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Religious Retribution through Football in Scotland

Eva Burns

This paper sheds light upon the conflicting, religious undertones of the two largest football clubs in Scotland, Rangers Football Club and Celtic Football Club, that is fuelled by the fanbases' cultural dependencies within each association. These football clubs, known nationally across Scotland, have an established conflict of ideologies; beliefs that go far behind the goals of the football pitch. The main thrust of this paper, then, displays a compelling focus on the self-identity established through sport, and in this instance, football, while so too heightening the pertinence of the politics within this playing field.

The world of sport is a society that is rapidly growing, due to the increasing influence of social media, extensive competitions, populous fanbases and ultimately, its expansive politicisation. Sport is inextricably political, due to its ability to influence everyday lives, drive social change and provide a greater sense of identity to individuals. The politicisation of sport is most persuasive through football: its support from fans, evidenced by the sport accumulating 5 billion fans worldwide (FIFA, 2020), and its clubs, act as a global force in culture and diplomacy. This article will aim to prove that sport is political by exploring the case of Celtic FC and Rangers FC, football clubs in the West of Scotland. The relationship between Celtic FC and

Rangers FC is undoubtedly complex, fuelled by historical and political influence. Understanding this politicisation of football and the capacity of political input can be seen through the history, practice, and supporters' behaviour of Scotland's two largest football teams: the Celtic Football Club and the Rangers Football Club. Scottish football fans demonstrate the impact of identity politics in football, particularly those of Celtic FC and Rangers FC.

Celtic FC and Rangers FC are the two largest football clubs in Scotland. This fanbase, arguably dominating Scottish sport, has extensive influence over a considerable number of the Scottish public. With over 98,000 combined

season ticket holders between the two clubs and thousands of fans across the city of Glasgow and the rest of the world, their influence is sweeping (Celtic FC, 2023) (Rangers FC, 2023). This article will explore the politicisation of both Celtic FC and Rangers FC, by referring to the historical creation of both clubs, fan behaviour, institutional aspects, violence related to football and government interventions on the issue. These factors will provide support for the argument that sport is, in fact, political.

Football offers a space for people to re-examine their self-identification, highlighting the presence of identity politics in a distinctive way. An individual's self-identity can be defined as how they reflect on their unique socialization (Proshansky, 2016). Self-identity permits individuals to further understand what makes them unique and what qualities they possess, and value, most. Identity politics refers to 'politics in which groups of people having a particular racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity tend to promote their own specific interests or concerns of any larger political group' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The Celtic FC is an inherently political institution, due to its establishment. Celtic Football Club was founded in 1887, as a means to alleviate the poverty that the immigrant Irish population of Glasgow's East End were facing (Celtic FC, 2022). This club's formation was driven by Brother Walfrid, an Irish Catholic Marist, in St Mary's Church Hall in Glasgow (Celtic FC, 2022). At the time of the

Celtic FC founding, the vast majority of Catholics in Scotland derived from Ireland, and in turn, the terminology and definition of Catholic and Irish became interchangeable in the West of Scotland (Bradley, 2007: 83). Celtic FC possesses an ethno-religious make-up, with additional historical socio-political ties to groups of Scottish society – particularly the Irish immigrant population, the Catholic population, and consequently the less wealthy individuals across these groups, permitting Celtic fans to value being a member of the club support as a key part of their self-identity.

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On the other hand, the Rangers FC was founded in 1873, purely as a sporting institution, with no overt political status. However, the Rangers FC were deemed as a Protestant football club, similar to all other clubs at the time in Scotland (Bradley, 2007: 85). From Rangers FC's establishment, the Celtic FC were understood as the 'other' in society. Undoubtedly, this is due to their immigrant background and differences in religious beliefs. In comparison, a strong Protestant nationalist-like identity was forged within Rangers (Bradley, 2007:86). In the context of establishing

the two clubs, it is thus clear Scotland was dominantly ruled by the Protestant church, whereas Catholics were the minority. In this instance, the hierarchical power of Rangers is clear, due to their alignment with the Protestant teachings at the time of creation.

