



A Progressive for Secession
Guest: Kirkpatrick Sale
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Kirkpatrick Sale is the author of Human Scale, among many other books.

WOODS: You are like my friend Bill Kauffman. I actually wonder: do you know Bill Kauffman?

SALE: Oh, yes, I do. I like him. I like him a lot.

WOODS: You guys are in a way two of a kind. You remind me of each other. You have a similar outlook on a lot of different questions, and you're both hard to categorize in the sense of the American political system. The American political system wants to categorize people according to whether they support Hillary Clinton or Mitt Romney, and you and Bill have helped to show the world that there are third, and fourth, and fifth, and sixth categories that you might think about putting people in.

SALE: Let me put it this way. People who believe in a flat earth believe there's a Left over there and a Right over there, and that's how they categorize everybody, but the people who know that there's a round earth understand that up at the top there are the authoritarians, whether they be the Stalinists on the Left or the Nazis on the Right, and then down at the bottom are the anti-authoritarian, libertarians, anarchists—all of the freedom-loving people together on the bottom. So there is no Left and Right, basically. It's essentially freedom or no freedom, authority or no authority.

WOODS: I bet, though, in the 1960s when you became, I suppose, politically active, did you think of it that way? Or did you think of yourself as being resolutely on the Left?

SALE: Well, I didn't think about it either way, but that's where I got put, and my activism in the 1960s was motivated by the idea of participatory democracy, which is one of SDS's slogans that really touched me, and they believe, at least the early SDSs, they believed in anti-authoritarianism and power to the people. And you called that Left, I guess, at the time, but to me it's still the same part of this anti-authoritarian political area where I work.

WOODS: And yet in recent years, a whole bunch of recent years, you have written and talked an awful lot about the idea of secession, which for whatever reason is an idea that's anathema

to a great many people who call themselves progressives. And yet you wrote a book—well, I was going to say a long time ago; I'll just say a number of years ago—called *Human Scale*, and it seems to me that the progressives are willing to go with you if it comes to the scale of your flower garden or the scale of the local business firm. But when it comes to the scale of the political order under which you live, to question that becomes a heresy.

SALE: Indeed it does, and then those people, those progressives, have never met a government they didn't like, never met a large government that they didn't like, and obviously that is the crisis they have brought on, the crisis that we face today. You may have seen that a Reuters poll a couple of weeks ago found that 24% of Americans believe that secession is not only legal, but they would participate in it in their state.

WOODS: I did see that.

SALE: That's 24%, and people sort of skip over that as being a minority, but it's 80 million people in this country—80 million people. That's more than voted for the Democrats the last time out. That's a significant number of people who believe in secession and who understand that this big government is simply failing us in every way. And it doesn't take a moment's thought to understand that the federal government is too big. It's too intrusive. The NSA, the IRS, Obamacare, TSA, you name it. And everybody knows this. This is not something that's hidden. It's not in the back pages. And the inability of this huge government to operate efficiently is also daily apparent; the Secret Service, the Veterans Administration, ISIS, and now Ebola, which they aren't handling right. And we have Benghazi, and the national debt, inability to do anything about climate change. All of this failure of the federal government is obvious, and yet, it has led only a quarter of the public to the obvious conclusion that the only thing that we can do is secede from this federal government. Leave the sinking Titanic.

WOODS: I like your point that 24% is in raw numbers quite a few people, but I would also say it's impressive given that the idea of secession is systematically demonized everywhere Americans look. Certainly in their educational system, they are taught that the United States is one and indivisible, and this is a holy, sacred thing, and only some perverse idiot would contemplate living on a smaller scale. They are taught to demonize secession really all over the world except, of course, when it serves the U.S government's strategic interests. But otherwise the prejudice is always against secession. And yet all secession means is that you might have some slightly greater chance of influencing the society in which you live. I don't even understand the fear. The fear can't possibly be that secession is going to mean Jim Crow laws, because then why are they against Vermont secession, when there isn't a sizable enough black population for that even to be an issue?

SALE: They are against secession in a knee-jerk, patriotic way that has never really been examined by most of these people. They declare it illegal without having any grounds for that—unconstitutional, and it does not appear in the Constitution, and among those crazy people who thought that living on a smaller scale might be better, might have more democracy, were

the founding fathers, including Madison and Jefferson, of course. That idea was inherent in the founding of this nation because, after all, we had just seceded from Great Britain, something that Scotland failed to do, but we did it, and we did it with force, and we did it successfully. So that was something in the minds of all these people who created this country.

WOODS: You have made quite a diverse array of friends over the years, holding the opinions that you do, and I myself, my view has always been I am so glad to collaborate with anybody—people don't have to be clones of me, but if they get the big picture on questions like the ones you are raising, I am so delighted to work with them. I have a friend named Murray Polner who has been involved in Jewish peace activism for a long time, and he very much is on the Left, but we did a very good antiwar anthology together. We took some of the best antiwar writing in U.S. history, and we made it into a book, and it was great. But by and large I find that when I extend a hand out to the Left, they try to chop it off.

