

## Scoring goals and back in the premier league

**Michael Parkinson** reports that in a Celtic city that legendarily could provoke an argument in an empty room, there are signs that peace has broken out – even with its archival Manchester. The public sector is talking to the private sector. And the government no longer treats the city as a pariah . . .

Liverpool is back in the news again. But this time in the right place – on the back not the front pages of the nation's newspapers. The success of Liverpool Football Club no only emphasises the days when both the team and the city were great in the 60s. It suggests there may be a symbiotic link between the city's and the club's fortunes.

The club went into European and domestic crisis in the second half of the 80s, just as the city did with its Militant challenge to Thatcherism which all ended in tears. The club's current revival may be matched by that of the city.

Even for a place which has turned many corners, there is plenty of evidence that Liverpool is putting its bad old ways behind it and trying to take its place as one of the country's leading European cities.

What is the evidence for the improvement? Partly it is about politics – with a small *p*. In the 80s, poor politics made the city's bad economic situation worse. Now Liverpool is trying to put that right. In a Celtic city that legendarily could provoke an argument in an empty room. There are signs that peace has broken out.

The private sector talks to the public sector. The community at least gets a look-in in some decision-making. The public sector is beginning to address and improve its own performance. Dare one say it. Encouraged by the Regional Development Agency's plans for the Northwest peace has broken out with its archival Manchester. The government no longer treats the city as a pariah.

The City Council is getting its act together. The continuity provided by a substantial majority for the Liberal Democrats and a leader with a good idea of where he wants to lead the city helps. This is matched by a pretty dramatic restructuring of the City Council with a dynamic and aggressive Chief Executive and lots of new faces who frankly acknowledge the Council has not been a good deliverer and needs to do better.

One of the Council's problems in the old days was that good people would not go and work for it. That is rapidly changing – even if pretty high salary levels have helped. Their challenge now is to earn their big salaries make the machine work better and start delivering – just like New Labour really!

There are some welcome signs of progress including one-stop shops and improved ICT systems. The city successfully fought off a threat to put the LEA into receivership and subsequently receive a glowing report from Ofsted for its rapid improvement. And at least the bins get emptied regularly – something Militant couldn't sort out,

In terms of urban regeneration, Liverpool has some of the most interesting initiatives around. LiverpoolVision, one of the first of the three Urban Regeneration Companies, has achieved a consensus that the city centre really does matter and has some pretty ambitious projects to deliver. And development in the centre is pushing along.

Its support for the bid for *City of Culture* for 2008 to mark the 1,000<sup>th</sup> year of its Charter is similar evidence that the city has learnt the need to send the right signals to the external world and compete with other cities.

Liverpool First, the partnership of all major public sector players, is regarded as one of the leading examples of the New Commitment to Regeneration developed by the Local Government Association, which formed the basis for the Government's crucial Local Strategic Partnerships.

Although the European Objective 1 Programme got a bit of a chancing in the early days, now with smarter leadership it has simplified and focused its efforts upon some key priorities and is beginning to deliver things. And the Commission constantly cites its partnership-based approach to local economic development as an example of best practice throughout Europe.

The best news is from Speke Garston, an industrial estate on the edge of the city. Here a combination of an SRB Partnership and the Speke Garston Development Company – founded jointly by the City Council and English Partnerships – has had a major impact upon a once derelict area.

An industrial and a business park are taking shape. The environment is being transformed; 7,000 houses have been transferred from the City Council to a housing company; Jaguar has invested heavily in the old Ford factory and is now producing the rave-reviewed X Type there – turning an basket case into an icon.

Its investment has been complemented by biotechnology and pharmaceutical investment by Medeva, Eli Lilly and Glaxo-Wellcome. Capital Bank has invested substantially and the old art-deco airport has been transformed into a hotel and leisure centre. Hard work by the Partnership and Development Company with the local community and employers means many of the new jobs in the area are going to locals.

There are other signs of progress across the city. Recent surveys indicate that employment growth was underestimated in the city during the 1990s and that during the past five years growth has compared favourably with the regional capital Manchester.

Productivity levels are high and industrial relations are good. Call centres are moving in quickly. The airport, from a pretty low base, is one of the fastest growing in the country and can carry up to three million passengers a year. The port is flourishing and expanding.

Property and rental prices are up. There is competition for development sites. There are even competing bids for the King's Dock, which we could never market when I was a Board member of the Merseyside Development Corporation.

Five new hotels have been built. Tourism flourishes. Its neglected and bankrupted main theatre has been refurbished, re-opened and now does much good work.

New build and conversion of industrial properties for offices, workshops, hops and apartments goes on. Over 6,000 people moved into the city centre during the 90s with more to follow. Urban Splash has made bars, cafes and restaurants flourish in the city.

Service sector work no longer seems a dirty word to Scousers and quality is improving with some beacon local firms setting the standard. At over 10% of its population, university students are having a major impact upon the city's culture and economy. Of course there is still a long way to go and much to be done.

Levels of wealth, with per capita GDP at less than 75% of the European average, are still too low. Unemployment levels are still too high. It is still about twice the national average – its historic relationship. The workforce remains less qualified than many of its competitors. The city needs to help more of its students make the move from consumers to entrepreneurs.

Population is still declining, although at a slower rate. The city is still coming to terms with living in a physical space that was designed for a population that was twice as big as it is now. The north end still lags behind the leafy south end of the city.

The council still needs to improve its performance. The city probably needs fewer partnerships and strategies and more action. But which British city doesn't? Undeniably, Liverpool started later than many of its provincial counterparts in Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham and still lags behind them.

But the process of modernisation has at least begun. With a fair win – and equally important with real commitment by the government to deliver its white paper on urban renaissance – progress should be sustained. And Liverpool will remain happily on the backpages – know not for its strikes but for strikers – and defenders!