

Selling City Out? Blue Reflections on the Thaksin Takeover¹

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The proverbial “blue half of Manchester” has greeted Thaksin Shinawatra’s imminent takeover of struggling Manchester City with unbridled enthusiasm, with ticket sales boosted and attention quickly turning to what new players Thaksin’s cash might be able to attract to the club.

But that enthusiasm is hardly universally felt. Numerous national journalists have critiqued Thaksin and his turbulent past, and an online poll at a national publication suggested that roughly one-third of football fans think Thaksin should be prohibited from buying the club. Perhaps more tellingly, numerous die-hard City supporters themselves are dissenting from the general enthusiasm, with reactions ranging from unease to out-and-out disgust.

The football appeal of the takeover for the average Manchester City supporter should be obvious. First, the takeover will reportedly eliminate much or all of the club’s outstanding debts. Second, Thaksin has promised substantial transfer funds. Those funds in turn make possible the third benefit, the ability to lure a world class manager and staff to take the City job. Sven Goran Eriksson will always have his detractors, but no one can deny that he has a far more impressive resume in world football than any previous manager in the club’s history. With Eriksson aboard, City will instantly become a club commanding worldwide media interest. (Whether Sven takes City up the table or the whole thing turns out to be a disaster, it’ll be great copy either way.) More importantly for fans, City will become a club that again can credibly aspire to become a regular Top Six side.

At the moment, breaking into the “Big Four” is almost entirely out of the question, but the new investment and management at least makes it possible for City to be grouped with the likes of Tottenham (regularly in Europe, regularly a factor in cup competitions) rather than the likes of Fulham (just barely hanging on in the top flight). While regular finishes between say 13th and 16th are indeed a major accomplishment at clubs like Fulham, that sort of position is stale fare for City fans at this point.

Why? Because City fans refuse to accept a permanent second-class citizenship as a football club; the frame of reference the median, middle-aging City fan has is of the glorious period between 1968 and 1977, when the club won five major trophies and had several near-misses, including a runner-up finish in the league in 1977.

That City had fallen well off that standard by the time the big money era of the 1990s rolled around was due largely to self-inflicted wounds and flat out bad management. But the hope for City and clubs like it until quite recently was that with a very good manager, a good group of home-grown players, and some astute transfer dealing, a club the size of Man City could once again break into the hallowed “Top Six” (i.e. qualification for European competition). That was the hope at City as recently as 2003 when Kevin Keegan was at the helm: after Keegan led the club to promotion in champagne style, followed by a respectable 9th place finish in the top flight combined with UEFA Cup qualification (albeit via an obscure back door), everything seemed to be on the up and up.

1. This essay originally appeared in the newsletter MAN CITY INFO VIA THE ALPS, available at www.uit.no/mancity/mcivta. It is reproduced here by permission of the author.

Instead, City's progress hit a wall, as the club fell back to 16th place in 2004, followed by finishes of 8th, 15th, and 14th in the following three seasons. Again, some of the problems were self-inflicted (a few too many of Keegan's signings didn't pan out). But the bigger problem was structural: the big four's lock on Champions League qualification was almost impenetrable, leaving the rest of the Premiership clubs to struggle over the scraps of an UEFA Cup slot. The financial position of the top four grew stronger relative to the rest of the league with each passing year's Champions League TV money.

Moreover, the contrasting examples of Chelsea and Leeds taught, in different ways, a similar lesson about the importance of deep-pocketed ownership in the modern game. Chelsea transformed itself from a club that was in 2003 about where Tottenham is now—a consistent top side but not quite silverware material—into a dominant force in the English game on the backs of the massive transfer investments of Russian owner Roman Abramovich. Serious money can, properly managed, buy serious success.

On the flip side, attempting to compete with the big boys without serious money on hand is likely to be suicidal. That's the takeaway lesson from the (still ongoing) saga of Leeds United, which saw the club slip from Champions League semifinalists all the way to the third tier of English football in six short years. The prior Leeds board gambled on on-field success, quite literally mortgaging its own future in order to build a star-laden squad that it was hoped could actually win the Premiership. The problem was that the capital requisite to such a project simply didn't exist, and instead the club acquired players through dodgy, highly-leveraged financial vehicles. Eventually, the house of cards collapsed, and with it the football club.

The Leeds and Chelsea examples carry the same practical lesson for clubs like City: if you want to compete with the big boys, you're going to need serious money—not debt-leveraged money, but the real article. If you don't have that, you're better off limiting your ambition rather than doing a Leeds.