When I had Ralph Nader on the show, he agreed that it seems to him unfortunately true that the libertarians are very eager to work with anybody, including people on the left, but there isn't as much of a reciprocation. Do you have any thought about why that might be? Or is that your experience?

SALE: Well, I think the reaction is they don't really want to increase liberty and individual choice in this country because that's what they fear. They want to have a certain national consensus that is enforced nationwide. And there are times when people on the Left will say that it's gone too far, but for the most part they are happy with a large government that tells people what to do, and the people who want to diminish that they don't consider friends. Now, Ralph Nader is somebody who I would feel is in our camp, basically. He has to make compromises doing what he does, but he basically gets the same things that we do. And the Left and Right don't matter. The fact is, his new book is arguing that there shouldn't be Left and Right, and that the people who want smaller government, efficient government, should work together for that. Of course, he still wants people to do it in national politics, which is crazy, but I will get him around to the secessionist camp.

WOODS: (laughs) We'll give you a little time on that. So in the '60s you were interested in the idea of participatory democracy, and today you are talking an awful lot about secession. Do you feel like you've changed? Or do you feel like you've pretty much stayed the same throughout your career?

SALE: That's the same thing. It's the same thing. I thought participatory democracy would be difficult to obtain, but by 1980 when I wrote *Human Scale*, I realized that it couldn't happen on anything like the scale that we are at—we were at then and are worse today, and that it had to happen at a very local, regional level. And I have always believed that. And then recently, in the last decade or so, I came to the conclusion that the way to make that practical would be secession. That is to say, we're not calling for the great overhaul of everybody's ideas about the economy or democracy or anything. Yet in fact, all that secession does is have government at a

different level, and I thought that was not only practical, but indeed, the only way we could have peaceful change in this country.

Of course, it's a conclusion that a lot of people around the world have come to. That's what's happened in the last 50, 60 years, whatever. The United Nations started out with 15 nations, and there are now 193 in the United Nations, and then there are some others like Taiwan and the Vatican that are not in the United Nations, but are nations nonetheless, so let's say you started out with 50 and now 200, and the large way that happened was through secession. So it's a very practical solution. It can be peaceful, and I think in this day and age it almost certainly would be peaceful. That is to say, if Vermont wanted to secede and voted overwhelmingly for it, I don't see how Obama could send in the Marines, particularly if Vermont went on a global scale and appealed to world public opinion, especially to those states that have been created by secession from Norway to Belarus, the Czech Republic—all those nations. And I think they would put the world's eye on Vermont and forbid any bombing of Montpelier.

WOODS: I think Vermont should appeal to all the countries that have been invaded by the U.S., and say, now look, you know what it feels like. Don't let this happen to us.

You have written for publications like *The Nation* and *Mother Jones* over the years. Let me anticipate the kind of objection that they might have to secession, and it's not a stupid objection. It does need to be answered. They would pull out episodes from American history that are indeed disturbing episodes. They would pull out the Jim Crow example, and they would say that for all the criticism you may have of the federal government, it can keep an eye on some of these outrages and enormities that take place on the local level. And if these entities secede, well, then now how are going to establish justice in those places? How do you answer that?

SALE: I don't think it's the business of any government to go around establishing justice for other people. In fact, defining what justice is and then forcing it down their throats, that's exactly what's wrong. The cost of forcing federal ideas on people is very high. It's true that a civil rights revolution did take place in the '60s forced upon much of the South, and with some measure of success, but it has been essentially a failure, and if you want to know the measure of that failure, you simply have to look at the schools, the public schools of America, which are not integrated, and I think never will be as long federal law is the way that people seek integration. The schools are less integrated now than they were. And it is a national disgrace. It is true that some gains have been made for blacks, but as long as you can point to the prison system of this land with its quite obvious racial injustice, you can't say that we have gotten very far in terms of placing blacks as a normal part of a social and political system. We haven't got there, and the reason is that it wasn't done in the right way. It is, I do believe, a right cause because it advances liberty for a great many people. It is the right cause, but it wasn't done in the right way.

WOODS: So you're saying if there had been some way other than through the use of force to accomplish these ends, they would have been accomplished in a more systematic and lasting and natural way as opposed to an artificial way in which people are forced together, and then they wind up like oil and water separating again.

SALE: You can't force people without getting their back up and their resistance. If that's the way people are, that's the way people should be, resisting somebody coming in and telling them what to do. That's exactly what's wrong with government, and it's exactly why we have to try to diminish that in any way we can. I think that there would be other ways to have accomplished this in the '60s. For example, if you take just education, what you would want to do for education is to try to see that neighborhoods are not all black. Try to increase the integration of neighborhoods. Develop policies that would encourage people as they have done, in fact, all over in recent years, encourage people to move into the very good housing stock where blacks lived before. It's called gentrification, but what it succeeds in doing is creating integrated communities, and therefore, the local school will perforce be integrated automatically, and that would be the way to integrate society into integrated schools. But we didn't choose that way, and so there are more black segregated schools now than there ever were.

