

Join the dots between English football's most recent crisis clubs and you can draw a circle. It runs just outside the M60 Manchester outer ring road through Bolton, Macclesfield, Oldham and Bury, town clubs in distant orbit around the stellar wealth of Manchester City and Manchester United.

This geography helps explain the answer to an important question for English football: why did the Conservative party election manifesto have an unusual amount (for a Tory manifesto) to say about how football is run?

The Conservatives successfully targeted, and must now try to hold on to, a new electorate in Midlands and northern towns where economies have been hit by deindustrialisation and where a majority of voters backed Leave – towns that account for a sizeable chunk of lower-league football clubs. At the same time, there seems to be momentum behind a supporter-led attempt to reform how football is run and stop more clubs being dragged into financial ruin. The two things may have some relation.

The Tory manifesto outlined pledges to create a new £150 million fund “to encourage local takeovers of civic organisations or community assets that are under threat – local football clubs, but also pubs or post offices”; and to “set up a fan-led review of football governance, which will include consideration of the Owners and Directors Test”.

The second element draws directly from the Fans' Manifesto published by the Football Supporters' Association (FSA) during the election campaign, which called for “an independent process of regulation for professional clubs with a tougher Owners and Directors Test” (Labour's manifesto also adopted very similar pledges).

Those were key ideas in the FSA's wider review of football governance, which called for the FA to take on “clear responsibility” for the regulation of professional clubs (at present the Premier League and EFL take this role), arguing that as “the greatest expressions of community identity in our nation” those clubs deserve stronger protection.

Regulation and governance are dry words covering hugely important ground: who protects clubs, how owners are judged fit to take over clubs, and how much intervention there should be by the regulator to help save clubs when things go wrong. In the case of Bury,

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failings on all fronts allowed the junking of a 125-year-old institution bound up with people's family memories, friendships and affection for their town.

In the wake of the Bury crisis, the FSA's plans gained significant backing from the FA Council in October and from MPs on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport committee in November.

The review had been around since 2018, but the organisation had been “struggling to get much engagement from the football authorities on it” says Kevin Miles, chief executive of the FSA. “But Bury very much concentrated their minds – and attracted the interest of a lot of people who had not showed any interest before.” He adds of talks with individual Conservative MPs and the government: “There's a bit of substance to it. Rather than just expressing concern, people are actually looking at what can be done.”

James Frith, who fought to save Bury FC as Labour MP for Bury North before narrowly losing his seat at the election, calls for a “national football regulator”, holding the EFL to be “one-third of the problem in this debacle” at Bury, “the previous owner and the current owner being the other third each”. He adds: “We need to look at salary caps, we need to look at proof of funds as part of any qualification of fit and proper [ownership].”

The other element in the Conservative manifesto, on supporting “local takeovers” of



# MARKET FORCES

*The Conservatives' focus on winning over towns has shifted their thinking on football and could benefit fans of lower-league clubs – as long as they follow through on their promises*

By JOHN MORGAN Illustration by MATT LITTLER





clubs, echoes an earlier call from former Conservative minister James O'Shaughnessy in a report he co-authored for Tory think-tank Onward. That report, which argued that voters are turning away from economic and social liberalism towards "security and protection", suggested in an aside that "fans should be given the opportunity to take over football clubs that fall into administration or bankruptcy with match funding [provided by the government] from dormant assets".

O'Shaughnessy, an AFC Wimbledon fan who is now a Tory peer, sees two factors that could drive greater Conservative engagement with football: the electoral fact that the party has won for the first time seats where the "classic small to medium-sized football club... is a focal point of a lot of community activity"; and a broader philosophical shift in sections of the party towards "a degree of scepticism about the kind of capitalist model, red in tooth and claw, that was unleashed in the 1980s and 1990s".

This gives scope for the Conservatives to now look at football in terms of "how you strengthen institutions of society that bring people together, that people trust" and "put them into the control of the people whose lives they affect", he argues.

Following the Brexit vote, there's a lot of focus in political

debate on the disconnect between thriving big cities – with global profiles, science and tech firms, research universities, tens of thousands of students and graduates, property booms – and struggling towns with none of those things.

While the majority of Premier League and Championship clubs are mostly in Labour-voting, city seats, the majority of League One and League Two clubs are now in Tory seats, reflecting the widening of the city-town political divide at the election.

Horrendous owners attach themselves to both city and town clubs, of course. But the Tory manifesto pledges on football came in a section titled "A new deal for towns".

Frith thinks the Tories clearly picked up on the politics around what happened at Bury. "I worked cross-party through all of this and I made exactly that point: the thing we are facing here is symptomatic of towns like Bury and the reason they feel detached, disaffected, annoyed, disappointed," he says.

"Quite literally, towns are at the expense of the success of cities," Frith continues. "Well, Bury Football Club is at the expense, literally, of a city club, Manchester City, at the expense of Manchester United, the Premier League, the TV deals."

The Tory manifesto had nothing to say about the distribution of the Premier League's TV wealth to EFL clubs and beyond, a systemic problem underlying all the individual crises at lower-league clubs.

Excitable political commentary about the "reversal of Thatcherism" stimulated by the early days of this new government is a reminder of how that ideology transformed football. The ending of shared gate receipts between home and away teams in the Football League to benefit the big city teams, clubs becoming PLCs so they could sidestep rules preventing financial speculation, the biggest clubs creating the Premier League to hoard TV riches – all changes from the Thatcher era that mirrored the wider shift to removing the regulatory leash and letting inequality run wild. Margaret Thatcher had no interest in football, but football had huge interest in Thatcherism.

The Conservatives' latest electoral and political directions may give them reasons for supporting moves to provide greater protection for lower-league clubs. Meanwhile, the footballing legacy of a previous ideological revolution is careering around the M60, and it will take more than a £150m community fund to stop it.