

FAST FACTS



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Minimizing the service: MTS in the north

The news that the Manitoba Telecom System is considering transforming itself into an income trust is another reminder why the Filmon government's decision to privatize MTS in early 1997 was such a bad idea.

As an income trust, the private company would be exempt from federal and provincial taxes. Instead earnings would be taxable only in the hands of private shareholders.

The catch for Manitobans is that by now many of those shareholders do not live in Manitoba or pay tax here.

It is another sign of how the privatization has shifted MTS's focus away from maintaining and improving telecommunication services for Manitobans to trying to crank up the rate of profit. In the seven years since the privatization took place Winnipeggers have seen the cost of basic telephone service double.

But a recent report into telephone service in Northern Manitoba that was carried out for an organization of northern Manitoba First Nations provides even more disturbing evidence of MTS's disinterest in service. In early February the Manitoba Keewatinook Ininew Okimowin submitted a

report to the Canadian Radio-Television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) that outlined how recent telephone failures in four northern communities had put the health of northerners at risk.

When the line goes down

Consider these events:

- In December 2003 a man with a gun demanded to enter the Wasagamack Nursing Station, where his wife was being treated following a domestic assault. When the nurses called the police at nearby Stevenson Lake they got a fast busy signal—a sign that the line was down. They finally got through to a long-distance operator, who contacted a Mounted Police office in southern Manitoba. From there a radio message was sent to the Mounties at Stevenson Lake.
- In November 2003 nursing staff at the Wasagamack Nursing Station try unsuccessfully for over two hours to get through to

In October 2003 the Garden Hill Nursing station staff are unable to get through to Winnipeg for advice on how to treat a cardiac patient for over two hours. The patient did not survive.

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nurse got through to the nursing station and was able to pass on a message to the Health Sciences Centre.

- In October 2003 the Garden Hill Nursing station staff are unable to get through to Winnipeg for advice on how to treat a cardiac patient for over two hours. The patient did not survive.
- In May 2003 a nurse in St. Theresa Point could not get through to Winnipeg to consult with a pediatrician about a three-weeks-old sick baby for several hours.

These are only some of the examples in a report that concluded that the quality of phone service provided by MTS was having a negative impact on the health and safety in four remote northern communities.

The four communities in the MKIO survey were Red Sucker Lake, Garden Hill, St. Theresa Point and Wasagamack. None of these communities is served by year-round road access. For that reason, these communities are all highly reliant on telecommunication service. Important matters such as health care, business, self-government, resource management and education all require regular and reliable contact with individuals outside of the community.

The battle to improve service

The survey was conducted as part of a lengthy struggle MKIO has undertaken to attempt to have northern phone service improved. In previous years other MKIO surveys of other northern communities have revealed similar problems.

For years MTS was unwilling to admit that callers in Northern communities had problems placing calls. In 2001, the corporation presented the CRTC with a 10-year plan to improve northern phone service. Thanks to MKIO's lobbying, the CRTC rejected that plan and imposed a five-year deadline on the company. In particular the Commission wanted MTS to consult communities and bring to an end problems of echo, delay, and a lack of outside lines in these communities.

The recent survey, like the ones before it, also

underlined the frustration that northerners experience when they try to log on to the world-wide web. Several people explained they simply gave up their internet accounts because they were never able to get on line with any degree of predictability.

All of which brings us back to the initial point: in a country such as Canada the ability to communicate, whether by phone, fax, or internet, is more than simply a private right. It is a matter of public interest, one that should not be left to the private market in general and, more specifically, a private corporation whose only talent is for devising new ways to wiggle out of its public responsibilities.

Doug Smith

*Doug Smith is the author of *As Many Liars: The story of the 1995 Manitoba vote-splitting scandal* published by Arbeiter Ring in 2003.*

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