



Will St. Kitts and Nevis break up?

Parties switch positions as the island of Nevis attempts to secede for a second time.

BY TERRY NISBETT

On the tiny Caribbean island of Nevis, a move to secede from the world's smallest federation has returned, led once again by Nevis Premier Vance Amory.

In 1998, Nevis tried for the first time to secede from the federation of St. Kitts and Nevis. Under their federal constitution, they could do so if they won two-thirds of the vote in a referendum in Nevis (*see Federations, Vol. 3 No. 2*). When Amory proposed secession then, many thought it was simply political rhetoric. But the proposal became a referendum even while people were wondering if he was serious. In that referendum, the secessionists won 61.7 per cent, just failing to reach the necessary two-thirds majority.

In 2003, when Premier Amory declared for a second time that he wanted to make Nevis an independent nation, people took him seriously. On July 17, 2003, the secession bill was given first reading in the Nevis Island Assembly. On August 12, Premier Amory tabled the proposals for a constitution for Nevis, with explanations, as mandated by the present constitution of the federation.

A constitution for Nevis?

When six months had passed and there was no debate on the secession bill, the progress towards secession seemed to have halted. On both islands there was speculation that the Concerned Citizens

Movement of Premier Amory had experienced a change of heart. The Premier extinguished all doubts on April 7, 2004. He tabled an amended draft constitution in the Assembly. Premier Amory explained that the initial set of constitutional proposals had not included the steps to be taken after the referendum, to secure the independence of Nevis. He reaffirmed his position on secession and once more declared his intention to create an independent Nevis.

The roots of the secession movement lie in a perception that St. Kitts gets greater financial benefits out of federation

than does Nevis.

Nevisians used to complain about poor roads, inadequate water and the electricity supply. This time the people of Nevis are angry about how their taxes are spent, where grants go, and who gets aid assistance.

"Nevis generates a substantial portion of the revenue but we get nothing," complains Ted Hobson, a prominent Nevisian lawyer who supports independence for Nevis. There is

also a feeling of inequality, ironically because of the fact that Nevis has a local legislature while St. Kitts does not – the legislature of the federation deals with local matters on the island of St. Kitts. (Citizens of St. Kitts and Nevis now face the same situation as the United Kingdom, which has regional legislatures for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but none for England.)

"The present federal structure does not allow the Nevis electorate any influence in the direction and policy of the State," says Ted Hobson. Although Nevis elects members to the federal parliament, almost all are from a Nevis-based party. They sit on the opposition benches and are likely to sit there after every election until one of the political parties in St. Kitts needs a coalition partner to form a government.

Interestingly however, the position of some other political parties has changed. The St. Kitts Nevis Labour Party, which forms the federal government, has switched its position. The Labour Party has abandoned its former wait-and-see position for one of warning about the unpopularity of Nevis secession in the rest of the world. However, the Labour Party softened its anti-secession stance by saying that they will not stand in the way of Nevis' obtaining secession. At a special Round Table meeting of stakeholders in January, Prime Minister Douglas first showed signs that



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he was taking a more federalist stance. He delivered the message that in all his discussions, the Commonwealth, the United Nations, the Summit of the Americas, the Caribbean Community and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States were all against the break-up of the federation. This would be a clear shift from the Labour Party's position as outlined in the Green Paper of 1982 which proposed two separate independent states with cooperation defined by a Treaty of Friendship.

The Nevis Reformation Party, a party that had been a proponent of secession, also switched sides. Today the Nevis Reformation Party is in favour of a reformed federation. The party advocates constitutional reform along the lines of the recommendations of the Constitutional Commission of December 1997, popularly known as the Phillips Commission (see *interview with Sir Fred Phillips in Federations Vol. 3 No. 4*). They propose that the future relationship should be defined by a legislature for St. Kitts as well as a legislature for Nevis, and a federal government headed by a President responsible for certain defined matters.

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Local and world opinion

Such a historical change of position may signal an evolving maturity of the parties and an acknowledgement of the realities of globalization and the economic vulnerability of small states. After the last call for secession, emotion prevailed over reason. This time there have been many opportunities for discussion both formally and informally, in the press and on the street corners. Many persons and groups have declared a preference for unity. Some do not wish for secession to happen in their lifetime while others think the solution would be for the governments in both islands to sit down and solve the problems. Others espouse bringing in a mediator to listen to the two sides.

The local Chamber of Industry and Commerce says that it is "not in favour of secession", but instead supports the recommendations of "separate governments for St. Kitts and Nevis with limited functions of Government being legislated and administered by an agreed central body." This seems to be the most consistent view of many groups and individuals.

The dialogue on secession and constitutional reform has been wide ranging but it remains just that at the moment – dialogue. If a solution is to be found, it will require a spirit of compromise on both sides and a leap of faith toward a new constitutional structure that both sides can accept. (6)