Bruce Livesey deconstructs “The House of Irvings”

BY SOPHIE M. LAVOIE

Time is ticking on the Irving Empire as its generational succession throws up new problems both for the company and the people of New Brunswick, the population it has dominated for eight decades, according to Bruce Livesey, an award-winning reporter for The National Observer, who delivered the NB Media Co-op’s annual keynote in Frederiction on Sept. 21, 2017.

The veteran reporter was fired from Global TV when he spoke to Jesse Brown from Canada and about his investigative story on the Koch brothers’ ties to Canada being axed.

Livesey grew up in Frederiction and spent summers working for The Daily Gleaner while at university in the 1980s. He also volunteered at the NB Film Co-op and wrote an article about co-ops for the first edition of the NB Film Co-op’s newsletter, “Focal Point.”

A Globe and Mail’s Report on Business magazine story spawned Livesey’s now eight-part series, “The House of Irving.” The series won the 2017 National Journalism Award for business reporting, the first time that an online publication won the award.

“The National Observer is changing the media landscape in Canada, showing that business can be reported on in a way that has the public interest at heart, which is the task of journalism,” said NB Media Co-op editor, Tracy Glynn.

Livesey vs. Irving Round 1

After Livesey’s first Report on Business magazine story, Brian Manning from the Saint John Board of Trade wrote a rebuttal piece, entitled: “Let’s Celebrate the Irving Family, Not Criticize Them.” Livesey had asked to talk to the Saint John Board of Trade for the story but had never heard from them. Manning attacked Livesey’s article, highlighting the economic windfall that the Irving company had brought to New Brunswick and to Canada.

Livesey deemed Manning’s attitude in the article as “demeaning” because the Irwins are enjoying tax rebates and other privileges that go beyond what is normally afforded to companies. According to Livesey, “they have become one of the richest families in Canada, at the expense of New Brunswick and to Canada.”

Livesey deemed Manning’s attitude in the article as “defensive” because the Irwins are enjoying tax rebates and other privileges that go beyond what is normally afforded to companies. According to Livesey, “they have become one of the richest families in Canada, at the expense of New Brunswick and to Canada.”

Livesey vs. Irving Round 2

Livesey decided to research the company further. The Irving empire includes between 374 and 210 companies, accounts for 1 out of every 12 jobs in the province, and one half of the province’s exports. The three Irving brothers divided the company empire up about 30 years ago. None of the Irving companies are publicly traded so there is no financial transparency, Irving money is in Bermuda, considered “the North Korea of tax havens” by one of Livesey’s friends.

When doing his series, Livesey found it incredibly difficult to find someone to talk about the Irvings, as had happened when he was calling previously on behalf of The Gleaner and Mail. For Livesey, only organized crime was more difficult to deal with. No former Premier would talk to Livesey, going back as far as Frank McKenna who was Premier from 1987-97. Livesey caught now Conservative Party Leader, Blaine Higgs by surprise when he was in Saint John looking for interviewees to speak about the Irvings, Higgs, who had worked for Irving Oil for about 25 years, had nothing negative to say about the company.

When he was able to interview people, Livesey stated: “you could tell they were extremely guarded. There was a fear in their voice.”

Andy Carson, one of the spokespeople for Irving, would get reports about Livesey’s calls to other people and enquire about his story in a hostile way, but refused to speak to Livesey in person. Only university professors, who had tenure for the most part, were willing to speak, but some also refused out of fear.

Livesey resorted to comparing New Brunswick’s demographics to those of other places in order to see if New Brunswickers were really doing better than other places. “It was the opposite,” concluded Livesey; the province had the lowest median income, the highest average suicide rate, high unemployment rates, the highest out-migration, high illiteracy, high poverty, high taxation, etc. Even the provincial power company is hiring its prices every year by two per cent while it subsidizes power for Irving-owned businesses.

The examples of Irving profiting from various governments are endless. In 2013, it came out that the City of Moncton taxpayers paid $88,000 per year to the Moncton Wildcats hockey team to compensate for loss of income in its corporate box. Robert Irving owns the Moncton Wildcats. Irving also received a $200 million grant to refurbish his Halifax shipyard a few years ago, but went abroad to look for workers for the shipbuilding operation.

Irving is currently financing “dog and pony shows” to promote the use of glyphosate in forestry operations as safe, according to Livesey, to whom this most recent issue as “the key” to understanding Irving’s influence on the province. Despite repeated warnings about health and environmental effects, Livesey said glyphosate continues to be sprayed only because of forestry interests.

Brotherly love?

Besides the way the Irvings treat New Brunswick, inside the family, Livesey said “they don’t necessarily treat each other very well.” Brothers Arthur and JR Irving are apparently not friendly any more.

Kenneth Irving, the son of Arthur, abruptly left the position of CEO after a mental health breakdown. Two years later, there was a bizarre lawsuit that ended up in the Bermuda courts between Kenneth Irving and Arthur Irving about the trusts that had been set up and would be divided up in Arthur’s will. What this really was about was “to re-establish his relationship to his father,” stated Livesey.

