



• ENTER THE DRAGON

Breathing fire and mouthing dark warnings about the high price of failure, Mrs Thatcher and her latest war cabinet recently turned their attentions to one of Fleet Street's most productive and deeply unloved sons. Football hooligans, or 'scum' as the present Chelsea chairperson and much of the rightwing press like succinctly to describe the terrace un-touchables, have become, somewhat late in their colourful and disreputable careers, the present administration's most recent and highly publicised enemy within. With the Government's eye for populist crusades and with the heads of the 'Argies' and the miners at least temporarily spiked, it is arguably a good time for the terrace gangs on the major ends to keep a low profile.

The diffuse and resilient traditions of football end rivalries suggest, however, that the game's fighting crews will probably continue their limited but complex war games despite the souped-up attentions of the state. Indeed, and as exclusively warned by her own *Daily Mail*, by promising rapid 'solutions' to football's spectator problems, the Iron Lady and her acolytes may find to their political embarrassment that this time they have bitten off just a little more than they can collectively chew. Perhaps in part recognition of this fact, the first offerings of the new group, produced a collection of tired and tried 'remedies' for hooliganism, rich in the rhetoric of the family, but with the emphasis on the need for football clubs to put their own houses in order.

Mrs Thatcher's personal interest in football hooliganism was sparked by recent highly publicised incidents at Chelsea and at Luton Town. The latter, involving the formidable Millwall fans, not only helped to relegate the Prime Minister's 'historic' diplomatic initiative in the Soviet Union to the inside pages of the tabloid press. It also occurred at a time when opinion polls showed support for the law and order Tories on the wane, and it involved a spectacular if short-lived attack on a disorganised and understaffed contingent of the Bedfordshire police force. (This, incidentally, ended an embarrassing period for the police at football. It followed complaints of police brutality against Chelsea fans at Sunderland.) For a party with a high regard for its public image and for the sanctity of the law, it was perhaps predictable that Conservative 'patience' with the hapless football authorities was soon reported to be at an end.

What followed was largely predictable, too. The tabloid press, in the vanguard of the

campaign to clog the hooligan, was soon wheeling into front page prominence two familiar figures. The first, the 'Laughing Yob', had the judiciary down as 'mugs' for their supposed failure to lock up hooligans like himself. The 'Shamed Thug', on the other hand, positively *thanked* the court for his own spell inside. Each was used, of course, to perpetuate the interrelated and sturdy myths that custodial sentences 'cure' hooligans and that courts are 'lenient' with football offenders.

Indeed, in the post-Millwall fall-out and in common with the aftermath of past 'out-rages', a procession of football court cases ended with young fans being heavily fined or jailed for offences including swearing, pushing other fans, or obstructing the police, their sentences announced with the now obligatory rejoinder about public demands for harsher punishments for hooligan offenders. (In one of a number of bizarre pronouncements from the bench during this time, a judge in Swindon told a man charged with kicking a rival fan that the fences and barriers at football grounds seemed to have a 'peculiar' and damaging effect on his behaviour. The judge then promptly sentenced the offender, a bricklayer, to five years imprisonment.) Within a few days of the scenes at Luton, Leon Brittan, fresh from a decision to extend the provisions of short, sharp, shocks despite their proven failure as a deterrent, was reassuring rightwing audiences (and the courts) that life sentences were an available and reliable measure for dealing with the more serious football hooligan cases.

In the House itself, some well established political figures were soon flexing their political muscle. In a knee jerk style which would be instantly recognisable to many of 'the lads' on the terraces, John Carlisle demanded no less than violent 'revenge' for his Luton constituents on the Millwall marauders. The Prime Minister, meanwhile, against the backdrop of her own divisive economic policies and of industrial action by schoolteachers, expressed her incredulity at the rising crime rate, 'in spite of increased police manpower', along with her belief that hooliganism was partly explainable by reference to 'lack of teacher discipline'.

In response, the Left was predictably and depressingly divided. Some Labour MPs expressed support for continental-style water canon for crowd control at matches while others, like the one-time Labour Minister for Sport, Denis Howell, recalled the massive police response to the miners strike and demanded more general police crackdowns especially at football. More honourably,

perhaps, Neil Kinnock wandered serenely into an old government trap with a statement on the broader effects of Tory policies on working class communities. Football hooliganism, as Kinnock was correctly reminded, predates Thatcherism by some way. Indeed, Millwall is a case in point with crowd disturbances at Millwall's home ground, The Den, sited in London's tough dockland area, stretching back at least to the turn of the century. Moreover, when, in the 1960s with football increasingly concerned about its image, a media-orchestrated panic began about hooliganism which helped to mould the phenomenon into its more organised and self-conscious latterday form, Labour's football policies under Howell seemed as bankrupt as many of those of the present government. Then, as now, for example, the sole emphasis was on fencing, segregation, more arrests and more appropriate (ie, harsh) sentences from the courts. In addition, far from seeking *social* explanations for hooliganism Howell turned, instead, to the advice of psychiatrists to help solve the puzzle of aggressive match day rituals.

Despite its exaggeration by the media, football hooliganism is a significant social problem. Apart from disturbing the high spending middle class audience so sought after by clubs these days and increasingly housed in their own 'hooligan-free' enclosures, it angers and frightens many working class supporters too. Moreover, the victims of football violence are almost invariably disadvantaged and, at least partly because of the Left's confused and ambiguous response to hooligan incidents, the Right have for a long time exploited the hooligan issue in the ideological struggle over law and order.

Traditionally, of course, the powerlessness of poor communities and the 'invisibility' of the narrow territorially-based expressions of masculine aggression and hostility sometimes produced within them has helped to limit the concern of the authorities and other groups with what has become, in recent years, an increasingly entrenched and economically isolated underclass. Today, football with its expansive media coverage and inherent working class rivalries provides a more appropriate public stage for those males denied access to, or who are disregarded towards, more legitimate channels of masculine expression. Riding, standing and sometimes fighting with the local football crew is, for some of the lads from the poorer estates, exciting, threatening and powerful. In their world, largely dominated by masculine parochialism, the requirements of defending reputations and of proving one's manliness, usually at the expense of women

or one's social class contemporaries, it is also an important source of meaning and status. In short, for many of those at the fighting end of Saturday afternoon's activities, increased employment opportunities *alone* will no more 'solve' the hooligan problem than will Thatcher's blind law and order assault on hooligan offenders. The question for the Left, and for all of us, is what, apart from the routine sexual exploitation of women, the dulling boredom and poor rewards of work or the brutalising and self-defeating experience of detention centres and prison, can we offer the goal end hard cases to replace Saturday's disruptive pleasures out and about at the match?

John Williams