All this is important to understand, if only so one can comprehend both the aggressive, persistent pursuit of this deal by the City board and the largely open arms with which the bid has been greeted by a majority of City fans. Quite simply, City fans see the takeover as an opportunity to move up the ladder of English football—perhaps not all the way to the top, but certainly to a higher place in the pecking order—an opportunity that simply would not exist in the absence of serious external investment.

But there is a minority view as well—those fans for whom the takeover doesn't sit quite right, or in some cases doesn't sit right at all. A number of City fans have articulated cogent, coherent, and in some cases moving expressions of angst and even disgust about the takeover. What's eating these City fans? Why can't or why won't they just go along with the program?

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To begin to answer that question you have to know a little something about Thaksin Shinawatra and his political career. Thaksin, who holds a doctorate in criminal justice from Sam Houston State University in the United States, built his business empire in computers, mobile phones, and related technologies. The growth of his ventures was intimately intertwined with his extensive contacts in Thai politics, as he benefited from a variety of government contracts and licenses. The notion that Thaksin made his money "outside of politics" before entering public life is thus in an important sense misleading.

Nonetheless, Thaksin is on that score no different than many other very rich men who have found profit through political connections. The more particular questions about this particular rich man have to do with his reign as a popularly elected prime minister of Thailand.

Before diving into some of the specific charges leveled at Thaksin, it's important to take a moment to understand the nature of the Thaksin regime. Thaksin built a popular political party in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis predicated on an alliance between domestic Thai capital (that is, local big business) and the rural masses. Implicit in his agenda was a critique of neoliberal models of globalization, and a welcome recognition of the need to better integrate the rural poor into the mainstream economy (in the process reducing poverty).

Putting it this way, the Thaksin regime appears to be well-founded, even admirable. Thaksin's efforts to extend credit and health care to the rural poor both had positive social effects and formed the basis for Thaksin's strong support among a sector of the population rarely championed in the political process. Indeed, some of the criticism of Thaksin's agenda within Thailand smacks of class prejudice against the rural poor for who supposedly were suckered into supporting the former prime minister.

So far, so good, it might seem: the idea that Thaksin is a champion of the poor dumped out of office by reactionary elements is an appealing one. But reality is a bit more complicated.

At the same time Thaksin was pursuing "Thaksinomics," he pursued other aspects of his social vision less compatible with standard democratic norms. The Thai political economist Pasuk Phongpaichit has provided the most detailed, informative account of the Thaksin regime available in English with her book "Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand" (co-authored with Chris Baker); the brief account that follow merely touches on themes developed and documented at greater length in that book.

First, Thaksin's regime reversed decades of progress in moving Thailand to a more open society based on unconstrained freedom of speech and a free press. Second, the tendency and perhaps purpose of his regime was to consolidate the political power of domestic business interests. Both these tendencies were in service of a broader vision of governance as management: to progress, Thailand needed to be run by a strong class of businessmen. Civic groups and others opposing such management simply got in the way and needed to be ignored and discouraged.

Third, Thaksin himself appears to have used the power of his office in ways which plainly benefited not just business in general but his family businesses in particular, which saw sharp growth in revenues and profits during Thaksin's tenure as prime minister. Cronyism and nepotism were prominent features of Thaksin's regime, and the prime minister took steps to take the teeth out of the anti-corruption measures established by the 1997 "People's Constitution."

Pasuk and Baker provide many examples of the way in which political pull benefited Thaksin and his family over the years, but the following illustration is as telling as any: "After his son, Panthongthae, completed university, Thaksin helped him establish a photography and advertising business. In 2004, the firm with the concession to develop advertising on Bangkok's new subway system announced it had been forced to surrender half the concession to Panthongthae's company."

It's worth recalling that Thaksin survived a 2001 official corruption charge for concealing assets by the skin of his teeth (one judicial vote). More recently, the specific action which

damaged his internal credibility was the \$1.85 billion January 2006 sale of his family's stake in the Shin Corporation to the Singapore government immediately after the passage of legislation raising the cap on foreign ownership of telecommunications firms; Thaksin's family was able to escape owing taxes on the transaction, prompting a public outcry and an ongoing official investigation and the well-publicized freezing of vast assets. There are other specific charges of corruption against the Shinawatra family as well, and recently formal charges have been brought connection with a questionable land deal benefiting Thaksin's wife.

