

Committee of Inquiry into Crowd Safety and Control at Sports Grounds, Interim Report (Chairman: Mr. Justice Popplewell), HMSO, London, July 1985. (Cmnd. 9585) Appendices, Illus. pp.92. £9.10.

Sport is not just an entertainment, it is also a form of escapism. As the game progresses spectators enjoy the ebb and flow of the match played before them, marvel at the athletic skills displayed by players (though for certain teams and players it often seems to be the lack of such skills!), and banter with friends and others about the fortunes of their team. For a few hours at least, sports enthusiasts are able to escape from the problems of the world - such things as violence, death and destruction. This statement, however, was not true for those spectators who attended two games organised by the English Football League on the 11 May 1985. On that particular day a grandstand at the Bradford City Football Ground caught fire, burnt to the ground, killing 56 people and injuring many others. And at the Birmingham City Football Ground a full scale riot occurred between rival supporters which resulted in the death of a 15 year-old youth, who, incidentally, was attending his first game. Injuries were also sustained by 236

persons (148 of whom were police officers!), 81 of whom (21 police) had to be hospitalised. And on the 29 May another full scale riot occurred between rival supporters in the European Cup Final at Brussels which, following the collapse of a wall, resulted in the death of 39 persons and injuries to many others.

Immediately following the events at Bradford and Birmingham the Secretaries of State for England and Scotland (but note, not for Sport) commissioned Mr. Justice Popplewell to conduct an inquiry and to make recommendations 'to improve both crowd safety and crowd control at sports grounds.' In evaluating Popplewell's analysis and recommendations it is important to realise that this is an interim report, a report that has been produced at high speed (in less than three months) because of the urgency of the situation. Popplewell has not completed all of his inquiries, but wished to place his recommendations before the authorities prior to the commencement of the next football season 'as safety levels must be improved quickly'. He also makes it clear that 'the time scale has necessarily prevented as full or detailed an investigation into these complex matters as I would have wished' (p.2).

As would be expected, his report is divided into two parts, with separate examinations of the events at Bradford and Birmingham. His approach with both is to ask three questions - how did it start?; why did it start?; and, what lessons can be learned? His investigations into the Bradford fire seem (to someone with no knowledge about the skills of fire fighting) to be very comprehensive and thorough, and his recommendations concerning safety well thought out and relatively uncontroversial. On the other hand, his analysis of the reasons for football hooliganism and recommendations to overcome the problem are more problematic and controversial. The reason for this, of course, is that, whereas the former problem essentially requires a technical solution, the latter, on the other hand, can only be resolved (if ever) through social means. One suspects that Popplewell's final report will focus most of its attention on the problems associated with football hooliganism.

Popplewell concludes that the Bradford fire resulted from accidental causes, when a lighted match dropped through a space in the floor boards of an old wooden stand ignited rubbish, accumulated over the years under the stand. (On page 29 it is pointed out

that between 1977 and 1983 'there were no fewer than 86 fires in grandstands and that in 1983 there were 200 fires elsewhere in sports grounds'). Within five minutes the stand was completely ablaze. Popplewell's recommendations concerning the protection of the public from similar fires in the future are designed to force clubs to ensure that their grounds are safe, co-ordinate and grant greater powers to local governmental and regulatory bodies to ensure that this occurs, and to train police and club stewards in the skills of fire fighting and crowd evacuation. In making these recommendations Popplewell realizes that the costs involved may sound the 'death knell' of many lower division clubs. His response to this, however, is that

I must put the safety of the public above the interests of the clubs...like other places, to which the public are admitted, such as shops, offices, hotels, theatres and cinemas, a reasonable standard of safety is necessary... [Spectators] are entitled to reasonable degrees of safety and are entitled to look to those who manage sports grounds to ensure their safety and to central and local government to enforce compliance with safety standards (pp.29-30).

The account of the Birmingham riot makes for fascinating, if not frightening, reading. Rival supporters alternated between attacking each other and the police. On page 34 Popplewell observed that the events at Birmingham 'more closely resembled the Battle of Agincourt than a football match.' His analysis of the reasons for the riot only run to two pages - the issues examined being drink, political activity, precautions taken by Birmingham, (inadequate) turnstiles, and supporters hell-bent on destruction - and will undoubtedly be criticised for its brevity. Later on in the report Popplewell rejects unemployment as a causal factor pointing out that:

The cost of travelling to a ground, of buying drink, of hiring conveyance, of buying a ticket does not tend to suggest that those who go to football grounds are particularly poor. Missiles at Birmingham consisted in part of one pound coins. Some who have been fined £500 were apparently able to pay with rolls of £5 notes (p.47).

Popplewell maintains that it is outside the scope of his terms of reference to find a solution to violence in society as a whole (and even if there is a 'solution' available could we expect a

government to adopt the appropriate policies?). He perceives his task to provide protection for those people who attend football games (p.43). As a result, his recommendations are designed to treat the symptoms of hooliganism rather than their causes. Besides enhancing police powers Popplewell recommends that a system of club membership with identification cards should be introduced. Only persons with an identity card would be allowed to attend matches, and, if convicted of hooliganism, would have their cards confiscated. The proposal, in effect, bans away any casual supporters from attending games; though, it should be added that Popplewell envisages situations where clubs could allow the card-carrying members of away clubs to attend matches (p.45). The major problems with this proposal are the costs involved in starting up the scheme, the provision of facilities and personnel to scrutinize the cards of a large number of spectators quickly (would one require the resources used by immigration departments at points of passport control?), of stopping a hooligan from obtaining a card from a friend or family member, and of whether or not the venue for hooliganism would simply move away from the football ground.

The Popplewell report is important reading for anyone with an interest in the future and well-being of English football. Many of the recommendations concerning fire prevention and safety have already been acted upon. The analysis and recommendations concerning hooliganism are more problematic, and, as yet have not been adopted. Notwithstanding this however, they are an important first step in focusing public attention on a problem which, periodically, had bedevilled English football.

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