“It is New Brunswick that enriches the Irivings, not the Irivings that enrich New Brunswick:” An interview with Alain Deneault

By THE NB MEDIA CO-OP

According to its website, the renowned French journal Le Monde diplomatique (LMD) is “a truly international newspaper linking people who take a serious interest in world events across the globe,” read by more than two million people with 37 different print and internet editions, published in 20 languages. That is why it is worth reporting that our own little corner of the world is getting big attention in an article published in the April 2019 edition of LMD by Alain Deneault, a scholar based in New Brunswick.

“The Irivings, Canada’s robber barons” concisely relates the political and economic power that one family with many industrial businesses has over our region, and the challenges facing people who wish to promote an open society and functioning democracy. In our interview, Alain Deneault discusses the issues he raises in his LMD article.

You use the term “feudalism” to describe the political and economic conditions in New Brunswick. What is feudalism, and why is it the right word for the system we have in this province?

I note first of all that this metaphor is frequently used for describing the situation in New Brunswick among journalists from outside the province who are not particularly known for being fiercely radical critics, for example Diane Francis or Peter C. Newman. The Irving conglomerate is different from other contemporary industrial and financial corporations in the way that it super-exploits a relatively confined area, rather than spreading its structures across the world and its activities to a variety of jurisdictions.

In the northeast of North America, we see the Irving conglomerate in the fields of oil, mining, timber, transportation, the food industry, restaurants, media, etc. Its 200 companies criss-cross the region while being managed in a very opaque way, especially from the tax haven of Bermuda. Its omnipresence makes it less a business than a sovereign power, frequently able to veto any important legislation in the region.

Many even-handed books contain a number of pages showing how a government could not be formed here without the approval of this powerful family. I’m thinking, for example, of Louis Robichaud’s biography written by Michel Cormier who recently has been Executive Director, News and Current Affairs at Radio Canada.

There are moments when this relationship of domination takes on a legal dimension. Charles Thériault, a prominent lawyer in matters of forestry policy, has revealed that the framework through which the government surrenders forestry management to the private sector cannot be revised without the approval of one of the Irving businesses. These kinds of observations abound, and the fact that the current premier of New Brunswick only reinforces this impression.

You call the Irving group a “second government” in New Brunswick and in the region. What do you mean by this exactly?

The family acts in the old manner of a colonial governor, for whom the legislative assembly was merely a chamber for recording his will, a kind of basilisk. But even beyond the way they finance or support this or that community project, they are able to substitute for departments of education, higher research, culture, youth and sports, municipal affairs, etc. It is almost impossible anywhere in Atlantic Canada to avoid running into the name “Irving” in a museum, a library, a university, a sports centre, and so forth.

It’s becoming embarrassing. You end up encountering the name more often than that of the government and a stranger who landed here without being told where he is could think himself in a conquered land. The Maritimes are Irving territory, a kind of “Saudi Arabia” as they say, or Irvingland.

You emphasize in the article that there are important differences between some multinational corporations, such as Total, and the Irving group. What are these differences, and what are the resulting differences in the field of politics?

Contemporary multinationals are sprawling and globalized. They are also usually publicly traded, which forces them to disclose a certain amount of information. Their desire for expansion results from the quest for new markets on a planetary scale.

But the Irivings have developed their structures in a productive corner of the country, forgotten by the public authorities and big capital, in a bid to marginalize public authorities and big capital, in a bid to marginalize multinationals like Shell. Total and Exxon are led to act in a concerted manner, notwithstanding the...
It is New Brunswick that enriches the Irvings. Each occasion widens the breach. As for the Irvings’ domination as never before in the Legislative Assembly. It gives the impression of a society where tongues are all part of a long-term historical movement. Today, for instance, Green Party members are raising the issue of the unwritten laws that are in fact losing their effectiveness, that we remain subjects of Her Majesty, a euphemism for the Crown does not belong to the public, and that we deal with every day as our parents did, that we are becoming untied. Each occasion will lead to new development. Jacques Poirias is a journalist of the extreme centre who has mostly composed a family drama, in which he mechanically compares the living conglomerate’s propaganda with the critical analysis of a supposedly balanced position that is weak and without scope.

As for Bruce Livesey’s reporting for the National Observer, it is formidable and welcome. It covers all sectors, from the environment to the thirst for expansion across the northeast of the continent, while bringing attention to media concentration and practices of intimidation. It is impossible to know what type of initiative will bring about change. Every moment of audacity, every time people stand up and say, even if it is in response to the public statements of the family, every transgression of the unwritten laws that are in fact losing their effectiveness, every time we end up distinguishing as such – these are all part of a long-term historical movement. Today, for instance, Green Party members are raising the issue of the "Irvings'" domination as never before in the Legislative Assembly. It gives the impression of a society where tongues are becoming untied. Each occasion widens the breach.

The publication of your article in Le Monde diplomatique indicates that an international audience can take an interest in what is happening in our part of the world. What effect might this have?

Other countries need to understand that Canada was and remains a colony, that we are not yet, nor have we ever been, citizens of any kind of democratic order, but that we remain subjects of Her Majesty, a euphemism for "colonial." Thus, our common territory, our lands, our forests, our waters, our public institutions are not really our own. Formally, they belong to the "Crown," which accords them a political status conceptually different from that of being publicly-owned. The Crown does not belong to the public, and it has sought historically to allow the ruling classes to profit from the wealth of our territory. The family feudalism of New Brunswick is merely the aggravated form of this system.