It is certainly the case that the prosecution of these recent charges against Thaksin by the military junta is politically motivated; and it's difficult for outsiders to judge just how corrupt Thaksin's regime may have been compared to prior Thai governments. But those facts in themselves do not mean the charges are without substance, though the former prime minister certainly is entitled to the right to defend himself.

Fourth, and most notoriously, Thaksin pursued a war on drugs in Thailand in a manner plainly offensive to widely accepted understandings of human rights. The specifics (some 2700 extra-judicial killings, torture, etc.) have been amply documented by human rights groups.

Some City supporters have persisted in referring to these charges as "allegations" and questioning the link between Thaksin and police excess. Unfortunately this is wishful thinking in the extreme; to see the linkage, one need only consult the policy speech Thaksin gave in January 2003 just prior to the launch of the war on drugs. In that speech, Thaksin approved scorched earth tactics worthy of a Dalek invasion, informing regional authorities that they needed to be willing to shed blood to clean up their local areas: "[The province of] Chiang Rai is another example of a province which was serious about suppression and rehabilitation . . . Sometimes people were shot dead and had their assets seized as well. I think we have to be equally ruthless. The drug sellers have been ruthless with the Thai people, with our children, so if we are ruthless with them it's not a big deal. I believe we are forced to be so. It's not something we have to be cautious about."

With rhetoric like this from the top, there can be no surprise that the results on the grounds were often ugly, and little doubt that Thaksin's regime carries ultimate responsibility for the excesses.

A more interesting defense of Thaksin than the blithe denial of these charges is to argue that he was merely carrying out the will of the people, who favored aggressive action against drug dealers. (Support for Thaksin's tactics extends, it appears, to the coup plotters themselves; there is no evidence that the coup was motivated by human rights concerns). I find this argument interesting in so far as it appeals to an absolutist conception of democratic political authority: the implicit claim is that whatever the state does is in itself legitimate, so long as a majority supports it. That view contrasts with the more common view that there are inherent limits on government, and that citizens (including criminals) have basic rights which government is not entitled to violate, even for a worthy, popular cause.

This latter view predominates in the West and underlies the work of human rights groups like Amnesty International. But, one might counter, surely the world is large enough for both liberal and nonliberal conceptions of democracy, and if a particular country decides it's willing to suspend its civil liberties for a time in order to squash drug dealers, no one on the outside should intervene, even if they find that process distasteful.

Perhaps, but any claim that Thais lack a robust conception of human rights and of democratic freedom is questionable—witness the evidence of the democratic social movements of the 1990s which led to the adoption of the most democratic constitution in the nation's history in 1997. There did appear to a robust though fragile tendency towards the expansion of not just democracy but individual rights in Thailand when Thaksin took power, a tendency that Thaksin is widely judged to have reversed.

This is important to recognize, because understanding this point will steer one away from a reductive view of Thai politics in which there are military coup plotters (bad guys) and democratically elected officials like Thaksin (good guys). A more three-dimensional view suggests that Thai politics, including in the Thaksin era, has typically been dominated by factions whose commitment to not just the external trappings of political democracy (elections) but to the substance of a democratic society (involving the full exercise of civic freedoms) has been and remains uncertain. Some close observers of Thaksin believe that his long term political goal was to create a one party state in Thailand modeled after Singapore.

None of this is to excuse the coup plotters, their motivations, or their actions. The coup, with its suspension of the Constitution (to be replaced by one drafted by the military) is a backward step for democracy in Thailand.

It is to say that Thai advocates of what most Westerners regard as the substance of a democratic society generally do not seem to regard Thaksin as a leader committed to democracy as such, but rather to elite rule ratified by periodic elections. Apologists for the coup in Thailand forward the implausible argument that democratic elections are not the ultimate source of political legitimacy in democracies. But apologists for Thaksin's regime err as well when they speak as if elections were the *only* thing that constitute a democratic society, or imply that it's excusable for a popularly elected leader to violate individual rights or to use a public position to advance private interests.

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So what does all this mean for Manchester City Football Club and its supporters?

One plausible answer is, nothing at all. On this view, what Thaksin did in Thailand is Thai business; what we should be concerned with is what he does with MCFC. In my judgment, there is actually quite a bit more to be said for this view than might seem immediately obvious, although I still don't think it's entirely right. To see why, let's consider two prominent ethical arguments against Thaksin's taking over the club that have been voiced by fans on the Internet and by some in the media.

