

LOFT AGM 25/4/16 – Chairman’s Report for the period ended 31 May 2015

Although this report technically covers LOFT’s trading year to 31 May 2015, it would be wrong of me to limit myself to that period.

Since our last AGM, the club has had 4 changes of manager and a relegation. As if the constant upheaval wasn’t bad enough, we’ve also seen Leyton Orient’s name dragged through the mud, all of which leads directly to Francesco Becchetti’s door including:

- The embarrassing ‘lock-in’ at a hotel after a televised defeat
- The club’s website being used to publicise statements about his difficulties with the Albanian authorities
- The pitch-side antics (and subsequent fine & stadium ban) after the Portsmouth game on Boxing Day, otherwise known as the Father Ted re-enactment ‘Kicking Hessesenthaler Up The Arse’

In under two years, Leyton Orient has gone from being a well-regarded, well-run football club with a unifying spirit between owner, club, players and fans, to a basket case that’s only ever a short run of poor form away from another set of terminated contracts and another inexplicable action. Amidst all this, we have continued to try and represent members and seek to influence the club regime. We’ve played our part in meetings of the Fans’ Forum, a group of fan representatives including the Supporters Club, ourselves, fanzines and latterly podcasts. We hope that the club will give its Supporter Liaison Officer, Keren Harrison, all the support she needs and doesn’t simply give lip service to her or the role.

We’ve also been regularly calling for Mr Becchetti to engage more with supporters, either with LOFT directly or the Fans’ Forum, and also with shareholders. We’ve sent him another invitation in the last week, to meet with fans to discuss his vision for the club, the finances and the constant upheaval behind the scenes.

The recent posting of the club’s accounts for the 2014/15 trading year are in an Abbreviated Format that is legally-correct for a business the size of the club, but don’t give enough detail to know what the source of the funding is of the club’s massively increased trading loss, or what the increase in ‘creditors due within one year’ – up by £3m to over £6m – is made up of.

LOFT’s activities haven’t solely been limited to matters of club stability. We successfully fought off attempts by Matchroom Sport’s lawyers to persuade the local council that our nomination of the stadium as an Asset of Community Value should be rejected. We set out to the council exactly why they should reject the appeal, and the council found in our favour and that the appeal should be rejected. The Matchroom Stadium is now protected should there be an attempt to sell the stadium quickly without fuss, as the community now has a right to bid.

As well as affiliating to and supporting Supporters Direct and Football Supporters’ Federation campaigns, LOFT has also been a key player in the coalition of 14 supporters’ trusts that united to call for the publication in full of West Ham’s contract to move into the Olympic Stadium. We too had submitted Freedom of Information requests and got nowhere in our attempts to get the terms made public, and it took such a coalition working together to push past all the attempts by the authorities to keep the terms under wraps. The recent publication of the complete contract is a victory for football supporters coming together across the country to change something they know isn’t right. We had hoped after the events of last season that the regime at the club had learned from its mistakes. Club CEO Alessandro Angelieri referred to this at Ian Hendon’s first press conference as manager, talking about starting a new chapter on a blank page. But the latest wave of sackings show

that the lesson still hasn't been learnt: you can't build for the future if you're constantly dismantling and starting again.

The very palpable anger among O's supporters and concern for the club's future led to a lot of discussion about whether and how LOFT should react. As a supporters' trust, we've always avoided discussion about on-pitch matters and the hiring and firing of employees as we can't influence those things. But the way the club is being run has an effect on its future stability, and Trusts exist to promote greater supporter involvement in the wellbeing of their club.

I personally felt it would have been wrong for LOFT to stay silent, or to just put out a carefully-worded statement saying we're concerned at the latest round of instability. We'd have been accused of standing by, doing nothing while the club goes through turmoil, of not standing up for O's fans, and of being weak and unable to act quickly. The overriding opinion from members was that emails are not enough

Becchetti's video statement was for some people enough to call off the protest announced for the Dagenham & Redbridge match, but in reality it was little more than a reaction to our protest being called. It had no real substance to it other than a call to support the team, which of course as fans we share.

I'd like to thank those who supported the protest by not going to your seat until the 7th minute – it might have been fairly small in impact during the match, but the publicity it gained in print, on the radio and TV and the fact it led directly to Becchetti's statement means it was worthwhile. And I accept that not all members supported the protest, but I urge all of you to play your part in making LOFT a success. You the members elect us democratically, we run the society on your behalf and we make the decisions we think are best.

I believe the club now stands at a crossroads and that the coming year is possibly the most important for both the club and LOFT. It's now up to you, the members of LOFT, to help us set out what if anything we do next. Do we continue to try and engage the owner even if he continues to ignore us? Has the point been reached where we declare we have no confidence in him and call for 'regime change'? Do we sit back and let whatever happens, happen? Do we organise more and different protests if the club continues to lurch from one mishap to the next with no sign of stability being achieved?

Ex CEO Matt Porter was hoping to come tonight, but circumstances have made that impossible. He has sent this message instead

"Sorry I can't take up your invitation to be with you tonight.

As we come towards the end of a second successive disappointing season, I think now more than at any time in its history the strength of a Fans Trust is critical for the future of our club.

During my time running Orient I always enjoyed a cordial, two-way line of communication with LOFT and other supporters groups and it is a shame that like so many of the values we deemed important back then that this has dissolved.

I am concerned for the future of Orient under its current ownership.

The backroom appointments made by the new regime have simply not been good enough and the identity of the manager is almost irrelevant given the lack of patience and respect with which they have been systematically treated.

This coupled with the drain of talented staff who have moved on to pastures new after being unable to deal with the untenable working conditions left for them has meant the club's infrastructure has been decimated.

Please don't turn your anger towards them or the players but instead focus on the root of the problem...when the club's ownership changed we were told the new regime believed in the same values we promoted: community, family, stability, professionalism, yet they have practised nothing of the same.

There was huge, albeit misplaced, investment in the playing side, but without strong support for the structure of the club, this will never achieve success.

What needs to happen now is for the Club to understand how you, the lifeblood of Leyton Orient, feel about the situation. You can see what is happening and I'm sure what has emerged in the media in recent weeks makes all the stories you have heard since the start of last season easier to believe...now more than at any time you need to present a united front and take heart from the fan power that has been shown at Charlton, Leeds and elsewhere to show that you will not be brushed aside without a battle."

I have my own thoughts about what LOFT could do next, but I want to hear what you the members think. Over to you...