We must show how the situation here, in which we are born, that we deal with every day as our parents did, that we end up integrating, is in reality anything but ordinary in the eyes of those who visit us.

In the West, practically no other population is still so subservient to their local family of lords. This remarkable context has been noted by others. It is obvious: it is New Brunswick that enriches the Irvings, and not the Irvings that enrich us.

If we can collectively, by stepping back from ourselves and seeing ourselves from the eyes of outsiders, change our perceptions accordingly, and develop a critical sensibility instead of submitting to an ideology to which we are far too accustomed, then we will progress.

Outgoing CUPE NB president Daniel Légère praised as an "elevator"
By TRACY GLYNN

A chapter in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) New Brunswick’s history has closed with Daniel Légère stepping into the role of president. As a leader, he has paved the way for other leaders to take the reins. Former president Légère’s union activism began the day he became a member almost 40 years ago. As a correctional officer in St. Hilaire, he became the shop steward and was advocating for workers before he had even passed his probationary period.

Sandy Harding, Vice-President of CUPE NB, says, "Danny is a principled, passionate and dedicated leader. During his 14 years as CUPE NB’s president, he has been committed to union membership and engaged workers the likes of which has not been seen in decades. He left CUPE NB in a better and more united place."

Making L’Acadie Nouvelle’s top 30 list of most influential New Brunswick francophones in 2017 and 2018, Légère’s voice spoken for better wages and pensions, pay equity, new legislation on first contract arbitration and a critical voice against privatization of health care and education. A strong supporter of CUPE’s global justice campaigns, Légère is also active with the New Democratic Party and the Common Front for Social Justice, the province’s largest anti-poverty group.

Légère has joined other union leaders and students to protest the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, extended his support to Colombian and Filipino workers who work across the province. Légère has also supported police, joined Mi’kmak and Wolastoqiyik peoples and allies at Idle No More actions. "Danny has been a friend, a mentor, and a confident to many for his tenure as CUPE NB president. He will leave a huge void, but with his leadership and mentoring, he has paved the way for other leaders to take the reins. Danny has garnered the respect of Canadians from coast to coast to coast. His legacy will live on throughout the labour movement for many, many years to come," says Colford.

Author Bruce Campbell. Photo by Ben Welland.

The Lac-Mégantic rail disaster and an Irving company, NB Southern Railway, were together in the same CBC news story last week as a court case wound up in Saint John.

Author Bruce Campbell was in New Brunswick in April to promote his new book: The Lac-Mégantic Rail Disaster: Public Betrayal, Justice Denied. Campbell’s book analyzes the history of the complex relationships linking railways, visual industry, transportation and energy extraction, by industry, and the devastation of a rural town in Quebec on July 6, 2013.

Campbell, an adjunct professor in Environmental Studies at York University and senior fellow at the Ryerson University Centre for Free Expression, is a former executive director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, one of Canada’s leading independent think-tanks, and the author of three major reports on the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster.

In this interview with the NB Media Co-op, Campbell discusses the relationships between the Lac-Mégantic disaster, New Brunswick, and Irving companies.

NBMC: The investigation into the Lac-Mégantic disaster triggered legal action against Irving Oil, and the NB Southern Railway, a subsidiary of J.D. Irving. What were the charges and outcomes?

Campbell: Following the Lac-Mégantic disaster, Irving Oil, as importer of the fatal shipment of Bakken shale oil from North Dakota, was charged with 34 counts of violating the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act: 14,000 tank cars of crude oil were hauled on its behalf from November 2012 to July 6, 2013 [one-third went through Lac-Mégantic]. Irving Oil, after lengthy negotiations, pleaded guilty to all counts in October 2017, paying $4 million — $400,000 in penalties and a $3.6 million contribution to support safety research on the transportation of dangerous goods.

Irving Oil was also a defendant in civil suits (wrongful death, class-action), contributing $75 million to the settlement in these cases. The federal government also contributed $75 million. CP is the lone defendant that refused to settle and is still in court.

The Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway was carrying the shipment imported by Irving Oil that derailed in Lac-Mégantic. A different railway, the Irving-owned NB Southern Railway, was scheduled to haul this shipment in the last leg of the journey to Saint John.

NB Southern was charged in 2018 with incidents related to hauling dangerous goods on this route stemming from 2012 up until the day before the disaster: 24 counts of failing to properly document dangerous goods act — 12 counts for failing to create proper shipping documentation and 12 counts for having unqualified personnel offering dangerous goods (crude oil) for transport. The danger was to people living in New Brunswick, it initially pled not guilty but on April 18, 2019 reached a plea agreement with federal prosecutors, pleading guilty to two counts of failing to properly document crude oil tank cars and paying $50,000: $10,000 in penalties and $40,000 in payments to support safety improvements in the transportation of dangerous goods.

The Lac-Mégantic Citizens Coalition is reportedly very disappointed with the plea agreement; both the low fine and other monetary payments, and the fact that it was reached with the NB Southern Railway pleading guilty just to two of the 24 counts with which it was charged.

To read the full interview, visit: nbmediacoop.org.

Susan O’Donnell is a board member of the NB Media Co-op and the lead researcher for the RAVEN project at the University of New Brunswick.

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