July 2012

BCL § 626: Corporate Dissolution and Distribution of Assets Held Not to Preclude Subsequent Derivative Action

John F. Finnegan

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/lawreview

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/lawreview/vol55/iss2/12

This Recent Development in New York Law is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in St. John's Law Review by an authorized administrator of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact cerjanm@stjohns.edu.
quash, in all but unusual cases.

Carl Lawrence

BUSINESS CORPORATION LAW

BCL § 626: Corporate dissolution and distribution of assets held not to preclude subsequent derivative action

Section 626 of the Business Corporation Law (BCL) authorizes shareholders to derivatively prosecute an action in the right of a corporation. To be entitled to commence such an action, the plaintiff-stockholder must be a "holder at the time of bringing the action," as well as at the time of the alleged wrong. While the

---

124 Section 626 of the Business Corporation Law (BCL) provides in pertinent part:
(a) An action may be brought in the right of a . . . corporation to procure a judgment in its favor, by a holder of shares . . . of the corporation or of a beneficial interest in such shares . . . .

At common law, those entrusted with the management and direction of a corporation could with impunity breach fiduciary duties owed to the corporation since shareholders were not permitted to bring actions at law against corporate directors to account for their actions or transgressions. Ross v. Bernhard, 396 U.S. 531, 534 (1970). Hence, the shareholders' derivative action developed as an equitable remedy to protect shareholders against such abuses on the part of management. Halpern v. Pennsylvania R.R., 189 F. Supp. 494, 498 (E.D.N.Y. 1960); Burnham v. Brush, 176 Misc. 39, 41, 26 N.Y.S.2d 397, 398 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1941); see H. Henn, CORPORATIONS §§ 358-360 (2d ed. 1970); Prunty, The Shareholders' Derivative Suit: Notes On Its Derivation, 32 N.Y.U.L. Rev. 980, 987-89 (1957). The scope of this remedy was subsequently expanded to permit actions against third parties who had injured the corporation, and against whom the corporation, through its directors' inaction, did not seek redress. Dodge v. Woolsey, 59 U.S. (18 How.) 331, 345 (1856).

The derivative action, as embodied in section 626, is the shareholder's sole remedy for a breach of a fiduciary duty owed to a corporation by a corporate director or officer. Shiel-ecrawt v. Moffett, 49 N.Y.S.2d 64, 71 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1944). It is distinguishable from both a representative action—an action in which the stockholder alleges that a duty owed to a class of which he is a member has been breached by the corporation acting through its directors (for example, the denial of voting rights), see Siegal v. Engelmann, 1 Misc. 2d 447, 143 N.Y.S.2d 193 (Sup. Ct. Queens County 1955); Lazar v. Knolls Co-op. Section No. 2, 205 Misc. 748, 130 N.Y.S.2d 407 (Sup. Ct. Bronx County 1954), and a personal action—an action in which the shareholder alleges that a duty owed to him individually has been breached by the corporation through its directors, see Diamond v. Davis, 60 N.Y.S.2d 375 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1945). See generally Note, Distinguishing Between Direct and Derivative Shareholder Suits, 110 U. Pa. L. Rev. 1147 (1962).

125 Hanna v. Lyon, 179 N.Y. 107, 110, 71 N.E. 778, 779 (1904); N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 626(b) (McKinney 1963). The rationale underlying the requirement that the plaintiff be a stockholder at the time of commencement is that the plaintiff, being under no fiduciary duty to vindicate a wrong to a corporation, institutes the suit to have the corporation made
law is well settled that a shareholder loses the capacity to institute or continue a derivative suit when, through voluntary sale or deprivation of title, his proprietary interest in the corporation ceases, the courts had not addressed whether a corporate dissolution and the accompanying distribution of assets pursuant thereto deprives a shareholder of the interest requisite to maintaining a derivative suit. Recently, however, in Independent Investor Protective League v. Time, Inc., the Court of Appeals liberally construed the rule requiring stock ownership at the commencement of a derivative action, allowing such an action subsequent to the corporation's dissolution and distribution of assets.

