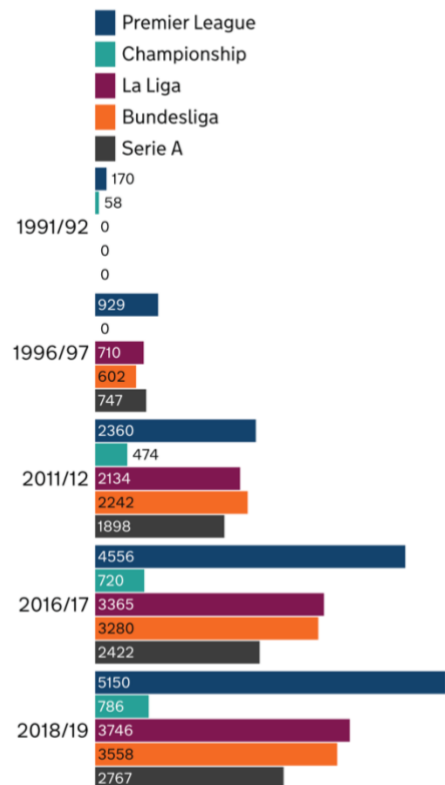
There is a worry amongst the established Premier League elite that sharing their revenue with the rest of the pyramid will weaken their grasp on the continental stage and cause long-term damage to the overall quality of English football.

"On the pitch, English Football is admired the world over, but it is important that measures are put in place to ensure our national game is fit for the future," Tracey Crouch affirmed.

Now that the independent regulator has been given the royal seal of approval by his majesty, the future of the English game will be placed in a new pair of hands.

Chart 2: Revenues in major European leagues (£m) selected years

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Source: Deloitte, Eurostat, DCMS analysis. No data for European leagues 1991/92