

Chapter 2

SECESSIONISM: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Causes of Secessionism

Two opposing trends are apparent in global politics operating simultaneously and with equal vigour. The integrating trend of economic globalisation of the nation states at the macro level and the disintegrating trend of states into sub state groupings on the grounds of ethnicity, language, culture etc at the micro level. One phenomenon, on the one hand, is attempting to eliminate boundaries, generating a feeling that nation-states and their demarcations have lost relevance. If the contemporary world were to be viewed from the former perspective, it would appear to be moving towards becoming a global village. The latter phenomenon in contrast makes it seem that human beings are essentially most secure in their ethnic groups. Conforming to the latter trend, what is of importance for the individual is not existing as universal global citizen but to preserve the distinct identity of their group.

Louis L Synder commenting on the relevance of nationalism, the sentiment which builds up nation-states as a force to reckon with, even in the contemporary times writes,

“Those who advocate a more liveable planet see nationalism as a historically artificial phenomenon that has outlived its usefulness and must be discarded in the advance of civilization...They see national sovereignty as the foundation stone of our contemporary international system, an outgrowth of the now discredited system of the divine right of kings. No longer can permanent security, it is said, be provided by alignment and rectification of frontiers. Meticulously drawn national boundaries are futile. Anthems, flags and slogans – the so-called tools

of nationalism are decrepit and outworn... One World is a goal in sight... Unfortunately this rosy picture of the international community has many flaws. Far from retreating nationalism has become an even more powerful a historical force... There are many paradoxes associated with this historicism".¹

Within these two parameters of opposing trends; an integrated identity of a global citizen and distinct identity of a group falls the concept of secessionism. Secessionism is defined in the Oxford Dictionary, as formal withdrawal from membership of some body or a federation of states². A succinct definition as elaborated in the Oxford Companion to Politics on the World by J Krieger states:

"Secession entails the breaking of connection between an administrative unit and the state to which it is joined...represents a radical effort on the part of societal interests to achieve self-determination transforming the political structure of the existing state relationship in the process".³

The concept of secessionism has come under bolder focus and has drawn the attention of political scientists after the end of Cold War. The sanctity of several concepts fell under academic scrutiny after the collapse of Eastern Europe and Soviet Union between 1990 and 1998.as the growth of member nation states in the international community has grown from 160 to 185, inclusion of 25 new member states to the fraternity of nations. With this happening the concept of nation, state, nationalism have all come under academic scrutiny."⁴

¹ Louis L. Synder, *Global Mini-Nationalism* (London: Greenwood Press, 1982), p.1.

² *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

³ J. Krieger, *Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (New York,Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 878-82.

⁴ Basic Facts about the U.N., Department of Public Information, New York, 1998, p.6.

The concept of state and nation has witnessed several changes in its definition and redefinition in history. Traditionally, international society was composed of dynastic states. Members of international society were sovereign states and not their population. This concept was challenged by the American and the French Revolution and after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the old real estate system was restored in Europe. This system managed to survive until the First World War (1919). The collapse of the Hapsburg, Hohenzollern, Romanov and Ottoman empires dealt a mortal blow to the dynastic principle after the First World War. The principle on which the World Order came to be patterned after the war was popular sovereignty and self-determination. It was no longer possible to defend the state as a private possession of particular individuals or families, now the ownership of state had to be transferred to people by a democratic test of opinion as collective selves, whose right to self-determination must be reorganized as the basis of the new political order⁵.

A major problem which arises in these circumstances is when it becomes necessary to decide which national claims to Statehood should be recognized¹. Plebiscite appeared as a Wilsonian solution in 1956 but expressing his concern on exercising this option W.I Jennings stated “ on the surface it seemed reasonable: let the people decide. It was in practice ridiculous because the people cannot decide until someone decides who are the people”⁶. In the absence of a universally accepted and uncontentious definition of a nation for it could mean an association, an ethnic

⁵ James Mayall, “Sovereignty, Nationalism and Self Determination”, Robert Jackson, ed., *Sovereignty at the Millennium* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1999).

⁶ W.I. Jennings, *The Approach to Self-Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p.56.

conglomeration, it becomes difficult to layout parameters for creating a new state and a defined area. Michael Nicholson, professor in the University of Sussex in international relations while writing on the power of the feeling of nationalism wrote:

“ The nation state taken strictly would mean a state where the overwhelming majority of the members were one nation. Unfortunately there are comparatively few states where this is true. Most states have several nations by almost any definition of nation. A few small countries like Iceland are nation states in the strict sense but they are unusual.... At the Versailles Conference shortly after the First World War, it was believed, particularly by President Wilson of the United States, that one of the major causes of war was that nations did not have their own states.. Once the world was divided into nation states, it was believed that a major cause of war would be removed. Nationalism was held to be a very dominant form of identification. There was a practical problem in the creation of nation state rather than a conceptual one. The different nations tended to occupy the same bits of land and be mixed up. Former Yugoslavia is a case in point... Wherever one looks there is a minority If one tries to make a partition such that the minority in the larger state becomes a majority in some smaller state or area, one finds that one has just created a new minority (Ireland and Northern Ireland are good cases on point) The task of creating a world of nation states seems almost impossible.. This has not stopped nationalism being a very powerful force in the modern world. Human beings seem to have a very powerful impulse to identify with a group and then invest that group with some moral standing which makes defence of the allegiance of a fundamental goal of life.”⁷

Nationalism is a potent force to reckon with and so the UN Charter has listed self-determination as one amongst the fundamental rights, and has even mentioned it even in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁸ but drawing and redrawing

⁷ Michael Nicholson, *International Relations: A Concise Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 18 –20.

⁸ Basic Facts about the United Nations, UN Publication, Public Information Department, New York, 1998 p.3 and 192.