In Independent Investor, shareholders and former shareholders of record of Sterling Communications, Inc. (Sterling) at the whole not only for the benefit of the corporation, but also for the benefit of every stockholder, and is "authorized to proceed only because of his proprietary interest in the corporation." Tenney v. Rosenthal, 6 N.Y.2d 204, 211, 160 N.E.2d 463, 466, 189 N.Y.S.2d 158, 163 (1959). Therefore, one who voluntarily disposes of his ownership in a corporation may never commence nor proceed in a derivative action. See Harris v. Averick, 24 Misc. 2d 1039, 1040, 204 N.Y.S.2d 372, 374 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1960). Similarly, a party who is deprived of legal title to his stock may not commence or proceed in an action unless he retains an equitable interest therein. Witherbee v. Bowles, 142 App. Div. 407, 418, 126 N.Y.S. 554, 962-63 (1st Dep't), rev'd on other grounds, 201 N.Y. 427, 95 N.E. 27 (1911).


See note 125 supra.
time of its dissolution, instituted a derivative action alleging that Time, Inc. (Time), the majority shareholder of Sterling, and the officers and directors of Sterling fraudulently mismanaged the corporation, thereby depressing the value of Sterling's stock and enabling Time to acquire Sterling at a price below its true market value. The action was commenced 6 months after the winding up, pursuant to shareholder authorization, of Sterling's affairs. Time moved for summary judgment contending that the plaintiffs lacked standing to sue. Special term granted the motion, finding that since the corporate entity no longer existed, the plaintiffs could not satisfy the share ownership requirement of section 626(b) of the BCL and, therefore, could not proceed in a derivative capacity. The Appellate Division, First Department, unanimously affirmed.

On appeal, the Court of Appeals reversed, holding that the maintenance of a derivative action was proper, notwithstanding the prior dissolution of the corporation and accompanying distribution of assets. Chief Judge Cooke, writing for a unanimous Court, initially observed that although the common-law rule required the abatement of an action by or against a corporation upon

131 The plaintiffs in this action may be classified into four groups: (1) those who accepted payment from the defendant, Time, Inc., and surrendered their shares in Sterling; (2) those who demanded the fair market value of their shares under the appraisal provision in section 623 of the BCL; (3) stockholders of record who refused a tendered payment for their stock; and (4) stockholders who were not of record at the time of Sterling's dissolution. 66 App. Div. 2d at 392, 412 N.Y.S.2d at 899.

132 Id.

133 50 N.Y.2d at 262, 406 N.E.2d at 487, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 672. The stockholders’ vote authorizing the dissolution of Sterling occurred on September 7, 1973. Id. Time acquired Sterling’s assets by late September 1973. 66 App. Div. 2d at 392, 412 N.Y.S.2d at 899. The action was commenced in March 1974.

134 50 N.Y.2d at 262, 406 N.E.2d at 487, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 672.

135 Id.

136 66 App. Div. 2d at 396, 412 N.Y.S.2d at 901. Neither the decision of the appellate division nor the decision of special term foreclosed the shareholders’ right to pursue redress in an individual or representative capacity against the individual defendants, the former directors of Sterling. Id. at 395-96, 412 N.Y.S.2d at 901. The appellate division affirmed special term’s refusal to permit the plaintiffs to amend their complaint to assert either of the alternative actions, however, on the ground that the plaintiffs failed to show that the individual defendants were before the court, since they had not been served with process. Id. at 396, 412 N.Y.S.2d at 901.

