

## Reflections of a Sad Kibitzer

“I wouldn’t shop here, Dad” were the words of his son that inspired Archie Norman when he was appointed Chairman of Marks and Spencer in 2015. Last year, in 2023, Norman was awarded the prestigious accolade of *Sunday Times Businessman of the Year*. He had returned M&S to the FTSE 100 and doubled its share price. But it wasn’t always like that.

In the 1980s M&S was the darling of the British high street, renowned for its good quality clothing. Its Board of Directors comprised veterans from other blue chip, traditional British companies. Content with its success, M&S saw no need for change and continued to stock its shelves with good quality, traditional garments. As Directors retired they were replaced by others from similar old-school backgrounds. The maxim that unless a company is changing as fast on the inside as the world is changing on the outside, it is heading for extinction, was quietly ignored.

M&S persisted with its traditional sales approach, even as the retail landscape evolved dramatically with the launch of Next, the start-up of Primark, and the arrival of Amazon. Despite the mounting competition and a noticeable decline in sales, M&S steadfastly rejected any major strategic shifts. The Board was only galvanized into action by a takeover bid from British Home Stores. After uniting to successfully fend off the challenge, it reverted to type. However, as M&S's share price continued to fall and its customer base rapidly declined, the necessity for change became undeniable. In response, M&S turned to Archie Norman, renowned for his remarkable successes in retail, to spearhead a much-needed turnaround.

Norman was dismayed to discover on his appointment at M&S that the staff at its headquarters didn’t seem to appreciate just how far its star had fallen. They were still living in the past. He resolved to slaughter some sacred cows and he did just that, starting in the Boardroom.

In the 1980s the English Bridge Union was enjoying great success. The summer congress in Brighton ran for 10 days and regularly attracted an entry of over 300 tables at each of the pairs and teams weekends. Delighted with its success there seemed no need to make changes, and the EBU didn't.

Personal computers arrived, but these didn't impact bridge. Satellite TV was launched and competed for people's leisure time, but this was aimed at a younger demographic. A warning bell should have rung, yet it didn't, or, if it did, it was quietly ignored. The internet emerged, smartphones appeared, Facebook arrived, but in the world of bridge time stood still. Gradually the average age of bridge players increased, gradually older players passed away, gradually the numbers declined, but the EBU continued to offer the same old fayre. Last year about 50 tables competed in just a single weekend in the summer congress, now relocated to Eastbourne. That's a drop from the 1980s of over 90%.

Try asking university students if they play chess, poker or bridge. Many will say that they know how to play chess or poker, and some will admit to playing regularly. But when it comes to bridge, few have even heard of it. It's not surprising. Christmas is the busiest period for selling games but if you looked for a bridge-themed gift in John Lewis last year you would have been out of luck. Scrabble, yes; chess sets, of course; poker kits, plenty; backgammon boards, a good selection; Mah Jong tiles, one or two; but not a single bridge-related item in sight. No velvet table clothes, no double packs of playing cards with or without scorepads or pens, no bridge books, not even one!

Last year two very experienced bridge organisers, Nicky Bainbridge and David Parry, decided it was time for change. They set out their manifesto, of which more below, and stood for the EBU Board. They were not elected but nevertheless achieved substantial support. In a very conservative organisation, where there hasn't been an open challenge for Chair and Vice-Chair for decades, this represented a big protest by many EBU shareholders. But, just as with M&S during its declining years, the majority of shareholders was not yet ready to abandon the old guard.

By the way, if you're not familiar with the EBU structure, you're not alone. Members like us don't get votes but instead each County Association appoints between one and four EBU shareholders depending on the size of the Association's membership. These shareholders are appointed by the County Committees, who in turn are usually elected by the clubs in those counties. But not the members of those clubs, instead the Committees of those clubs. So if you want to influence decisions you must first join a club, then be elected to that club's Committee, then be elected to the County Committee, then be selected as a shareholder. It's no wonder that people don't bother.

Returning to the *Time for Change* manifesto, here's a synopsis of what Bainbridge and Parry proposed:

1. Restructure the business and concentrate on core activities.
2. Actively engage with all clubs, big and small, EBU affiliated or not.
3. Refresh the tournament structure to reflect what today's players want.
4. Actively promote bridge to new people, especially young people.

Let's flesh this out a little.

The EBU occupies massive premises which it doesn't need. It sells bridge equipment which is not the function of a national organisation. It houses an extensive library which virtually no-one uses. It publishes a magazine in hard copy, which is targeted at a relatively small number of players. And it offers a diary which few people want.