It is important to note that the establishment of the Rangers FC did not take place against a political background, but rather, they were moulded into becoming associated with political foundations:

Rangers at the turn of the century were a Protestant team, but only in the sense that all teams in Scotland were Protestant. As the one team which could be called upon to keep the Catholics in their place it attracted the more anti-Catholic elements in the Scottish population (Murray, 1988: 27).

The divide and rivalry between the Celtic FC and the Rangers FC illustrate how football can be political in an extreme and overt way, through the understanding of fan behaviour and involvement, in addition to the institutional make-up of both clubs. One particular aspect of how the relationship between the two clubs is political can be seen through the faction of the Rangers FC support being Protestant and Unionist in hue - that is fuelled by anti-Catholic hate. The existence of the Celtic FC and the Rangers FC - in Scottish society - has extensively showcased the issue of religious retribution across the nation.

Football fans of Celtic and Rangers alike partake in extremely political behaviour towards one another as supporters, with frequent issues of sectarianism arising, which has become rife within Scottish society. Sectarianism can be understood as ethnic and religious hostility, discrimination, and prejudice (Bradley, 2014: 588). Moreover, sectarianism within Scottish football is deep-rooted through the political and social backdrop of the formation of both the Celtic FC and Rangers FC. In the instance of this rivalry between Celtic and Rangers, George Orwell's understanding of sport allows a further understanding - 'sport is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence' (Orwell, 1945: 2021).

The two clubs have opposing political bases and is seen most persuasively through the link between the Rangers FC and Orangeism in Scotland, against the pro-Ireland stance that Celtic Football Club possess. The Rangers FC fan culture is characterized by Orangeism sentiments, through the repertoire of fan songs and emblems used (Whigham et al., 2021). The songs included are: 'The Sash My Father Wore' and 'Derry's Walls'. These lyrics capture and celebrate the identity of being proud, British, Orangemen and commemorate the Victory of King William III, in the Williamite War in Ireland - a war in which a Catholic was overthrown as King of England, Ireland and Scotland (Bradley, 2004: 253). Undoubtedly, these songs explicitly incite sectarianism

and hatred towards Catholics in Scotland. Moreover, Rangers fans commonly utilise symbols relating to the monarchy, the union flag, and Northern Ireland loyalism – all of which incite anti-Ireland messages – which dispute the basic pillars of the Celtic FC as a religious safe haven. The fan culture has strong links to Orangeism in Scotland, along with the institution of the Rangers FC themselves. The Orange Institution have conducted its annual religious service at Ibrox Stadium – the home of Rangers FC – on numerous occasions, which can attract crowds of up to 15,000 people (Bradley, 2004: 254). It is important to note that anti-Catholicism is central to orange ideology practice in Scotland, therefore a portion of the fans within the Rangers FC, and its establishment, actively partake in and enable anti-Catholic behaviour (Bradley, 2004: 237). A direct example of anti-Catholicism within Rangers FC was in the 1960s when a former Rangers player publicly announced the club's Protestant-only policy. This policy has been held since the club's establishment, which permitted the Rangers FC to only allow players to partake for their team if they were of the Protestant religion. This in turn, also underscored the Rangers FC 'no Catholic policy', which shows the obscene direct discrimination that the Rangers FC endorsed for decades.

The Celtic FC fan culture is characterized by pro-Ireland sentiments, through the repertoire of songs and emblems used. For example, the songs 'Celtic Symphony' and 'Go on Home British Soldiers',



Fan Culture: Rangers FC

both express extreme pro-Ireland sentiments. With lyrics including 'We're not British, we're not Saxon, we're not English. We're Irish and proud we are to be' (Wolfe Tones, 2004), in tandem with pro-Irish Republican Army (IRA) statements throughout – these football songs spearhead the politicisation within the sport. This association with the IRA throughout their songs, emblems and political stance is a key component of the Celtic FC. The IRA were a republican paramilitary organization seeking an establishment to end British rule in Northern Ireland, become a republic, and form the reunification of Ireland (Cowell-Meyers, 2022). From the 1970's the IRA carried out bombings, ambushes and assassinations. As seen through the fan demonstrations and songs, many Celtic FC fans would argue that the IRA were not a terrorist organisation, but was instead a civil rights movement of freedom fighters, who acted to protect their beliefs. Ultimately, the IRA were a terrorist organization through their use of violence to create political change:
...the use of violence for political ends

within democratic societies should always be classified as terrorism and dealt with as such, because a democratic society provides for means to achieve the protection of all citizens' rights through nonviolent and legitimate means (O'Brien, 1983: 2).

