

Let's nationalize more companies, starting with Bell and Rogers

By Gerald Caplan

August 30, 2014 – *The Globe and Mail*

The British Labour Party has begun to make the case that market fundamentalism, or neoliberalism, is not necessarily the best way for society to operate. Specifically, it's been trying to show that private enterprise is not always superior to public enterprise.

Beginning with Margaret Thatcher, British governments have denuded the UK of almost all public enterprises, from British Airways to the Royal Mail. The Labour Party Opposition wants to remind Brits that some entities actually make more sense under public auspices. Fortunately for them, I am in a position to offer my Labour comrades foolproof evidence for their gambit. Two words: Rogers and Bell.

The best case for public enterprises, bar none, is interacting with these vast operations, in so many ways the quintessence of modern corporate capitalism. One deals with them, of course, only in life-and-death circumstances, when there is absolutely no alternative. Like when you lose your cellphone, as I foolishly did.

I'm still shaken from the experience.

About four years ago, Bell was driving our family so crazy that we switched all our home devices to Rogers. Of course that made no sense either since Rogers also drove us up the wall with its cable service, as we were handing over a small fortune to both telecom giants without a clue what we were actually paying for. But after a particularly surrealistic episode with Bell, when seven different agents over several days offered us seven different prices for a new, improved package of services that we hadn't asked for and didn't need or want, we made the big leap to all-Rogers.

Regret was instantaneous. Although I tried not to take it personally, Rogers seemed determined to crush me and came very close to succeeding. Over a month's time, I spoke to some 18 Rogers staff – literally, I kept track – and while, like Bell's, most were pleasant enough, every single one of them, every single time, gave me a different story. As an all-Rogers household, we were entitled to a better overall deal on price. But what that price actually was, no one could or would ever say. Ever.

I was expected to agree to a contract without ever knowing its cost. What fool would do that? Nice to meet you. I had been totally worn down, beaten into abject submission. Until last week, I passively paid our huge inscrutable monthly bill. Our various Roger services were now costing more than the mortgage.

But I just couldn't live without a new phone. So I made the dreaded call to Rogers and within no time I was once again a gibbering wreck. Of course getting a cell phone isn't a big deal like a whole new service contract. The latter involves the full monty of psychological warfare; a new phone is just an exasperating tease. So the process this time involved not 18 Rogers staff but merely five, between 4 to 5 hours of my time and about 3 to 4 hours of my wife's.

Each of the first four employees – three by phone, one at the store in person – pretty well took down my entire life history, paying no attention to what I had already told the previous staffer. Exactly as four years earlier, from none of them did I ever get a complete, straight, comprehensible answer about exactly how much this would cost and what exact

services were covered. One staffer actually told me, straight out, that the previous staffer had “got it all wrong” – I wasn’t hard to convince – so we had to begin the process anew.

Finally, we were assured the new phone was operational, and we left. They were wrong. It wasn’t. It was 100 per cent non-operational. It was a dead parrot. We returned to the store. Two staff huddled and eventually discovered the problem. Another employee offered that if the company brass ever paid attention to staff who actually dealt with customers, virulent customer hostility to the company could end. But no one “above” ever did. We left again.

Long ago, when I was co-chairing the federal task force on Canadian Broadcasting, a few creative Canadians advocated that the telecommunications oligopolies be put under public ownership. It made perfect sense and was even arguably the Canadian way, like the

CBC. But it was a political non-starter. No government has been prepared to consider it. The Harper government has tried to make easy political points by calling for another major national player to join the game, as if that would force the existing predators to shape up. It’s a bad joke on us poor suckers.

But maybe it’s not too late for a real solution. Hey, Tom Mulcair: bringing Bell and Rogers and Telus and Shaw under public ownership? Now that’s a cause worth marching for. You’d unite suffering Canadians in their tens of millions from coast to coast to coast, getting them out onto the streets at last. Occupy Rogers! Occupy Bell! Everyone’s mad as hell at these guys, so why do we still have to take it?

Gerald Caplan is an African scholar, former NDP national director and a regular panelist on CBC’s Power and Politics.