That allowing Thaksin to operate MCFC or any Premiership club is tantamount to endorsing the human rights abuses of his regime. The thought here is simple: no one wants a football league operated by former strongmen who kept power via human rights abuses. On the other hand, it might be countered, Thaksin will not be committing any human rights violations by running Manchester City, and as the club had no role in any of the abuses in Thailand, the club itself will remain untainted, unless Thaksin were to use club resources to finance unsavory activities (which no one expects).

Additionally, if Thaksin is complicit in human rights violations, who else in the football world might be? Should Tony Blair be barred from buying Newcastle due to his complicity in the various crimes committed by alliance forces in Iraq? What about new Liverpool owner Tom Hicks, a major financial supporter of George W. Bush, architect of that war? Indeed, what about Sky, until recently holder of 10% of City, itself owned by

Rupert Murdoch, financier of the odious Fox News Channel in America, the leading outlet for Republican propaganda in the United States?

More to the point perhaps, modern states, particular modern democratic states, have a common understanding that retired politicians are (with very rare exception) not to be held personally accountable for policies they undertook when holding the reins of power, even when those policies were simply awful and led directly or indirectly to many deaths. George W. Bush faces in all likelihood no legal sanction or constraints on his future activities once he leaves office on account of the Iraq war; neither did Henry Kissinger or any number of comparable figures. If Thaksin were to unambiguously retire from Thai political life and forswear future involvement in Thai politics, he perhaps could avail himself of the convention that moral wrongs committed by leaders to advance the supposed interests of states are, in a sense, vacated once said officials leave office.

That the money Thaksin is using to buy the club is tainted. This variant of the charge is that if Thaksin earned his fortune in part through corruption, his great wealth is at least in some measure a theft from the Thai people, and hence should be considered dirty money.

This argument seems less compelling to me than its predecessor. While it would be false to mythologize Thaksin's rise as a businessman and pretend it was a matter of sheer personal brilliance rather than success in securing lucrative contracts from the Thai government, the bulk of his fortune appears to have been made through legally permitted means. The corruption charges Thaksin now face pertain to supposed attempts to use public power inappropriately to further bolster that fortune. But to criticize the fact that Thaksin is a very rich man indeed, one would have to launch a critique of the capitalist system itself and the way it allows some, especially the politically connected, to amass great wealth through ways which are legally permissible even when morally dubious. But if one is going to critique Thaksin on those grounds, one will also have to critique the whole of top tier modern football (a point we shall return to below).

In short, the purely moral arguments against Thaksin's takeover of Manchester City are less clear-cut than they might first appear: simply put, Thaksin's running the City football club in itself seems unlikely to cause or perpetuate serious moral harm; the money he intends to use to run the club appears to be no more or less tainted than that of other very wealthy men; and other former politicians who committed crimes against human rights at least as grave as Thaksin's are commonly permitted to live as free private citizens once leaving office.

Even so, there is still legitimate room for unease about the fact that City fans even need to be debating these questions. Moreover, in addition to the strictly moral arguments, there are three additional prudential concerns about Thaksin which in my view need to be taken very seriously indeed. These include what kind of person Thaksin is, what kind of club supporters want Manchester City to be, and what Thaksin's underlying motivations for buying the club are.

What sort of person is Thaksin Shinawatra? Clearly Thaksin is a highly intelligent, sophisticated person with a sharp mind and with unusual charisma. But he also has been criticized for being duplicitous, for making misleading statements about himself and his rule, and for using positions of public trust for private advantage. And he has been known to take a low view of dissent and an aggressive posture towards manipulating the media.

To the extent any of these negative characterizations of Thaksin prove accurate, they carry troubling consequences for MCFC. Will Thaksin run the club with an iron hand, stifling internal dissent and vainly attempting to control the media? Can he be trusted to fulfill his promises, and to speak accurately to the media? To put the question bluntly, is this guy (behind the initial impressions) at bottom a self-serving manipulator?

What sort of club do Manchester City want to be? Some of the most moving statements about the Thaksin takeover come from long-term supporters who believe that a club owned by a foreign businessman with a dodgy past is a fundamentally different enterprise than a locally-based club based on strong fan identification with the club as an institution, not just a source of entertainment. The concern is particularly poignant in City's case, as the club are famous for having fans who supported the cause through unimaginable lows long after cost-benefit oriented rational persons would have turned their affections and attention elsewhere. The basis of that loyalty was a belief in the idea of City as a special community, its fans a brotherhood in a very tangible sense.

