

# The Scottish state and the criminalisation of football fans

**Michael Lavalette and Gerry Mooney**  
consider football fandom and the 'ultras' phenomenon

*Football crowds have been viewed as a problematic presence from the start of the modern game. 'Uncontrolled' working class fans have a contradictory position within football. They help create the atmosphere at matches, pay to enter the grounds and are a source of commercial exploitation but also potentially threaten to disrupt matches or clash with rivals both in and around grounds. For the state, and for the clubs, fans represent a problem of 'law and order'. How can and should fans be moved about? How can the (particularly) young fans be controlled?*

At different points in time various groups have been viewed as particularly problematic: hooligans, casuals and today, increasingly, 'ultras'. There is some confusion amongst many people when they hear the term 'football ultras'. Many assume it is a synonym for 'hooligan' – but whilst some ultras do engage in violence most ultras are not looking for trouble or violent clashes with fans from other teams. Another common misconception is that ultras is a short-hand to refer to football fans with connections to the far-right. But there is nothing inevitable about ultras groups being right-wing and there are explicitly left-wing ultras groups in clubs across Europe – notably the Commando Ultras 84 (at Olympic de Marseille), Brigade Autonome Livorno 99 (Livorno) and Original 21 (AEK Athens).

## 'Ultras' and the contradictions of fandom

The relationship between football clubs and the ultras is often

contradictory. In many respects the ultras represent a challenge to those who run football clubs. They contest the meaning and 'ownership' of the clubs, often summed up in the slogan 'FC not PLC'. Owners are viewed, at best, as custodians

of clubs which are identified as representing a tradition, and a connection with fans and players from the past which is resistant to the drives of commercialism and globalisation (Lavalette, 2013).

Arguably the best known ultras group in Britain today are the Green Brigade (GB) at Celtic. The problematic relationship they have with Celtic Football Club is reflective of the broader contradictions of fandom. The Club have acquiesced in the creation of a distinct Green Brigade area in the stadium that has effectively been handed over to the GB, and they regulate the fans and activities within that section to a degree. The Club benefits from new songs and the colourful displays the section initiates, but are also regularly at loggerheads with the



A Green Brigade protest against the Scottish Government at Celtic Park

Photo courtesy of The Green Brigade

group. Throughout the 2011/2012 season there were announcements and leaflets from the club threatening fans who stood up and made 'lateral movements' during games. This was a reference to the movements of the GB as they sang. Football stadia regulations were quoted to back the Club's case and the local authorities issued a threat that they may 'close the ground' because of the fans' behaviour. Yet every time an announcement about the 'lateral movements' was made it was met with resounding 'boos' from the crowd as a whole.

Over the course of the 2012/2013 season the GB were vociferous in their complaints about their treatment from the Club and, more importantly, by Strathclyde police. Several members of the group were arrested at home. Others were picked up en route to matches. Banners were removed. Members were served with match bans (often without prior knowledge) or travelling bans. In the ground, police officers with cameras swarmed all over the section. The GB's case is that this level of police surveillance and harassment would not be possible without the cooperation of the Club. On the weekend of 16 February 2013, as many of them entered the ground, they were met with officers with lists of names of those they wanted to 'monitor'. In response the ultras refused to take their seats. In effect this was the third boycott against harassment the group had participated in during the 2012/2013 season.

This harassment reached a new level on Saturday 16 March 2013, when about 200 supporters of the group were 'kettled' in Glasgow's Gallowgate area. The policing was considered so extreme (horses, dogs and a helicopter were all deployed) it led to a number of well publicised critical comments from lawyers, politicians and sections of the media, with some claiming it was tantamount to 'police state' (Spiers, 2013). To understand why the GB is

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under such pressure from the state we need to look at their history and activities.

### **Celtic's Ultras: the green brigade**

Formed over the summer of 2006, the GB was a reaction to the direction the corporate owners were taking the club. Like most big clubs in Britain, Celtic bought into the attempt to rebrand top class football. All seater stadia; a more 'family orientated' atmosphere; an emphasis on 'corporate hospitality': all with the intention of altering the 'match day experience'. The result at most top clubs was to kill the atmosphere.

