

If this is how they react to taking the knee, please keep politicians out of sport

The rightwingers who condemn the players' anti-racism protest are clearly people who don't even like football



'Boris Johnson feels unable to condemn those people booing England footballers who take the knee before matches.' England's Jack Grealish (in blue), before the friendly against Romania in Middlesbrough.

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“Let’s keep politics out of football this summer,” intoned Nigel Farage, a politician, releasing his second video about football in a 24-hour period. Nigel has reached the top, which is to say that he now operates out of a loft conversion in an undisclosed location. From this nerve centre, he also kept politics out of sport by tweeting multiple times about the decision to suspend a test cricketer for historical tweets. Could fans get Nigel to say the exact opposite for coins on Cameo? It’ll cost you £75 to find out.

Either way, Farage was joined in his Corinthian endeavours by culture war secretary Oliver Dowden, who informed the world that the England and Wales Cricket Board had gone “over the top ... and should think again”. Like Boris Johnson, meanwhile, Oliver seemingly feels unable to condemn those people booing England footballers who take the knee before matches – but he would doubtless feel way more comfortable condemning the very noisy section of England supporters who bellow No Surrender on the fourth line of the national anthem at every single fixture. And yet, I’m going to shock you, Oliver: THEY’RE THE SAME PEOPLE. A small minority, yes, but the same small minority.

If, as rather a lot of people are suggesting, we “need to listen” to the message they’re sending with the booing of the footballers’ anti-racist gesture, then I guess it follows that we “need to listen” to their message of totally incoherent sectarianism. I mean, I know it’s been linked to the BNP and the EDL and the National Front. But if people are doing a thing, then the government’s position seems to be that that thing needs to be listened to and taken on board, as opposed to treated as something a minority of nasty twats are getting up to after several pints.

Speaking of several pints, it is of course no surprise that we’ve also heard on this front from Laurence Fox, the 18th toughest guy at Rada. Fresh off his London mayoral bid for the Reclaim party, which awkwardly saw him fail to reclaim even his deposit, Laurence now announces he will be boycotting all England games in the Euros and hopes the “millionaire woke babies” go out in the first round. To which the only sensible reply is: so what? YOU DON’T EVEN LIKE FOOTBALL. Trust us, we can tell a mile off. Why does anyone even care what Fox thinks about football – or even, after that London result, about politics? It’s like asking Marcus Rashford what he thinks of a mid-afternoon repeat of Lewis.

There are plenty of politicians who are absolutely avid football fans with a long heritage of genuinely caring about the game, as well as the positive and negative aspects of our society that it reflects (yet crucially, does not create). Notably, these are the ones who don’t actually jump on every passing bandwagon.

Instead, you get the likes of Farage or Fox or Johnson. And whenever one of these walks up to what I imagine they’d call the penalty crease to sky some completely basic point about football, all I can think is: SHE DOESN’T EVEN GO HERE. What are you even doing, guys? Why are you here? Without Googling, tell me where the last Euros were hosted. Let’s face it, you couldn’t even tell us which two teams were in the FA Cup final. Come back when you can beat a nine-year-old on the trivia.

The fish-out-of-water format was typified this week by one Martin Daubney, a former Loaded editor who was briefly a Brexit MEP. Martin has been wetting his pants about the whole taking-the-knee thing and, following England’s friendly with Romania on Sunday, rushed to the airwaves to ask for the names of the “two England players” who did not take the knee, because he’d like to shake the hands of “those lads”. Oh dear. We don’t expect Martin to be able to identify Florin Răducioiu and Ianis Hagi on sight – but we do expect him to have glommed on that they are, in fact, Romanian. Without wishing to get too deeply into the arcana of England fandom approximately 10 minutes out from a major tournament, knowing which team is which is pretty much the price of entry to this particular conversation.

On the one hand, it’s hilarious that Martin somehow charlatanned his way through the whole of nineties and noughties lad-mag culture when he appears somewhat clueless about the sport that was supposedly such a massive part of it (which in turn tells you a lot about how plastic lad-mag culture actually was). On the other, could he not just do whatever is the former politician’s equivalent of shutting up and playing?

Likewise with Johnson and Fox. I’ve no idea whether Dowden genuinely likes sport, but if the culture secretary really wants to help he should be delivering on his promise to hold social media companies to account for the torrents of racist abuse

black players receive on these platforms, instead of dicking around trying to pick the England cricket team.

In the meantime, it remains significant that throughout this entire pandemic, the only group any cabinet minister has suggested should be made to take a pay cut are Premier League footballers. Top-flight footballers are the only super-high-earning UK taxpayer you will ever see a politician disparage. Despite the fact that English football is a hugely successful global business that makes millionaires out of extremely talented, young working-class individuals, there is just something about it that makes all this the wrong kind of success. I wonder if we'll ever put our fingers on it.

You can be quite sure the same politicians would listen to pretty much any other passing multimillionaire on any subject on which they cared to opine. A multimillionaire such as Wetherspoon's boss Tim Martin, for instance, is permanently indulged by the government in his every political outpouring. One minute Tim's doing joint appearances with Boris Johnson to push Brexit; the next he's trying to get the government to reverse its EU immigration policy because he's discovered he can't get the staff. What a preposterous character. And yet, it's only sportsmen and women who are continually urged to just shut up and play. You never hear politicians tell Tim Martin to just shut up and get them a pint.

So as another Tory MP wades into the row to draw comparisons between taking the knee and the Nazi salute, we have to ask: please, please, please can we keep politicians out of sport this summer?

Should that prove impossible, then all these politicians supposedly concerned about "the issues" embodied in the debates over racism in various sports need to look much closer to home for the solutions. They, and not any England sport's management, are responsible for the country. Perhaps they could even consider the lessons of one FA executive's reply to Margaret Thatcher in 1985. "What is football doing to keep its hooligans out of society?" ran Thatcher's pious inquiry. "On the contrary," came the reply. "What is society doing to keep its hooligans out of football?"

- *Marina Hyde is a Guardian columnist*