To the extent such impassioned loyalty is valued at all under the new regime, it is feared, it will be as just another commodity to exploit and profit from.

This fear leads us directly to the third, still unanswered concern. *Why exactly is Thaksin buying this team, and what does he want to do with it?* No one pretends that Thaksin is a lifelong City supporter, even if he has evidently done a little bit of research on the club's history. Nor is it clear that Thaksin carries a lifelong passion for football itself.

This leads to the worry that Thaksin has an ulterior motive for buying the club at this time. The most likely such motive is not profit, as with the American owners of Manchester United and Liverpool. Rather, the most likely such motive is building up his personal prestige both in Thailand and throughout Asian. That a Thai could come to own a major sporting institution such as Manchester City will surely strike many Thais as a major point of pride, and a potentially invaluable propaganda boost for Thaksin.

The worry then is this: does Thaksin intend to use his association with City to help leverage a return, directly or indirectly, into Thai politics? Doing so would carry grave risks for the club: the club's fortunes should not be held hostage to, or be intertwined with at all, ongoing controversies in internal Thai politics. (The government has indicated it will seek to extradite Thaksin to stand legal charges if he does not return to Thailand by the end of July, and is also investigating the funds Thaksin is using to acquire City. Some in the Thai media speculate Thaksin is buying City precisely to improve his chances of fighting extradition.)

Put simply, it's one thing if on a whim Thaksin has decided to entertain himself and while away the hours running a Premiership club, quite another if City is going to be used as a pawn in a larger political agenda. If City fans were to make one demand of Thaksin as the moment, it should be not to buy back Shaun Wright-Phillips as soon as possible, but for him to state in no uncertain terms that he has retired from Thai politics, that he will refrain from any extensive involvement in future Thai politics, and that his attention will be fully on City.

That would be good for the club; and, once the junta gives way and new elections are staged, it might be good for Thai democracy as well. Taking Thaksin out of the long-term equation might once again free up space for the grassroots democratic forces that made so much progress in Thailand in the 1990s to re-assert themselves and set the country on a more democratic path than that foreseen by either Thaksin or the coup plotters. In that way, ironically, Manchester City might be doing Thais and Thai democracy a favor,

precisely by taking Thaksin and his problematic vision of a corporate-managed society off their hands.

At the moment, however, Thaksin is a long way away from being able to focus his attentions on City. He has numerous legal charges to answer, and whether he wants to or not will remain a key figure in Thai politics at least until the military junta stages an election and gives up power. Whether he can address all those issues and also effectively oversee the promised rejuvenation of Manchester City is, at the least, open to serious doubt.

As for the longer term, Thaksin on numerous occasions since the coup has said he is retiring from the political life and that it's time for a younger generation to take the helm in Thailand, in one interview even going so far as to thank the coup plotters for giving him an early retirement. But there is widespread skepticism about such statements in Thailand, and City fans would do well to remain suspicious as well.

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So where do we go from here?

Although I can understand the disgust some of the more disillusioned fans feel towards the City board for orchestrating this sale, the proper target for both City supporters and football fans in general is the structure of the modern game itself. Top flight football has moved away from its community roots, and increasingly treats supporters like cash boxes rather than as the spiritual owners of their respective clubs. More specifically, the entrenched financial inequality between the top clubs and the bottom within the Premier League creates every incentive for club boards—believing sincerely they are acting in the best interests of their club—to cut deals with large-pocketed investors wherever they can be found. As the City case shows, the sheer thirst for a chance to at least be competitive at the highest level will lead most (though not all) fans to welcome new ownership and the (illusory?) promise of a money-driven boost up the table.

If there is any silver lining to the City deal, it is that perhaps this will be a key event in persuading those with the power to regulate the game that it's time to put some brakes on runaway commercialization and take the steps needed to restore competitive equity within the sport.

But what can ordinary fans do? Surely the supporters' trust movement provides the most promising mechanism for fans to take ownership into their own hands. But supporters trusts' are far too weak at top flight clubs at the moment to prevent what happened at City (even if they wanted to). Perhaps what is required at this stage is a complementary organization of football fans in general committed to pressuring the FA, the Premier League, and the government to restore a measure of equity.

In the meantime, where does that leave those Manchester City fans (myself included) whose conscience and judgment do not permit them to join in the excitement so many other fans feel at the moment?

