

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Response from Dic Mortimer

Submission to Communities, Equality & Local Government Committee's Inquiry into the Welsh Premier League

Any inquiry into the state of the Welsh Premier League (WPL) that does not concentrate on the fundamental flaw at its very heart would not be a genuine or credible inquiry. Therefore unless the CELG Committee confronts the fact that six Welsh football clubs (Cardiff City, Colwyn Bay, Merthyr Town, Newport County, Swansea City and Wrexham) play in the English football pyramid, and treats it as the paramount issue to be dealt with, then, ladies and gentlemen, you are wasting everybody's time including your own. To discuss the WPL without including the position of the six Anglo clubs would be as silly as talking about WW2 without mentioning the Germans. The one and only reason the WPL has, pro-rata, the lowest gates, worst grounds, weakest sponsorship, least media coverage, tiniest prize money and, oh yes nearly forgot, smallest support from government in all of Europe is because Wales, uniquely in the world, permits six of its clubs to desert it and play in another country's competitions. These are not just any clubs; they are, historically, Wales' five "biggest" (plus Colwyn Bay). This is a crippling handicap no footballing nation in the world could cope with – and no other but Wales would countenance for one moment. It means that Welsh football holds some very undesirable records: the only country without a club from either its capital city, its second city or its third city in its national league. Try to imagine the health of, say, the English Premier League (EPL) minus Manchester United, Manchester City, Arsenal, Chelsea, Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool and you're getting warm: gates would collapse, sponsorship would dry up, TV would lose interest, etc. And England has a population of 50 million compared with our 3 million, plus a vast web of professional clubs that might at least fill some of the gaping void. It shouldn't need saying, but in a Wales without a pluralist media it sadly does: we need every Welsh football club to play in Wales, and until that happens Wales' flagship national league will remain a laughing-stock. Every single WPL problem your Committee identifies can be traced directly to this question: not so much an elephant on the doorstep, more a herd of mammoths rampaging in the FAW boardroom. And yet the FAW, incredibly, DOESN'T EVEN HAVE A POLICY on the matter. What would cause outrage the world over goes without a whimper of protest here. On the contrary, this perverse Welsh anomaly is treated as utterly natural and non-negotiable, enjoying the backing of the entire Welsh establishment, while those who argue for change are marginalised and ignored.

To allow the selfish, short-term dreams and delusions of the six clubs, their owners, officials, fans and pals in the media to be prioritised to the detriment of the thousands of other football clubs of Wales is not just wrong, it is monumentally stupid. The damage is there for all to see, not just in the impoverished Welsh pyramid, but in Wales' pitiful international record. In case it has escaped your attention, Wales has not qualified for the World Cup for 54 years and counting – the worst record in Europe bar Finland and microstates like San Marino with the population of Abergavenny. The reason for this is simple: we hardly have any players. For the forthcoming World Cup qualifying campaign manager Chris Coleman has a total pool of around 50 pro-footballers to select from: again another shameful pro-rata record low for Wales. The dearth is explained by our lack of a professional domestic league, without which Wales is left in the humiliating position of hoping English clubs accidentally develop the occasional decent player for us or, failing that, scouring the English lower leagues for players with a Welsh grandparent. No other FIFA country operates in this hopelessly doomed way. There is no mystery about how to build a successful footballing nation: just check out how the rest of the planet does it. To play football you require players. To create players you require clubs. To build clubs you set up leagues. To operate viable leagues and make the imperative connection between your domestic and international games you have all your clubs in those leagues. How difficult is this to grasp? Now, the last time I looked, Cardiff, for instance, was located in the geographical entity called Wales. Not England: Wales. Nobody can satisfactorily explain to me why Cardiff City FC ply their trade in another country. When I press City fans for a justification, they cite "tradition", until I inform them that the club spent its first 11 seasons in Welsh leagues, and then they are reduced to what the refuseniks' case always boils down to: "because we want to." They have no argument, and they know it. And had this 'Welsh' club won the recent Carling Cup final against Liverpool (a game in which not one Welshman featured in their starting XI), then next season would have seen the grotesque, Euro-wide debasement of both our capital city and Wales when the words "Cardiff, England" were put in the hat for the Europa League draw. Meanwhile, Swansea City might beat the Bluebirds to the 'honour' of representing England if they continue to do well in the EPL. Apparently, it's not enough that England already has the wealthiest clubs in the world to represent them, they need our help too. The Welsh government continually bewails Wales' global invisibility, yet government ministers and many AMs always fall over themselves to be associated with the recent on-field successes of Swansea City and Cardiff City, inevitably uttering the words "this is good for Wales" - flagrant Orwellian double-speak for Wales' actual erasure. While these clubs throw their weight behind the richest football pyramid in the world and strive to assist already-mighty England in Europe, Wales is left to be represented in the world's most important club competitions by part-time clubs operating on a shoestring from villages and small towns. The message is loud and clear: a Welsh championship is not worth the winning, representing Wales in Europe is unimportant, Wales does not matter. Does the Welsh Assembly agree?