WOODS: Is your view on secession that secession is always morally justified, and that any seceding state ought to be supported, or are there conditions on it?

SALE: Yes, absolutely, secession is good. It does not guarantee that what you will get is smaller units that promote liberty and prosperity. You saw this piece by Ron Paul recently, of course.

WOODS: Yes.

SALE: In which he argued that secession is not only happening around the world, but it's in the great American tradition from the revolution onward, and people who are against big government ought to support it, and that it brings liberty and prosperity. Alas, that isn't true. I wish you could say that every seceding state brought liberty and prosperity. It will, obviously, increase the chance of individuals having more say over what goes on, but it doesn't guarantee that. So some seceding states might be very unpleasant ones, as I think you could find in the states that were created when the Soviet Union collapsed. You'll find some very unpleasant states there. But you'll also find some very successful and freedom-loving states—Latvia and Estonia I am thinking of. And then the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in fact. My attitude as the director of the Middlebury Institute, which is devoted to the study of separatism, secession, and self-determination, is that all secession, all separatism, is good in and of itself and should be supported. It opens up the possibility for greater freedom and democracy and prosperity. But it doesn't guarantee that. But if you look around the world at which states are the most successful economically as well as in democracy—freedom. They tend to be quite small—almost all below the seven million of Switzerland. And a great many of them below five million, which is the size of most of the nations in the world. So there is a much greater possibility that

you will have the liberty and prosperity that you want in the democracy, but it's not guaranteed, of course.

WOODS: I personally think that the division of the country into red and blue states as the media describes them is a ridiculous oversimplification. There are lot of us who would not call ourselves red or blue, but for the sake of argument let's say that there's some truth to it. There are some people who conform to the stereotypes of red versus blue. And every four years we have a presidential election in which we're presented with the idea that the two sides are really in a kind of civil war with each other—that whoever wins is probably going to oppress the other group. It never occurs to them to say: why don't we put our arms down, stop fighting with each other like this, and say: you do your thing, and I'll do my thing, and just leave it at that. They are both so addicted to the idea that there must be one solution rammed down the throats of everybody. The people in the blue states, their view tends to be—the characteristic members—that in the red states we have these backward Christians, and they hate science, and they are just an embarrassment. And the people in the red states say that in the blue states, they are morally despicable. They are an embarrassment to us.

Why not just depart in peace? This is so obviously the solution to that problem, and yet it can't penetrate because people are not even allowed to think that way.

SALE: They are not—the government education system, obviously, does not allow that possibility, and people will always say, well, the Civil War proved that you can't do that. What the Civil War proved was that when one half of the country with a great deal of power and money wanted to destroy the other half of the country, it could use a lot of force if it wanted to do so and win a war. It doesn't prove anything about secession whatsoever. And, of course, secession doesn't have anything to do with slavery, either. Although that was one of the reasons that the South wanted to resist the increasingly centralized and oppressive North that wished to do away with its money and its way of life. Secession is obvious. It was obvious then. It's obvious now that, and in fact that leads to the concept of state's rights. An idea which is surfacing now because of gay marriage. And I think that that has to be promoted, along with the idea of nullification, I think we should stress the rights of states to have their own laws, go their own way, which of course, Washington and Colorado proved you could do with marijuana, which is still illegal, and yet there are those two and another 13 states that have defied that law to say we want to do things our own way. Those state's rights are very valuable, and obviously, they have been terribly harmed and diminished over the years since 1865. But that's still a concept that we ought to applaud and try to reinvigorate.

WOODS: Before I let you go, tell us briefly about the activities of the Middlebury Institute.

SALE: The idea is to assess the secession movement in this country. I have had three national conventions of secession movements. The biggest one was about, what was it, five years ago I guess now or longer in fact, six years ago, and it found that there were 35 groups in the country that were willing to work for secession. It turned out that a great many of them were websites

and nothing more than that. That they were not people who were organizing and trying to get people on the ground to take political action within their states. They were just people in their lonely bedrooms promoting the idea of secession. Nothing wrong with that, but it's necessary to do something more like what the people in Vermont have done—the people in Texas, some of the people in Hawaii, some of the people in Alaska, and a good number of people in the South in various ways have taken political action—tried to spread this idea. But it has not, I have to say, taken hold greatly over these last 10 years that I've had the Middlebury Institute, and I'm waiting for it to happen, and I would encourage it when it happens, and maybe I can have another national convention when I see that this is really taking shape across the country, and I can only fervently hope that those 80 million people will decide that they don't have to just sit there and hope for this if they can go out and try to organize for this.

WOODS: The website is MiddleburyInstitute.org, and we've been talking to Kirkpatrick Sale. Kirk, I appreciate your time today—very interesting stuff. We met one time, maybe you remember, at a Liberty Fund event, and we were talking about secession. I remember we were talking about South Carolina and nullification at that event, and I remember being too shy to really talk to you at that point. But years later I got up the nerve to pick up the phone and call you. So thanks for doing it. I appreciate it.

SALE: Well, I am certainly glad to do it, and I am glad you're interested in the very same things that I am. Let's see where we can take it.