137 50 N.Y.2d at 264, 406 N.E.2d at 489, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 674. Notably, the Court upheld the dismissal of those plaintiffs who had sought appraisal under section 623 of the BCL on the ground that appraisal is an exclusive remedy. Id.; N.Y. BUS. CORP. LAw § 623(c), (k) (McKinney 1963).
the corporation’s dissolution, the legislature, in enacting section 1006(a)(4) of the BCL, specifically provided that a corporation was to continue to exist as a legal entity for the purposes of judicial proceedings even after dissolution.\textsuperscript{138} The Court noted that although section 626 of the BCL specifically requires a plaintiff to establish ownership at the commencement of a derivative action, this rule was not absolute.\textsuperscript{139} Rather, the section 626(b) ownership requirement was pragmatic in nature, reflecting the need to ensure that the plaintiff is not a stranger to the corporation and is actually representative of the class of stockholders whose rights are purportedly being protected.\textsuperscript{140} In the wake of dissolution, however, a “stockholder possesses a substantial interest in the distribution of corporate assets,” according to the Court, and thus, retains a significant interest in pursuing any existing cause of action in favor of the corporation.\textsuperscript{141} This interest, the Court found, is sufficient “to satisfy the spirit of the rule.”\textsuperscript{142} Moreover, the Court noted that section 1006(b) of the BCL which provides that the dissolution of a corporation does not affect any remedy available to or against a corporation, its directors, officers or shareholders which existed prior to the corporation’s dissolution, buttressed its conclusion that such dissolution of itself cannot prevent a qualified plaintiff from satisfying the ownership requirements of section 626(b) of the BCL.\textsuperscript{143}

It is suggested that while the Court’s conclusion was sound, it might have reached the desired result without sanctioning non-compliance with the literal requirement of section 626(b) ownership. Section 1006(b) contemplates the survival, \textit{inter alia}, of corporate remedies during the winding up of corporate affairs.\textsuperscript{144} It is

\textsuperscript{138} 50 N.Y.2d at 263, 406 N.E.2d at 488, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 672. Section 1006(a)(4) of the BCL provides that a dissolved corporation, in winding up its affairs, may “sue or be sued in all courts and participate in actions and proceedings.” N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 1006(a)(4) (McKinney 1963). The Court noted that earlier, under the predecessor statute, section 29 of the General Corporation Law, ch. 650, § 29, [1929] N.Y. Laws 1531, it had held that a dissolved corporation could be a party to litigation even after distribution of assets. 50 N.Y.2d at 263, 406 N.E.2d at 488, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 672 (citing Matter of Ehrlich, Inc., 5 N.Y.2d 275, 279, 157 N.E.2d 495, 501, 184 N.Y.S.2d 334, 338 (1959)).

\textsuperscript{139} 50 N.Y.2d at 263, 406 N.E.2d at 488, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 673.

\textsuperscript{140} Id. at 263-64, 406 N.E.2d at 488, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 673.

\textsuperscript{141} Id. at 264, 406 N.E.2d at 488, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 673.

\textsuperscript{142} Id.

\textsuperscript{143} Id. at 264, 406 N.E.2d at 488-89, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 673-74 (citing N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 1006(b) (McKinney 1963)).

\textsuperscript{144} N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 1006(b) (McKinney 1963). Section 1006(b) was based on
submitted that in *Independent Investor* the cause of action to recover for the directors' mismanagement of the corporation is an unliquidated asset,\(^{146}\) precluding, at least pro tanto, the completion of corporate winding up.\(^{146}\) Thus, the institution of a derivative action, the proper remedy for injuries to the corporation even during

---

\(^{145}\) A cause of action against corporate directors for the mismanagement of corporate assets is redressable only by the corporation and not by its shareholders in an individual or representative capacity, and any recovery obtained by the shareholders suing derivatively inures to the corporation. Klum v. Clinton Trust Co., 183 Misc. 340, 48 N.Y.S.2d 267 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1944); see Smith v. Bradlee, 37 N.Y.S.2d 512 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1942). See generally note 154 and accompanying text infra; see also N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 623 (McKinney 1963). Section 623 provides for an appraisal remedy to determine the fair market value of the shares held by shareholders dissenting from a corporation's dissolution. Id. Pursuant to the determination of the stock's value the appraiser may consider, as an unliquidated asset, any corporate causes of action. *Id.*

