

**“Westcote”,
Seymour Plain,
Marlow,
Bucks.
SL7 3DA.
7th December 2011**

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Mr. Hugh Robertson, M.P.,
Minister for Sport and the Olympics,
Department of Culture, Media and Sport,
2-4, Cockspur Street,
London SW1Y 5DH.

Dear Mr. Robertson,

FOOTBALL GOVERNANCE

I am writing on behalf of Reading Football Supporters' Society Limited, known as 'STAR' (Supporters' Trust at Reading).

In January, we made a submission to the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport as our contribution to its Investigation into Football Governance. Although it addressed each of the areas set out in the Committee's terms of reference, our main focus of concern was the football authorities' manifest inability to self-regulate, in particular to get to grips with the areas of

- (1) the ownership and running of professional clubs by fit and proper persons, and
- (2) ensuring that every club's strategic objectives and financial management are prudentially sound.

When the Select Committee's Report was published, we welcomed its findings and were pleased that it addressed the issues of primary concern to STAR and football supporters generally. The majority of the conclusions and solutions appeared to be well-informed and had taken into account the evidence from a range of stakeholders in football, not just those currently directing football. (This was particularly impressive in the light of the huge distraction caused by the 'phone hacking enquiry'!)

Our response went on to say,

“It is, however, disappointed that the over-riding conclusion is that reform of football governance can be achieved through agreement between the football authorities and without legislation, (although it does recommend legislation if the voluntary reforms fail). It remains our view that vested interests make effective self-regulation impossible. It was noted that much of the evidence was, like ours, sceptical that change from within the game is possible, and so we would urge more significant changes if the FA does not take control and fully implement the recommendations.”

Following that, we were, of course, pleased to see the Government's strong, positive response to the Select Committee's recommendations, particularly with regard to:-

- (1) The setting up of a football licensing body with appropriate power, skills, accountability and representation;
- (2) The recognition of the value of the contribution that supporters' groups make in different ways in the running of their football clubs. In particular, we are pleased that this is reflected in a practical way by the encouragement of the football authorities to provide long-term funding to Supporters Direct and other high-profile supporters group representative bodies; and
- (3) The commitment to legislate if the football authorities fail to put forward changes that make 'a lasting and substantive difference'.

It remained, and still remains, our view, however, that, in the absence of a new, powerful, external regulator backed by government legislation, the proposed reforms to the FA Board do not go far enough: a clear majority of truly independent directors, rather than the two proposed, is a necessary minimum change to enable the FA Board to stand up to the powerful vested interests within the professional game.

It was my privilege to be Chairman of STAR at the time of Reading F.C.'s promotion to the Premier League and it became quite clear to me where the true power in English football lies.

You will know from your time in the banking industry just what independent regulation truly means – or rather, can mean, when it works properly! – and the F.A. is a very long way from that.

It is very encouraging, though, that you are taking a firm line with the football authorities. Like you no doubt, we await with interest just what they come up with at the end of February. They will doubtless expect you to accept compromises, but we would urge you and the Government to stick to your guns to make sure that, once and for all, we end up with a governance regime which is respected and in which everyone involved in football can have confidence.

I should perhaps mention that, although we are fully independent of Reading Football Club, we have kept the Club's executive informed of our views; it is perhaps ironic that we are supporters of a football club which is both owned by a respectable and highly respected local businessman and has the highest quality financial management!

Finally, I am sending a copy of this letter for information purposes to your colleague, Damian Green, who is Honorary Vice-President of STAR.

Yours sincerely,

C.R.Witcher

Board Member
Reading Football Supporters' Society Limited
(T/A 'STAR' – Supporters' Trust at Reading)