After the release of Jacques Politr’s book, Irving vs. Irving, the Irvings brought a formal complaint to the CBC against the CBC reporter for some of his tweets, showing that the “company does not forgive easily,” said Livesey.

When asked about how long we can expect the Irving empire to exist by an audience member, Livesey responded, “most corporations are in rough shape by the third generation.” Livesey thinks that in 10-15 years, parts of the Irving empire will be sold off.

Irving vs Other Media

Livesey’s Report on Business story received two letters of complaint when his original story came out. Livesey was a freelance reporter at the time and managed to come to an agreement with the newspapers. However, Livesey had to confront the Irvings once again when he published The National Observer series.

Irving Oil never responded to his letters previous to the stories coming out, but suddenly an extensive feature appeared in The Financial Post. According to Livesey, this was “a puff piece” interview with Arthur Irving with no mention of the internal troubles of the Irving family. For its part, JD Irving Ltd. would respond to the letters, through their corporate lawyer and through Mary Keith, their Vice President Communications. Each of their letters would start off in a “nasty” and “over-the-top” way, according to Livesey, denouncing his nosy investigative work.

Livesey came to the conclusion that it’s only media outside the province that ends up writing about New Brunswick. Livesey is of the opinion that, “This is where the NB Media Co-op, in its effort to create a non-Irving media outlet, is very important.”

Livesey also recognized Miles Howe’s work with the now-defunct Halifax Media Co-op. Howe submitted several Right to Information Requests and uncovered intense pressure by the Irwins on the provincial government. Howe’s work was “an exercise in poverty,” said Livesey, since he was making well under $20,000/year. According to Livesey, the New Brunswick CBC, for its part, “must not appear to be subjective” so, despite having done some good reporting in Saint John, its reporting is limited in its scope.

New Brunswick is “an extremely challenging environment,” for reporters, said Livesey, but that hope that Irving will no longer be able to “control the message” as much as they were in the past, mostly because of social media.

In a final reference to the forestry sector and the glyphosate controversy, Livesey assured the audience that the Irvins are not heeding the best interests of New Brunswickers, as the recent Dr. Elith Cleary affair proves. Dr. Cleary, New Brunswick’s former Chief Medical Officer of Health, was preparing to release a report on the effects of glyphosate when she was abruptly fired. Livesey concluded by saying: “the Irvins are the cause of much of the problem and not the solution.”

Sophie M. Lavoie is an editorial board member of the NB Media Co-op.
Federal prisoners have launched a court challenge seeking to have their wages increased following a two-year standstill. The prisoners argue that their low wages are unfair, given that they are working in hazardous conditions and facing the risk of violence.

According to the prisoners, their wages are insufficient to meet their basic needs, including food, housing, and healthcare. They also argue that their work is essential to the operation of the prison, and that they should be compensated accordingly. The prisoners are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which has been involved in other cases related to wages and working conditions for federal prisoners.

The government, on the other hand, argues that the current wage freeze is necessary to protect the financial stability of the federal prison system. The government also argues that the prisoners have access to a range of benefits, including healthcare, education, and recreation, which they would not have if they were not incarcerated.

The case is significant because it addresses the issue of fair compensation for federal prisoners. It is also likely to set a precedent for other prisoners who may be seeking wage increases in similar situations.

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**Community Calendar**

To list your community event, email info@nbmediacoop.org. For an updated listing of events, visit our website at nbmediacoop.org.

**AfroFest**, Oct. 28-29 at the Fredericton Inn Hotel. The goal is to celebrate African culture, heritage, dance, history, food, workshops, arts and cultures.

**Rebeca Lane**, Wednesday, Nov. 1 at 7:00pm at the Fredericton Inn Hotel. A young woman who passed away on her first day of school, a resolution, he wanted to give J.D. Irving representatives a day to tell us they would be spraying around us, next to that area. J.D. Irving has cleared it and is about to spray. "Last time we didn't even know they were spraying just across the street," she said. "It's a lot of our hardwood. I'd like to tell J.D. Irving that we just want to make a living here, but also we're concerned about the risks to fish and game, the impact on forest diversity and local waterways, as well as the probable link to cancer for exposed citizens."

Ganong said that, before Council makes a decision on such a resolution, he wanted to give J.D. Irving representatives a chance to present their perspective to councillors. The company is to be given an opportunity to present its perspective before the council.

The residents, holding colourful signs calling for forest herbicide spraying to stop, expressed frustration that their tax dollars are being used to pay for the current spray program.

Earlier in August, Stop Spraying NB, an organization that has formed to oppose forest spraying, made a presentation to Petricodac Village Council. The group asked the village to pass a motion against the spraying of the forest because of the risks to fish and game, the impact on forest diversity and local waterways, as well as the probable link to cancer for exposed citizens.

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