\(^{146}\) A corporation's affairs have been "wound up," when all liabilities have been satisfied and discharged and all assets have been realized and distributed. See Fleckner v. Bank of the United States, 21 U.S. (8 Wheat.) 338, 362 (1823); United States v. Metcalf, 131 F.2d 677, 679 (9th Cir. 1942). In Bacon v. Robertson, 59 U.S. (18 How.) 480 (1855), the United States Supreme Court, in considering whether a corporation's existence had terminated, held that where assets remain in the corporate entity for distribution, the corporation retains substance and therefore, cannot be considered to have ceased to exist. *Id.* at 488-89. Parenthetically, the *Bacon* Court further noted that where assets remain unliquidated, the corporation's shareholders could maintain a derivative action to force the distribution of these remaining assets. *Id.* at 489. In *Independent Investor*, since the corporation retained an unliquidated asset subsequent to the directors' disbursement of assets, it cannot be said to have had its affairs completely wound up.

Additionally, it is suggested that, in determining whether Sterling had been wound up, consideration must be given to the pendency of appraisal proceedings pursuant to section 623 of the BCL. Since an appraisal judgment is satisfied through the corporation by a disbursement of corporate assets, N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 623 (McKinney 1963), the pendency of these proceedings involving claims against this corporation, it is submitted, indicates that the corporation has not been wound up. Moreover, if assets have been set aside to satisfy a judgment arising from appraisal proceedings and the amount set aside exceeds the amount which must be disbursed, the corporation retains assets for distribution, and cannot be considered to have been terminated by liquidation. See Bacon v. Robertson, 59 U.S. (18 How.) at 488-89. In the alternative, if insufficient assets or no assets have been set aside, it is submitted that winding up has not been completed as corporate liabilities have not been provided for, as required by the BCL. See N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 1005(a)(3) (McKinney 1963). In this event, the BCL provides that the directors are jointly and severally liable to the corporation, *id.* § 719(a)(3), and authorizes a suit against the corporation by the creditors or a derivative suit by the shareholders against the directors for failing to provide for the corporation's liabilities, *id.* § 1006(a)(4).
the winding up period, would be timely.

It is submitted, moreover, that shareholders of record at the time of dissolution satisfy the section 626(b) ownership requirement and thus have standing to proceed pursuant to section 626.\textsuperscript{147} During the pendency of the period preceding winding up, such shareholders are considered the equitable owners of the corporation.\textsuperscript{148} It is suggested that this equitable ownership concept is analogous to the statutory ownership requirement of a "beneficial interest" in the corporation's stock at the time a derivative action is commenced.\textsuperscript{149} Indeed, it is at least arguable that the legislature has borrowed from equity the standards by which to determine standing in a derivative action.\textsuperscript{150} Since these standards require only that the plaintiff-shareholder in a derivative action demonstrate an interest in the corporation,\textsuperscript{151} the shareholder's "substantial interest in the distribution of corporate assets"\textsuperscript{152} would, it is submitted, satisfy the legislative "ownership" mandate incorporated in section 626(b) of the BCL.\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{147} It is suggested that if, after dissolution, an asset, such as an unliquidated cause of action, remains, then a vestige of shareholder status remains sufficient to satisfy the section 626(b) ownership requirement. See note 148, infra. Indeed, in such a situation the requirement should be held satisfied since the shareholder has not divested himself of his ownership, but rather merely has had his ownership interest diminished to the extent that assets have been distributed.

\textsuperscript{148} Weinert v. Kinkel, 296 N.Y. 151, 153, 71 N.E.2d 445, 446 (1947) (per curiam); see 2 Hornstein's Corporation Law and Practice §§ 711, 714-718 (1959). Since equity recognizes that the shareholders are, in essence, the proprietors of a corporation and are ultimately the sole beneficiaries thereof, Kavanaugh v. Kavanaugh Knitting Co., 226 N.Y. 185, 195, 123 N.E. 148, 151 (1919), it follows then, that at distribution the shareholders remain the equitable owners of those assets not distributed.

