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Burnham Calls for Review of Ban on Drinking in Soccer Stands

Police leaders said changing the 1985 law without full consultation could endanger match-day safety.

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A dispute over alcohol rules at soccer stadiums in England and Wales has intensified after Prime Minister Andy Burnham said the long-standing ban on drinking in the stands during men’s matches should be reconsidered, while police leaders warned that changing the law without full consultation would put safety at risk.

The debate centers on the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol) Act 1985, which bars supporters in the top five tiers of English men’s soccer from drinking alcohol within sight of the pitch. The measure was introduced during the 1980s, when fears about

hooliganism and crowd disorder were at their height. Burnham said the rule now unfairly singles out soccer supporters because fans at other sports, including rugby league, can drink in their seats.

“I don’t think it’s fair for football fans to be singled out in that way,” Burnham said, according to ITV News. He said the legislation came from “an era where football was very different” and argued there is a case for ending what he called discrimination against soccer fans. He also suggested that any change could be introduced first on a trial basis rather than all at once.

Burnham has raised the issue before. ITV reported that before entering Downing Street in July, he questioned why rugby league supporters at Everton’s Hill Dickinson Stadium were allowed to drink while watching a match from seats where Everton fans would not be permitted to do the same during a home game.

The Football Supporters’ Association quickly backed Burnham’s position and said recent experience in the women’s game shows the policy can be changed without causing problems. The group said Women’s Super League and Women’s Super League 2 pilot schemes allowing alcohol in the stands had worked, and that many clubs support a broader trial. FSA chair Tom Greatrex said the organization has long argued that it is wrong to criminalize soccer supporters for drinking a pint while watching a match.

The argument then widened into a dispute over the legacy of Hillsborough, the 1989 disaster in which 97 Liverpool fans were killed. In a statement urging caution, the UK Football Policing Unit said legislative changes were made after “a number of football-related tragedies” and after the Taylor Report “for good reason.” The unit added that the sport is now in its longest period without a major football-related disaster.

That language drew an immediate rebuke from the supporters’ association, which accused the policing unit of wrongly linking Hillsborough to the current drinking debate. In a post on X cited by ITV, the FSA said the disaster “was not caused by alcohol” and said comments that brought Hillsborough into the argument had to be corrected. The group pointed to official findings that Liverpool supporters were unlawfully killed and that serious failures by police and ambulance services contributed to the deaths.

Police leaders have not rejected discussion outright, but they have warned strongly against moving too quickly. A spokesperson for the UK Football Policing Unit said it would welcome a meeting with Burnham to explain the operational and safety issues that, in its view, any legal change would create. The spokesperson said other sports do not experience the same level of violence and criminal behavior from supporters that soccer does, even if those incidents involve only a minority of fans. Alcohol, the unit said, often plays a significant part in violent and disorderly behavior around matches.

For that reason, the unit said, it would be “irresponsible” to encourage greater alcohol consumption during games. It also said it would be “incredibly rash” to make fundamental changes to the law without a full review of the evidence and meaningful consultation with police officers and other practitioners who work on match-day safety.

The clash reflects a long-running tension in English soccer between efforts to modernize the fan experience and concerns about public order. Supporters’ groups and some clubs argue that the current restrictions are outdated and inconsistent with the treatment of spectators in rugby, cricket, horse racing and other sports. Police and safety officials say soccer remains different because of the scale of crowds, the intensity of rivalries and the history of disorder linked to alcohol.

Any shift in the law would have effects well beyond the political argument. A trial or broader rule change could alter how clubs, stadium operators and concession companies handle alcohol sales on match days. It could affect licensing conditions, staffing levels, security procedures and responsible-service requirements for beer, wine and spirits in concourse and seating areas. For hospitality and drinks businesses that operate inside stadiums, that could create new sales opportunities, but also new compliance and crowd-management demands if the rules are relaxed.

For now, no formal change has been announced. Burnham has made clear that he wants the issue revisited, and the supporters’ association is pressing the case that the current rules are unfair and out of date. Police leaders, however, are signaling that any attempt to scrap the ban will face close scrutiny from those responsible for policing and safety at matches across England and Wales.