Within the framework that states perceive terrorism to be within a democracy, the Irish Republican Army were an unmistakable terrorist organization. This highlights the anti-British stance that Celtic fans have adopted and furthermore shows how political Scottish football can be.

The undisguised presence of sectarianism in Scottish football, and the wider Scottish society, has resulted in Government involvement through political party support and campaigns. The 'Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012' was introduced by the Scottish Parliament, as a means of tackling aggressive behaviour and threats by football fans (The Scottish Parliament, 2018). The Act encompasses offensive behaviour associated with sectarianism, including singing, chanting and social media posts or comments. MSPs in Scotland attempted to tackle the issue of sectarianism through this act, but ultimately failed. The final amendments to the Bill were proposed in 2018, which resulted in the complete repeal of the Act. In its final assessment, it was stated that it had not tackled bigotry and had been widely criticised by law groups and human rights groups. Football

fans have been treated as second-class citizens (The Scottish Parliament, 2018). The relationship between football fans and the Scottish Government is convoluted with emotions regarding the Act, even years after its repeal. The 'Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012' provides evidence to further claim that sport is, in fact, political. The Scottish Government had to intervene as a means to control and deter religiously fuelled hate between the Celtic FC and Rangers FC, as well as the wider football society in the country.

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In Glasgow, the sectarian violence and abuse extends beyond the boundaries of what is understood as 'football hooliganism'. In 1995, a young boy called Mark Scott was horrifically killed due to sectarianism. Mark Scott was wearing a Celtic top - under his zipped jacket - as he walked through a Protestant area of the city on his way home from a Celtic game, when a man picked him out randomly from a group of Celtic supporters and killed him by a knife attack which left Mark with a seven-inch wound in his neck (Scott, 2001). This

horrific incident led to the creation of 'Nil By Mouth', a campaign to combat sectarianism in Scotland. 'Nil By Mouth' has several aims: to inform the public about the problems of sectarianism; promote integration within Scottish society; to encourage respect to all cultures and to resist sectarianism, racism, and bigotry, in any form. Ultimately, this campaign was founded to raise awareness of the damage, violence and death that has resulted from sectarian behaviour in Scotland (Nil By Mouth, 2022). 'Nil By Mouth' has received increasing amounts of support from political parties, both the Celtic FC and Rangers FC, in addition to schools and colleges across Scotland.

In Scottish culture, particularly on the West Coast, being a football fan is a large aspect of an individual's self-identity. Some academics have argued that Scottish football allows supporters to express a sense of Scottishness, through a nationalist or unionist paradigm (Kelly, 2018). A key way that sport can be political is through the power to influence political opinion and participation. Thus, through being a supporter of either the Celtic FC or Rangers FC, it provides a strong sense of identity for thousands of individuals across Scotland and the rest of the world. Moreover, with both teams having contrasted political backdrops, it can ultimately influence their supporters' beliefs.

When referring to how sports can be political – the political affiliation of football clubs themselves provides a key

insight. Historically Celtic FC supporters have been associated with Irishness, Catholicism, and republicanism, as well as being left-wing of the political spectrum (Turner, Begg and McTague, 2022). The Celtic FC is also seen to have had strong ties to the Labour Party and left-wing politics, particularly visible through the previous Chairman of Celtic FC, John Reid. John Reid was a British Labour Party politician, having served multiple cabinet positions under Tony Blair, such as Home Secretary, Secretary of State for Defence, Secretary of State for Scotland and a Labour MP from 1987-2010. Following his roles in government, he took on the role of Chairman of Celtic Football Club in 2007.