If football fans were guided by purely rational principles of morality, the answer might be simple: City fans should go support local neighbors Stockport County (owned by its supporters since 2005), or the grassroots club Maine Road F.C. And if the standard of play on offer at those clubs isn't quite satisfying, one could simply become a Barcelona fan (another supporter controlled club).

But most football fans aren't guided by purely rational principles, of morality or anything else. The City fans that feel the most hurt about the Thaksin takeover are those with particular commitments to this particular club and what they believed it represented. Fans like these just can't give up on the club they've supported for years, decades, lifetimes, or transfer allegiance to another club with fewer moral entanglements.

Some may simply quit following football altogether. While that course of action is understandable, some (many?) fans that might want to quit simply can't—we're too addicted, too interested. Moreover, if the most conscientious fans quit, that worsens prospects for keeping club owners accountable and for trying to reform the sport itself.

So here's what I suggest. I hope that most of those City fans who feel most alienated right now will continue to follow and support the team. (For my part, I for sure will be watching come August, though I can't yet predict how I will when City score a goal compared to how I have felt in the past.)

And I hope those fans will play a leadership role in keeping a close, skeptical eye on Thaksin and what he does with the club. What I have in mind is not griping about Sven's tactics and selection, or even his transfer buys. Rather, what I have in mind is how the club is governed, and how it treats supporters. Will the club keep up and enhance its various community programmes in the city of Manchester? Will it maintain a quirky, family atmosphere? Will the club attempt to gouge supporters at every chance?

In short, will the club continue to be run as an institution rooted in and committed to the city of Manchester itself, and as a club that respects and maintains close contact with its supporters? Or will it be run to support Thaksin's political aims, or other extraneous goals?

Taking up this sort of agenda is rather different than the familiar ritual of judging a manager on results, a board on financial support, and the club as a whole on long-term competitive progress. Rather, it will require close attention to the details of the day-to-day life of the club itself, and as such intensive monitoring of such matters will best be carried out by those who have regular interactions with the club or otherwise are in position to judge what is happening behind the scenes at City. The aim should be to hold the leadership of the club accountable and also to give supporters a genuine voice in the running of the club.

I share the heartache of those City fans that feel like they simply cannot carry on supporting the club under Thaksin. And yet I also share a hope that the City those fans mourn need not die. Thaksin Shinawatra will not be the owner of the club forever; chairmen stay on a bit longer than player and managers, but in the end they go too. Only the fans are permanent, and in a deep moral sense, they are and will remain the true owners of Manchester City.

Consequently, we have a responsibility to protect the club, even (especially) when it's under the ownership of a figure that has invited justifiable skepticism and concern. If all goes swimmingly well, Thaksin might pour his 50 million pounds into the club, Sven Goran Eriksson will take the side into the top 5 or 6, and then Thaksin will lose interest or otherwise find reason to make an exit, with the club unscathed but having made profitable use of Thaksin's investment. In the fantasy scenario, a consortium led by Ricky Hatton and Shaun Goater will then move to buy the club and provide the resources to consolidate the club's improved position.

Unfortunately, reality is unlikely to be so pleasant. Association with Thaksin might turn into a millstone around the club's neck over the long term, especially so long as he is

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seen as an active player in Thai politics. He might change the character of the club in unwelcome ways. He might prove not very good at chairing a football club. He might use the Club not relatively innocuously as a way to buy a bit of sporting glory in “retirement” but as a lever to get his way back into Thai politics. There’s a lot that could go wrong.

And if it does, City’s future as an institution will be in doubt, and all the fan loyalty over the many years will have been in vain. That is an outcome City fans, both those who welcome the coming of Thaksin and those of us who aren’t exactly tickled by the takeover, have a responsibility to help prevent, in any way we can. In the modern Premiership, supporters aren’t going to be allowed to run clubs, and one club after another (Birmingham?!) are likely to find themselves transformed from parochial firms to global enterprises.

If the sport is to maintain any sense of integrity and any sense of responsibility to the fans that make the big contracts and profits possible, fans are going to have to find ways to make their voices heard, louder than ever before. This is most especially true at clubs like Manchester City; the fight to establish a genuine voice for the fans in the modern game, and to hold powerful new chairmen like Thaksin responsible, is a massive challenge, every bit as daunting as the challenge of fulfilling City’s on-field aspirations.

Here’s hoping City fans are up for it, and come to see the Thaksin takeover, however troubling, not as an occasion for abandoning the sport but for fighting to change it.