There are wider issues at stake here than merely football; issues of sovereignty, of territorial integrity and of identity. But in football terms the issues are crystal clear. Taking Cardiff City as my example again (a club I have supported since a boy), their English-fixation has been a disaster. For the sake of their empty trophy cabinet, perpetual financial crises, notorious hooligans and dubious property deals the club acts like a giant Leylandii tree planted by an anti-

social neighbour, blocking out all light, consuming all nutrients and making it impossible for anything else to grow. While every ball kicked by their collection of shipped-in mercenaries is feted, hyped and fetishized in what passes for the Welsh media (London corporations TrinityMirror and the BBC), the entire Welsh pyramid suffers an almost total media black-out. In Cardiff's south-east Wales catchment area not only are there no clubs from the capital in the WPL, there are also no clubs from the Taff, Ely and Rhymni valleys and all of Gwent, meaning that 40% of the entire Welsh population has no club in Wales' national football league. If I want to watch a WPL match the nearest is 30 miles away at Port Talbot - guess what, that's another Welsh record: the longest journey any resident of any capital city anywhere must make to watch his nation's top league. And here's another disgraceful record for you to ponder: of all the capital city clubs on Earth, Cardiff City has produced the fewest players for its national side. That's because 92 years shuffling up and down the English leagues have compelled them to wheel and deal in players on the English model who can out-muscle Stoke, rather than nurture Welsh-qualified talent who can out-think Spain. Like the other five, the club is a cuckoo in the nest, sucking the life out of the Welsh game for ultimate purposes that are never spelt out (holding the European Cup aloft for England?). And because the very existence of the WPL calls into question their Welsh credentials, the six clubs are acutely aware that it threatens their untenable position. That's why they all these days bedeck themselves in Wales-lite symbolic garbage from dragons to Cross-of-St-David kits in absurdly obvious attempts to mask the treacherous reality. Sure they're Welsh - if it has no practical purpose. Sure they're Welsh - if it comes with no obligations. Sure they're Welsh - if you pay them enough. Because, one thing you can be sure of: if, in the unlikely event the positions were ever reversed, playing in the WPL was more lucrative than playing in England, Cardiff et al would be rushing to join.

The WPL will not conveniently die to save the six clubs' embarrassment. It cannot, because without it Wales would no longer have the right to enter European club tournaments and could no longer claim to be an independent footballing nation in any meaningful sense. Then there would be no bulwark to stop a complete amalgamation with England and the abolition of our international side - something always hovering in the background threatening Welsh footballing independence, as the row over the GB team for the Olympics attests. And, despite all its travails, the WPL has gradually progressed as it reaches the conclusion of its 20th season. You wouldn't know it from the *Western Mail* with its 4-page 'Swans in the Prem' supplements, but the Welsh pyramid is stocked full of intriguing clubs, fascinating sagas and promising young Welsh players. Performances in Europe, although still bought to a halt annually by fearsome thrashings at the hands of crack professional outfits from around Europe, are improving against the odds (the WPL is currently ranked 46th out of the 53 European leagues - an overachievement given we have the poorest pyramid). This gives an inkling of what would be possible if all Welsh clubs pulled in the same direction. The fact is that football is woven into the fabric of Welsh life, with clubs from Amlwch to Angle and Chepstow to Connah's Quay, a geographical coverage not equalled by any other Welsh sport, more registered semi-pro players per head of population than Brazil, and a record of producing world-class individual players for over a century, from Billy Meredith, via John Charles to Ryan Giggs. Our football-mad country could have thrilling success, as has happened in similar-sized

nations like Denmark, Greece, Ireland and Uruguay, were it not for the traitors in our midst. The time is well overdue for the Welsh government to intervene where the petrified FAW dare not and resolve this self-destructive, ridiculous mess. That is what the Assembly is legally and morally obliged to do. Forget your individual allegiances to the Swans or whoever; your job is to protect and further the interests of Wales as a whole.

The very first thing that needs to be extracted from the FAW (it will not be easy) is a statement of opinion, intent, or just long-term aspiration, about the position of the six clubs – something they have never done. Then the government should set a timetable for the rapid, orderly movement of the six clubs into the Welsh pyramid in liaison with all the relevant bodies (FIFA, UEFA, the FA), seek compensatory damages from the FA for the 20 years and counting when the income and trading health of Welsh clubs has been decimated by the absence of the six, and put funding in place to bring all clubs in the top tiers of the Welsh pyramid up to minimum UEFA standards. Then Wales can at last begin the long hard task of building a professional club structure that can generate the conveyor belt of players needed to have a chance, one day, of reaching World Cup tournaments – and perhaps future generations won't have to endure the lifetimes of defeat and despair that are inevitable when a nation is divided against itself.