\textsuperscript{149} Section 626 of the BCL provides that a derivative action may be commenced by one who is a "holder of shares . . . or of a beneficial interest [therein]" at the time of initiating suit. N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 626(a), (b) (McKinney 1963) (emphasis added). Since the legislature contemplates that a "beneficial interest" is a sufficient predicate to commence suit, it appears reasonable that a holder of an "equitable ownership" interest would be an appropriate plaintiff. Such equitable ownership has been held to be vested in the shareholders who hold shares at the time of dissolution and distribution of assets. See note 148 and accompanying text supra.

\textsuperscript{150} See notes 124 & 126 supra; cf. N.Y. Bus. Corp. Law § 626(c) (McKinney 1963) (originally a procedural rule of the courts, Continental Sec. Co. v. Belmont, 206 N.Y. 7, 19, 99 N.E. 138, 142 (1912)). See also note 151 infra.

\textsuperscript{151} As a corollary of the equitable nature of the derivative action, see note 124 supra, the standing requirement, likewise developed, as an equitable matter, Hawes v. Oakland, 104 U.S. 450, 461-62 (1881); see Ross v. Bernhard, 396 U.S. 531, 534 (1970), and has always necessitated a demonstration of a shareholder's proprietary interest. See note 125 supra.

\textsuperscript{152} 50 N.Y.2d at 264, 406 N.E.2d at 488, 428 N.Y.S.2d at 673.

\textsuperscript{153} Since it is well settled that equity looks to substance, and not form, Small v. Sullivan, 245 N.Y. 343, 354, 157 N.E. 261, 264 (1927); Marco v. Sachs, 201 Misc. 933, 937 (Sup.
The courts of New York have long held that corporate mismanagement constitutes a corporate injury redressable only by a derivative action. A strict construction of section 626(b) precluding a derivative action after dissolution would dispense with the equitable purpose of the derivative action—to provide relief to shareholders from the abuses of corporate directors which are otherwise not redressable. Thus, it is submitted that the *Independent...*
dent Investor Court’s conclusion that dissolution should not preclude the institution and prosecution of a derivative suit is consistent with the literal requirements of section 626(b) and, indeed, is necessary in order to provide a remedy for minority shareholders aggrieved by the misconduct of those persons exercising corporate control.

John F. Finnegan

DEVELOPMENTS IN NEW YORK LAW

General admonition to jointly represented defendants sufficient to discharge trial court’s duty of inquiry

Joint representation of criminal defendants is highly suspect because the frequent inability of one attorney to protect the conflicting interests of codefendants is likely to give rise to the ineffective assistance of counsel. Although the sixth amendment however, the appellate division intimated that a direct fiduciary duty was owing to the stockholder from the corporate directors, and, therefore, the shareholder had recourse to a remedy, either a representative or an individual action. 66 App. Div. 2d at 393, 412 N.Y.S.2d at 899. The court, however, did not detail the nature of this fiduciary duty. Id. at 393, 412 N.Y.S.2d at 901. *But see note 154 supra.*

To hold that a corporate dissolution would have the effect of vitiating a shareholder’s derivative action, thereby leaving the shareholder remediless, *see note 154 supra,* could induce dishonest corporate directors to arrange for a dissolution and distribution of assets, thereby preventing action against themselves. *Holmes v. Camp,* 186 App. Div. 675, 679, 175 N.Y.S. 349, 352 (1st Dep’t), aff’d, 227 N.Y. 635, 126 N.E. 910 (1919). *See generally note 124 supra.*


The right to the effective assistance of counsel is guaranteed to criminal defendants. *U.S. CONST. amend. VI; N.Y. CONST. art. I, § 6; CPL § 210.15(2) (1971).* While it is the duty