Bainbridge and Parry proposed to move to much smaller premises, stop selling bridge supplies, digitise the library and then sell it to a private collector, increase the frequency of the magazine from quarterly to monthly and publish it online, abandon the diary, and reduce the number of staff. The estimated saving would have been about £400,000 pa. This was how they planned to fund their proposed initiatives.

Actively engaging with all clubs is the biggest immediate challenge. As UMS or Universal Membership Subscription continues to rise, and with the EBU offering scant value to

grassroots players, so more and more clubs decide there is little benefit in maintaining their EBU affiliation. And as fewer and fewer players have to cover the cost of a fixed range of activities, so the UMS inevitably has to increase still further, causing more clubs to vote with their feet and disaffiliate.

Bainbridge and Parry proposed to freeze UMS for three years. In a period of high inflation this would represent a reduction in the real cost. They planned to increase the frequency and widen the range of *English Bridge*, to increase the magazine's appeal to grassroots players. Of paramount importance, they intended to actively engage with the clubs and those running them, usually on a voluntary basis. The clubs are the backbone of the EBU, and Bainbridge and Parry were determined to make them feel part of the bridge family, instead of simply cash cows to pay for highfalutin activities like the Laws and Ethics *Blue Book* and sending teams to play in international championships. In time, the growth in membership and participation levels would offset the lower UMS, thereby laying the groundwork for a sustainable long-term future.

Refreshing the tournament program was an essential plank in their manifesto, not to generate new players, but to provide a better range of competitions suited to the experienced players. Crucially, they intended to separate the elite players from the rest. Top players want to play complex conventions, they want strict rules with stops and alerts. Most people do not want this; instead, they want a pleasant evening's entertainment without the fear that at any moment one of the regulars will shout "director, please" if they think about a bid, are too slow to decide which card to play from dummy, or accidentally revoke. And they don't want to have to try to understand that an opposing two spades shows five clubs and might be weak or might be strong on one round, whilst against their next opponents it shows a minor two-suiter with longer diamonds and is forcing to game. Etc, etc - you get the drift.

So there needs to be a range of tournaments where the experienced players can practise their bidding gadgets, from which lesser mortals are positively excluded even if they want to participate. This approach creates a far better environment for the top players. However, Bainbridge and Parry's proposal was not solely to improve the situation for the regular

players. Indeed, this is only a by-product of their big plan. The primary reason is to create an environment in the remaining tournaments where complex conventions are not permitted, effectively excluding most hardcore players whether by practice or regulation. These tournaments are for the vast numbers of ordinary players.

Throughout their history, bridge tournaments have been mixed ability affairs. As the game evolves and becomes increasingly complex at the higher levels, this creates a barrier to entry for newcomers. This must change if bridge is to survive, let alone thrive.

However, these three objectives - business restructuring, engagement with the many grassroots clubs, and tournament reform – represent the low-hanging fruit. To achieve them will require hard work and the right leadership, but they are all within easy reach. It is the final goal that must be achieved if bridge is to win through – recruiting young players. This will not be easy and will require vision, persistence and determination.

To engage today's youth, we must deploy a fleet of digital platforms, captained by influencers rich in charisma, and navigate them through cyberspace to the distant realms of *TikTok* and *Instagram*, worlds inhabited by the aliens known as Gen Z. Then, having made contact, we have to offer them what they want if we are to attract them to our wonderful game. As every successful businessman or woman will tell you, success only ever comes from selling the customer what they want, not what you want the customer to buy. This means greatly simplifying the rules at entry level and providing a friendly and welcoming *No Fear* environment where young people can socialise with their peers. In time the keen ones will make the transition to the higher levels.

The current old-school, group-thinking EBU Board simply doesn't see it. Or, as Albert Einstein put it: *Few people are able to express opinions that dissent from the prejudices of their social group. The majority are even incapable of forming such opinions at all.*

Only a change in leadership will provide the radical changes in organisation which are essential for bridge to have a future. And change and radical are not words that the older people who run bridge like to contemplate. Even if the disgruntled retired Colonels of Tunbridge Wells decide they want change, the corporate structure of the EBU makes it very difficult to achieve. As the man to whom we owe it all, Ely Culbertson, said: *The nature of all social organisms, from private club to world government, is such that those in control inevitably tend toward the formation of cliques, so as to perpetuate their own power and privileges.*

If you do not want change, do nothing. But if you want change, seek out your club and county committee members and lobby them to vote for change.