

We are at a moment when the world can pivot

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The Telegraph [has this to say](#) in an email this morning:

Andy Burnham's first three months in Downing Street have been, by and large, smooth sailing. He has now hit his first proper, full-blown diplomatic crisis. Oddly enough, it has come as a result of bad behaviour in the game he loves: football.

As we report, Abu Dhabi is threatening to pull the plug on billions of pounds of investment in Britain. All because the Premier League has found Manchester City guilty of breaking financial rules.

The problem for the Prime Minister is Manchester City is owned by Sheikh Mansour, who also happens to be the United Arab Emirates' vice-president, while Khaldoon Al Mubarak, the club's chairman, is also chief executive of one of Abu Dhabi's largest wealth funds.

Correspondence obtained by The Telegraph under freedom of information laws shows that Britain has been courting Abu Dhabi for funding, not least for a hi-tech corridor between Oxford and Cambridge that is being vaunted as this country's answer to Silicon Valley.

The email is free to anyone, so I have copied it on that basis, and because this issue matters.

As I noted earlier this week, the issues raised as a consequence of the findings, now confirmed by the Premier League that Manchester City is guilty on all the charges it raised against it, subject to their appeal, are absolutely fundamental to the questions that we need to ask about how this country is governed.

If Manchester City did not play on the level playing field that the rules of the Premier League were intended to create, what we will know is that we are living in a world of decidedly unfree markets where the power of money creates a situation where those who can command it can create control, and so additional rewards for themselves, at cost to everyone else.

If it was additional funding that was inappropriately disclosed, as the Premier League allege, that provided Manchester City with the opportunity to win so many trophies whilst dominating football in this country, and in the most viewed league in the world, and there is no appropriate penalty imposed which reflects the severity of the allegations raised, then we can only abandon the concept of sport, but we can also abandon the concept of competition, markets, and even a free society.

If it transpires that we are living in a new Gilded Age, where those with access to funds can have what they desire untrammelled by the rules that have been created to enable all to participate, then the last hopes that we have for justice will disappear, because we will know there is none.

This might sound melodramatic, but in truth, I think I seriously understate my case.

I note the threats that have been raised, to which the Telegraph refers. They are what people possessed of money beyond any reasonable need, which provides them with power beyond that which any person should reasonably possess, resort to. Threat is the ultimate bargaining chip that money enables, and it is unsurprising to see it might be used.

I have a simple response, but it is the only one that is tenable. What this government, this country and our society, as well as football, must say is:

"Take your threats and your money elsewhere. We do not need them here. We do not want them here. We believe in opportunity, fairness, justice, openness and accountability. We think those are the characteristics on which real wealth is created.

And what is more, we understand that if there is opportunity in this country which requires funding, then our government can create the funds in question to put the resources that can create those outcomes to use because, as Lord Keynes once said, anything we can do, we can afford."

Am I expecting to hear those words from Andy Burnham? I would love to answer that question affirmatively, but I very much doubt I can. I expect deals, backroom discussions, and appeals to be made for moderation to the Premier League, with Manchester City being punished enough to prevent it from winning the title this year, but nothing more.

But if that is what happens, expect consequences. Expect every club that has not achieved the outcomes that they would wish for in the Premier League, and that has been beaten by Manchester City on the way, resulting, most especially, in their relegation and loss of profits, to sue the Premier League as a consequence.

Expect, too, that the crowds will turn away. There is no entertainment when the fear of match-fixing exists.

Expect also the international crowds who spend small fortunes on subscriptions to watch the Premier League to look elsewhere.

Expect, too, that international competitions will review participation by English clubs.

For football, this is not an issue that is resolved by being lenient to Manchester City.

For the wider country, and for the world at large, the same is also true.

We are at a moment when the world can pivot. We can move towards economic, social and sporting justice, or we can undermine it.

The question is, what will Andy Burnham do?