Singing was often reduced to an occasional tune at matches with close rivals. While keen to improve the atmosphere at Celtic Park, the GB was also clear from the beginning that they were a political grouping. The originators were clear about their aims:

*What makes the Green Brigade different is our politics. We are*

*anti-racist, anti-sectarian, anti-fascist and left-wing and proud of the fact.*

(celtictalk.org, 2010)

Since their inception, the GB have tried to bring colour and song to home and away games through their chants, banners and in their displays which also define the group's stance on a particular issue. Perhaps the most 'notorious' of their banner displays came in November 2010. On the nearest Saturday to Remembrance Sunday teams in the Scottish Premier League were to wear a red poppy on their shirts. Complaining about the role of British troops in the murder of civilians from Ireland to Iraq the GB section of the ground was covered with a banner proclaiming: 'Your deeds would shame all the devils in Hell. Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan. No Blood Stained Poppies on Our Hoops' ('Hoops' being a popular name for Celtic's shirt). Such banner protests are only one part of the group's campaigning work. The GB is involved with the Alerta Network of anti-fascist fans groups. As part of their anti-racist work they hold an annual 'anti-discrimination' football tournament which involves teams made up of



Celtic supporters gather in Glasgow's George Square in April 2013 to protest against the criminalisation of football fans  
Photo courtesy of The Green Brigade





Courtesy of Fans Against Criminalisation

local asylum seekers. The slogan of the event reflects Celtic's own roots in the Irish migrant community: 'Made by Immigrants, Refugees Welcome'.

However, what has undoubtedly provoked the ire of the Scottish police and the Scottish Government is the GB's self-defined socialist-republicanism. Despite Scottish media reports to the contrary, the GB rarely sing pro-IRA songs. However, in their repertoire are a number of songs commemorating the Irish Hunger Strikers and civilian victims of the British presence in Ireland. It is these songs that have been used as an excuse to target the group under the 'Offensive Behaviour at Football' legislation. This Bill was developed by the SNP-led Scottish Government at the end of season 2010-2011. That season saw a match between Celtic and Rangers which concluded with a confrontation between the managers of both clubs. In the weeks following this Celtic manager Neil Lennon was physically assaulted whilst on the touch-line at a match in Edinburgh

against Hearts. Subsequently a range of people with connections to Celtic including Lennon, Celtic players Paddy McCourt and Niall McGinn (all three of Catholic origin from the North of Ireland), were sent bullets through the post.

The problem seemed obvious to some, sectarianism and anti-Irish racism. But the Scottish Government (2012), decided to act against 'offensive behaviour' at football grounds (and on the web). *The Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act, 2012* came into force on 1 March 2012.

'Offensive behaviour' was ill-defined. It is identified as 'sectarian singing' and offensive acts and language (McConville, 2013). The Act attempts to criminalise 'offensive' chanting and behaviour' at matches but for supporters of the GB their chanting is primarily political. How is that to be judged?

The legislation was widely seen a panic reaction from the Scottish Government and has led to the

police targeting fan groups at many clubs, including at Rangers. There is no doubt that it is Celtic's GB who the police have focussed on. They have targeted their 'offensive banners', singing songs that are

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'sectarian' (loosely defined to capture any songs broadly supportive of republican issues) or behaviour that is likely to cause offense – which seems to mean any involvement in the GB. While there have been many arrests, so far the police have failed to get a significant conviction.

In response several Celtic supporters groups have come together to form Fans Against Criminalisation which has organised

several demonstrations against the Act, including on Saturday 6 April 2013, when around 3,000 to 4,000 mainly Celtic football fans demonstrated in Central Glasgow.

### The Scottish state and policing the working class

The GB has been targeted by the police because they represent a politically orientated approach to football fandom. The policing of working class football fans in Scotland before the new legislation was generally unacceptable – but the new legislation has made matters worse. There is a wider political context here. The SNP Government are advancing a model of a 'new', 'modern' Scotland in which aspects of working class culture are seen as highly problematic. The legislation we have highlighted here together with other legislation around the minimum pricing of alcohol reflects a more general concern to reshape Scottish society. In this the Scottish state has been deployed with force to implement this. That we refer here to a Scottish state is a direct challenge to claims that Scotland is, this side of independence, a 'stateless nation'. In the policing of football fans in Scotland today, the power of the Scottish state betrays such claims. ■

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For more information visit:  
[fansagainstcriminalisation.blogspot.co.uk](http://fansagainstcriminalisation.blogspot.co.uk) and [alerta-network.org](http://alerta-network.org).

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