

## Hold the Phone!

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS –

The news that Maritime Tel and Tel and three other east-coast companies would merge into a monster phone company called AtlanticCo did not engender in me a frenzy of enthusiasm. Not that I doubt the intelligence of the strategy, or underestimate the dangers of inaction. But MT&T ain't broke. It don't need fixing. And it has a good deal to lose.

You never know what skeletons may lurk in a corporate closet, but I like what I know about MT&T, whose services are essential to my livelihood. Once a sedate monopoly, MT&T has become nimble, responsive and enterprising since the advent of competition. It has been attentive to customers. And it has been a responsible corporate citizen, partnering with other businesses, working co-operatively with government and sponsoring innumerable community events and ventures. This last item, of course, can be seen as simply enlightened self-interest -- but it sure beats the primitive lust for plunder and pillage which constitutes today's preferred corporate style.

The numbers proclaim MT&T's success. Last year, despite robust competition, MT&T had 86 per cent of the Nova Scotia long-distance market, 75% of the cellular market, and 60% of the market for Internet services. MT&T effectively *owns* telecommunications in Nova Scotia. And, to a significant extent, Nova Scotians own MT&T. Fully 67.9% of its shareholders are Nova Scotians, most of them small investors holding only a few shares. (The largest block of shares is held by Bell Canada Enterprises, which owns the Bell system in Ontario and Quebec, and will own more than 40% of the new regional company.) Many MT&T employees own shares; the company allows employees to accumulate shares by payroll deduction, and reinvests their dividends automatically.

Do Nova Scotians know how well off they are? I recently had occasion to order telephone service in the United States, where 22 competing long-distance carriers allegedly offered me service. But some supplied only business communications; others withheld the necessary software from the local phone company; others were already at full capacity. I wound up with Sprint.

The chaos and incompetence of Sprint proved breathtaking. Its best rate is 10 cents US (15c Canadian) per minute, 24 hours a day -- far worse than MT&T's Freedom Time. After you sign up, you get a postcard congratulating you on having chosen Sprint's low rate of 25c a minute. You call again, and Sprint's rep says there is no such thing as a 10-cent 24-hour rate which includes Canada. You're adamant. The rep consults a supervisor and then says, Hey, guess what, there *is* such a rate, and he's "corrected it."

On a second line, Sprint overcharges you by about \$450 US because you're not signed up. But you are, and your local phone company has a record of the event. You call Sprint, and someone in New York promises to fix the problem. She doesn't. You call the same number again and someone in Atlanta says he has no record of your previous call, but *he'll* fix it. He doesn't. Your third call reaches a Californian who has no record of either previous call, and who wants you to fax the bill. She provides a number which is not a fax number. You call again and explain it all to another representative who says he will fix it. At least you think that's what he's saying, but he speaks only fragmentary English. I commend large companies which hire immigrants, but if people don't speak good English you don't put them on your customer-service desk any more than you hire short guys like me for your basketball team.

I am not making this up. I have a fat file on the Sprint fiasco, which dragged on for six months. And yet I stayed with Sprint, miserable though it is, because informed Americans insist that Sprint is no worse than other US long-distance companies.

Do we appreciate dear old MT&T yet? The four companies are forming AtlanticCo -- which becomes Canada's third-largest phone company -- partly to save money by eliminating duplication. (Ironically, one

of the vanishing jobs belongs to former New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna, that impassioned apostle of communications technology, whose seat on the Bruncor board will evaporate.) More important, AtlanticCo will gain better access to the capital and marketing muscle required in the exploding communications marketplace. MT&T will remain an operating company within AtlanticCo.

My worry is that AtlanticCo may succeed. It may thrive, grow, and become an internationally-competitive giant. Like, say, Sprint. Dear God, what a terrifying prospect.

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