

DECEMBER, 1997

Neo-Conservative Heaven

ISLE MADAME, NS

Blew into Toronto ninety minutes before the meeting. Caught a cab downtown. Checked into the hotel. Thirty minutes left. Just time enough to call home.

Dialled 8 for an outside line, then 0, 902, and my home phone number in Nova Scotia. Heard the bong! to punch in my calling-card number.

Silence. Then a woman with a Deep South accent.

"Ah'm sorry, that credit ca'ad isn't valid."

"It is," I said. "I've had it for 20 years and I've used it today."

"Well, mah computah shows it as an invalid numbah. You must be with some rinky-dink li'l local phone company."

"I'm with Maritime Tel and Tel, which covers Nova Scotia."

"Well, y'all cain't use that ca'ad."

"Okay, make it a collect call."

Pause.

"You cain't call that numbah collect."

"That's my home phone number."

"You cain't call outside the United States from that phone."

"I'm not *in* the United States. I'm in Toronto, Canada."

"Well, this is AT & T, and y'all cain't call that numbah collect from that phone."

Called the front desk.

"Dial 9 for the Bell Canada operator, and place the call through her."

Dialled 9. Repeatedly. Busy. Called the front desk once more.

"Yeah. Well, there's a pay phone in the basement you can use."

Went to my meeting. Learned that others had tried to call *Toronto* from their Toronto rooms. Couldn't be done.

Deregulation, eh? The bracing winds of competition.

Blew into Ottawa. Talked with a friend. Works in a small federal bureau. Had six colleagues take early retirement when the government got into fat-free governance. Golden handshakes totalled nearly half a million dollars. That was in June. Bureau now understaffed. In September, began hiring new employees, and re-hired its retirees. They earned \$250 a day as employees. Now they earn \$450 a day as contractors. Plus their pensions.

Streamlined government, eh?

Big wind blew into Nova Scotia late in November. Heavy rain, wet snow, 80-km/hr winds. Blew down trees and power lines. Some families had no power for three days. Nova Scotia Power called it "the worst storm in 15 years."

Gusts of laughter and roars of rage. Fifteen years? Hurricane Hortense came through in September 1996. A hurricane, by definition, blows at more than 100 km/hr, with torrential rains.

Well, said NS Power defensively, the worst in 15 years *in terms of damage to the system*.

Maybe so, since the system is apparently dilapidated. NSP was privatized in 1992. It had 2400 employees. Now it has 1900. Talk to those employees over a drink. They say the privatized (and demoralized) NSP is understaffed and skimps maintenance. Customers are suing, and the Utilities and Review Board is reviewing. Even the Premier is owly.

In my yard, a broken branch as thick as your leg hangs above the power lines. Once, I would have mentioned it to the local linemen; they'd have stopped by with a cherry-picker and taken it down. Now you call Halifax. They send down a guy who says maybe it won't hit the power lines anyway. Three guys so far. The last guy, months ago, said he'd handle it.

Branch hasn't fallen -- yet. When it does, NSP will blame the weather.

Private sector efficiency, eh?

Can't afford schools any more. Nova Scotia has public/private "partnerships" building new high-tech schools. Great stuff. In October we learned the banks wouldn't finance the developers, so the government had loaned them \$47 million. Interest free. One developer said the arrangement "brought some private-sector efficiency to these things."

Just like the Hillsborough Bridge in Charlottetown, crossed by 22,000 commuters every day. In 1996, PEI sold it to Strait Crossing Inc., for \$500 million. No tenders. Secret contract. SCI will improve the bridge and lease it back to PEI for \$7.4 million over five years. Then the government can buy it back, for \$22 million. Alternatively, SCI can charge tolls for 10 years on the hitherto toll-free bridge.

Brave new world. And let's not even talk about Canada Post, group mailboxes, strikes and a proposed dividend payable to the government.

I'm really old, sonny. But I can remember when government was considered a useful communal device to provide and regulate necessary public services. Schools, roads, airports, railways, bridges, mail, telephones, harbours, electricity. Wasn't supposed to turn a profit or get into bed with business. Just had to do the job. It did, too.

Quaint, eh?