John Reid was a Glasgow born, working class, Roman Catholic – his personal beliefs aligned with those of the club, and he provided an overtly political presence within Celtic FC. The Rangers FC and their supporters, on the other hand, have been associated with Protestantism, Orangeism, Conservatism, and unionism. The unionism that is overtly expressed by the Rangers FC and their fans is not focused solely on unionism in Britain, but also Northern Ireland (Turner, Begg and McTague, 2022). It is fair to state that Rangers FC have a clear right-wing agenda. Although Rangers' supporters cannot be wholly viewed to be Conservative Party supporters, it renders clear that there are strong connections between Protestantism, Scottishness, Britishness, Northern Irish politics, and the monarchy, in regard to the core ideologies of Rangers FC and the

Conservative Party (Bradley, 2004: 255).

The sport of football can be political through direct fan involvement through fan/crowd demonstrations – an aspect that is extremely apparent in the case of the Celtic FC and Rangers FC. Fan demonstrations for both teams are usually organised by their relevant ultras group. A football ultras group refers to a portion of the club's fanbase that usually consists of some of the most extreme and passionate supporters. Using Celtic FC, this is seen through the Green Brigade and its counterpart, the Rangers FC, the Union Bears.

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One way that fans of both Celtic and Rangers are seen to display their political opinions through football is through tifos and banners. Tifos are choreographed displays in which fans in a sports stadium raise a large banner together or simultaneously hold up signs that together form a large image. Both teams utilise tifos to project their political stance.

For example, in September 2022, Celtic played Rangers at Parkhead and unveiled a giant tifo that stated 'Today We Dare to Win', alongside an image of a teenager

in a gas mask, holding a petrol bomb from the Battle of Bogside in 1969. The Battle of Bogside occurred during the height of the troubles in Ireland, occurring from 1968-1998, due to longstanding enmities between Catholics and Protestants over British rule. The centuries of conflict ended in 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement was passed, which in turn provided a new power sharing agreement between the UK and Irish governments and the parties of Northern Ireland (UK Government, 1998). The chosen slogan on the tifo was in reference to the Irish civil rights campaigner and politician Bernadette Devlin who once said, 'Yesterday I dared to struggle, today I dare to win' (Devlin, 1970). This display is a fitting example when attempting to understand how football can be political.

These types of displays are not exclusive to Celtic's Green Brigade, with Ranger's Union Bears also partaking in political tifos, showcasing their unionist stance through such displays. One prime example is their tifo display in response to the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. The commemorative display, organised and presented at Ibrox, as shown below, included a union jack and a silhouette of Queen Elizabeth II. It highlights the regard in which a large number of the Rangers support hold the royal family and the monarchy. In this instance, the Rangers fans also sang 'God Save the Queen' after UEFA had banned them to do so. Once again, this subtly provides insight into the important of monarchy within the Rangers support.



Types of fan displays: Celtic Green Brigade (left), and Rangers Union Bears

The political stage of Scottish football is ardent and ever changing, particularly in the case of the Celtic FC and Rangers FC. Sport has the command to be extremely influential, through soft power, political culture, the concept of political identity, and the impact that sport has on the everyday life of individuals. Football clubs have the ability to influence extremely large numbers and have the unique opportunity to have the ability to influence a large percentage of young people, with many young people idolising football players and clubs. Both the Celtic FC and the Rangers FC have the ability to create their own political culture within its fan's support, which can ultimately impact wider society – as seen through the over

presence of sectarianism in Glasgow and the West of Scotland. It is difficult to contest whether football can ever be 'un-political' with the ever-growing impact of social media, the politics of identity and the passionate support that fans have for their team. Although, FIFA states that football clubs 'must not have any political, religious, or personal slogans, statements or images' present at any time (FIFA, 2015), and governing bodies across all sports can implement laws regarding the politicisation of their sport, it is arguably impossible to remove politics all together. The case of the Celtic FC and Rangers FC provide a direct example of how politics can influence and be intertwined in sports today.

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