



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

The Nest of Secession

The resurgence of the State of Jefferson movement in northern California, where residents of 20 rural counties have forwarded declarations expressing their desire to secede from the rest of the state, raises some interesting questions for those of us in the hybrid borderlands of Central Oregon.

The sentiment driving secessionist movements, from Scotland to Quebec, from Puerto Rico to eastern Oregon, are largely centered on perceptions of disenfranchisement.

Closer to home, there are secessionist movements afoot, and they share with the State of Jefferson proponents another belief, difficult to discredit, that an

unbridgeable ideological chasm exists between the interests of urban and rural voters.

Deschutes County falls squarely inside the boundaries of a new Idaho, as drawn by Ken Parsons, a retired farmer from La Grande, who has proposed joining large swaths of eastern Washington and Oregon with Idaho, in an effort to balance the interests of rural constituencies.

What chance, the mostly rural supporters of secession ask, do they have in state legislatures overwhelmingly dominated by the urban population centers? They have no voice in tax or social services policy, the utilization of natural resources, and no bill, they argue, no matter how integral to their communities, will ever survive the odds of passage.

There is truth in that claim, as many of these communities are dependent on industries that instantly raise the urban hackles and bring out the fangs: mining, logging, and ranching.

Some of this same sentiment underwrites the Malheur Refuge takeover, an activity whose sole, sad, accomplishment to date has been to get a man killed and to poison the well of

cooperation and civil discourse on a broad range of subjects for years to come.

The response to secessionist concerns, when there is one, is often flippant. Dr. Jeffrey Dense, of Eastern Oregon University, is quoted in the *Eastern Oregonian* dismissing the notion out of hand: "...disgruntled citizens would be better off to get involved in politics, instead of complaining about the state of affairs."

That's a King George response if I've ever heard one, and precisely the kind of arrogance, usually delivered by politicians and academics, that keeps driving rural folks toward thoughts of divorce from the centralized state and the tone-deaf political classes in Salem and Sacramento.

In California, opponents rapidly and vigorously pushed the State of Jefferson discussion into the realm of absurdity, advocating tongue-in-cheek for six separate Californias.

No matter, the proponents are driving on, and in some cases receiving the full, if muted, backing of local governments who feel powerless.

When covered by urban-based journalists, the issue of secession is often handled with barely concealed

mockery. Nothing is as off-putting to the urban journalist set as grown men and women wearing camouflage jackets, confessing strongly held religious beliefs, carrying a pocket copy of the Constitution, or expressing an appreciation for firearms.

And so the coverage is often tainted by confirmation bias: these country folk must be nuts, therefore I will find nutty things about them to report.

To be fair: most of the considered arguments against secession are rooted firmly in economic questions. How does it benefit large, poor counties to join together to form a large, poor state? That's the most legitimate argument against secession, and the principle reason the movements have mostly failed.

It's an open secret that many native Oregonians, east of the Cascades, view their neighbors from the "Wet Side" with varying degrees of contempt, and resent the urban influence on their politics and views, particularly when they haul up stakes, replant themselves in Central Oregon, and fail to cast off the old mindset.

Californians are often held in particular disregard for the same reason. Refugees are almost always

looked at sideways, and Central Oregon is filling up with them.

So where would that leave us, should a serious secessionist movement gain steam? Would the sentiment take root? Deschutes County is a broiling milieu of displaced urbanites, refugees from failed states, inveterate ranchers and loggers, the patchouli-doused and the mud-covered. To say that Deschutes County, or Sisters itself, is anything less than a wildly eclectic frontier town would be nothing short of libel.

Full disclosure: I was raised in the State of Jefferson, in a town smaller than Sisters by half, and watched dolefully as it has been pushed into an unrecoverable tailspin by a state government that is largely blind to its existence, to say nothing of its needs. But I've lived in the cities too, mined them for all of their worth, and am fully aware that there is much good to be found in them.

But I'd probably vote to secede, if it ever came to that. If only because I like a good fight, and the notion of a government that listens would be refreshing.

There. I've given the nest a good kick. Let's hear from the hornets.

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