Surveying

Like you, we have read a hell of a lot about Hillsborough over the last couple of weeks. We quickly reached saturation point, partly because there are a limited number of ways in which the same points can be made without becoming repetitious and partly because so many stupid things have been said.

One thing deserves to be re-iterated, however. The deaths of ninety people at a football ground in Sheffield were not just another tragic accident. Instead, they were a predictable consequence of the fact that the people who run English football have stumbled from one crisis to another without evolving a coherent, consistent, policy to deal with any specific problem.

The rise to public prominence of the FSA and the spread of the independent magazines, has encouraged the belief that supporters might finally get the opportunity to wield some influence on the way football is administered in this country. An incident such as this demonstrates both the urgent need for such a development and the amount of work that still needs to be done.

Slow progress is being made but nothing has really changed. The individuals who run football clubs with, in many cases, breathtaking incompetence, continue to manifest total disdain for football fans.

Periodically, the cast-list is shaken up — new additions to the familiar clutch of pompous businessmen seeking personal aggrandisement — but the attitudes are as entrenched as ever. The same policemen adopt the same aggressive attitude to football, insisting that it should be treated as a public order problem rather than as a form of entertainment. The same prejudice is attached to all football fans, deemed to be passive accomplices to the sociopathic minority.

The implication is that ‘normal’ people need to be protected from the football fan. But we are normal people. The Football Fan is not an easily defined social stereotype, whatever the tabloid cartoonists may choose to believe. All manner of people go to football matches. A few of them are intent on unleashing aggressive instincts which are also manifested in wine bars on a Saturday night or in tourist hotels on the Costa Del Sol. Thuggish behaviour is rarely reported in any detail when it can’t be directly linked to a football match.

Football is being made the scapegoat for a society brutalised over the last decade. Yet, a proportion of law officers are afflicted with the same oafish sensibility which is exhibited by a minority of fans. Since this magazine first appeared, we have regularly received letters complaining about specific police actions. The correspondence has come from a broad spectrum of our readership and builds up into a weighty indictment of general policing policy at football matches over the last three years. A large proportion of the Liverpudlian supporters who angrily spoke out against the police tactics at Hillsborough will have had previous had experiences which serve to further fuel their sense of grievance.

Fans and the police have developed a prejudiced view of one another which has served only to create barriers which are of as much significance as the perimeter fencing. Then there are the administrators. Their attitude is one of utter incomprehension and cowardice. They don’t stick up for football supporters because they basically neither understand nor like them. The FA have abdicated any responsibility for the events of Hillsborough in typical fashion. Faced with crisis and degeneration, they have failed to take positive steps to resuscitate the game.

They have obstructed change where it was proposed by the powerless (the fans) but prostrated themselves before a political establishment which would be quite happy to see the game destroyed.

Complaints about safety and comfort were ignored because they were being made by supporters. Official action will be taken now, because the same points previously