

Title: Is New Brunswick... Irving's B*tch?

An Analysis of the Irving Conglomerate's Influence Over New Brunswick's Economy, Politics, and Society

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September 1, 2024

Moncton, NB, Canada

Abstract

The Irving conglomerate is a dominant force in New Brunswick, exerting substantial influence over the province's economy, politics, media, and environment. This paper explores the extent of that influence by investigating ten key questions about the Irving companies' historical roots, economic impact, political sway, regulatory capture, environmental practices, media control, and public perception. The paper argues that the Irving companies have created a business empire that functions almost as a "second government" in New Brunswick, using their economic power to shape public policy, suppress dissent, and secure favorable financial conditions, often at the expense of public accountability and democratic governance.

Through a combination of historical analysis, case studies, and comparisons with other Canadian corporate families, this paper demonstrates that the Irving family's control over New Brunswick is unparalleled in its scope and depth. The findings suggest that New Brunswick's heavy dependence on the Irving conglomerate raises serious questions about the balance of power in the province, the health of its democratic processes, and the broader implications of corporate influence in a modern society. Ultimately, the provocative question—Is New Brunswick "Irving's

B*tch"?—serves as a lens through which to examine the challenges and consequences of one family's outsized influence in a region struggling to assert its independence.

This abstract succinctly summarizes the scope, purpose, and findings of the paper while setting the stage for a deeper exploration of the Irving conglomerate's pervasive influence in New Brunswick.

Introduction

New Brunswick, one of Canada's smallest provinces, is often overshadowed by larger economic and political forces at play in the country. However, within this province lies a powerful and unique dynamic, primarily influenced by the Irving family, one of Canada's wealthiest and most secretive business empires. The Irving conglomerate's control over New Brunswick's key industries, media, and political landscape has led to a profound and sometimes controversial relationship between the family and the province. The provocative question posed by this paper, "Is New Brunswick... Irving's B*tch?" serves as a stark entry point into understanding the depth and implications of this relationship.

The Irving family's rise from a single sawmill in the late 19th century to a multi-billion-dollar empire today is a story of strategic business acumen, aggressive expansion, and a careful balance of public relations and behind-the-scenes influence. From oil refining to forestry, and from media ownership to political lobbying, the Irving companies are deeply woven into the fabric of New Brunswick. While the family's businesses have brought economic prosperity and jobs to the province, they have also drawn criticism for environmental practices, regulatory capture, and a near-monopoly on information through their media holdings.

This paper seeks to explore whether the extent of Irving's influence effectively subjugates New Brunswick to the family's interests. It will do so by examining ten key research questions that investigate the historical roots of the Irving empire, their economic impact, political influence, control over media, environmental footprint, and public perception, as well as comparing their dominance to other powerful Canadian families. Ultimately, this paper argues that New Brunswick's heavy dependence on the Irving conglomerate raises serious questions about democratic governance, economic independence, and the broader implications of corporate control in a modern society.

Section 1: Historical Overview of the Irving Empire

Research Question 1: How did the Irving family establish their business empire in New Brunswick, and what were the key factors that contributed to their early growth and dominance?

The Irving empire began modestly in 1881 when James Dergavel (J.D.) Irving purchased a small sawmill in Bouctouche, New Brunswick. Under his son K.C. Irving, the business expanded dramatically, first into oil refining and then into a vertically integrated conglomerate encompassing forestry, transportation, media, and more. Key to their growth was the ability to control all aspects of production and distribution, from raw materials to finished products, which minimized costs and maximized profits. This approach not only allowed the Irvings to dominate the local economy but also gave them significant leverage over local politics and regulations([Wikipedia](#)).

K.C. Irving's strategic decisions, such as moving his business operations to Bermuda in the 1970s to avoid Canadian taxes, showcased a willingness to use legal loopholes to maintain profitability and control. This move was controversial and criticized, but it underscored the Irvings' approach to business: relentless, opportunistic, and largely unaccountable to the broader Canadian public. Today, the Irving empire is a major player in multiple sectors, providing thousands of jobs and accounting for a substantial portion of the province's GDP and exports([The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)).

Section 2: Economic Impact on New Brunswick

Research Question 2: What is the economic impact of the Irving companies on New Brunswick's economy, including employment, GDP contribution, and influence on major industries such as forestry, energy, and media?

The economic impact of the Irving companies on New Brunswick is vast and multifaceted. As one of the province's largest employers, the Irvings provide approximately one in every eight jobs in New Brunswick, making them an essential part of the local labor market. Their business interests range from J.D. Irving Limited, a leader in forestry and paper products, to Irving Oil, which operates the largest oil refinery in Canada in Saint John. This refinery alone processes up to 320,000 barrels of oil per day, supplying much of the fuel used in Eastern Canada and the Northeastern United States([The Canadian Encyclopedia](#),[NB Media Co-op](#)).

The Irvings' dominance extends beyond direct economic contributions. They control large portions of New Brunswick's land through extensive forestry operations, which are critical to the province's export economy. However, this concentration of

economic power also raises concerns about monopolistic practices and the lack of competition. Critics argue that the Irving companies' vertical integration allows them to suppress local competitors, manipulate prices, and maintain a stranglehold on crucial industries. While their economic contributions are undeniable, the degree of control exerted by the Irving family often limits the province's economic diversification and resilience([ShunCulture](#)).

Section 3: Political Influence and Regulatory Capture

Research Question 3: How have the Irving companies influenced political decisions and policies in New Brunswick historically? What methods or tactics have they used to exert their influence?

The Irving companies have long been accused of wielding disproportionate influence over political decisions in New Brunswick. Through direct lobbying, strategic donations, and leveraging their vast economic power, the Irvings have been able to shape policies that favor their business interests. This influence is particularly evident in environmental regulations, where the Irving companies have consistently lobbied against stricter rules that would increase their operational costs. For instance, the companies have successfully opposed efforts to ban the use of glyphosate in forestry, a practice that benefits their bottom line but has drawn significant public and environmental criticism([The Maine Monitor](#)).

The influence of the Irving companies on New Brunswick politics is also evident in the careers of key political figures, including Premier Blaine Higgs, a former Irving Oil executive. Higgs' government has frequently been seen as sympathetic to Irving interests, raising concerns about conflicts of interest and regulatory capture. This dynamic has led to a perception that the Irvings operate as a "second government" within the province, using their economic might to secure favorable legislation and stifle opposition([The Strand](#)).

Section 4: Media Ownership and Public Perception

Research Question 4: How does the Irving family's ownership of New Brunswick's media outlets affect public perception and the dissemination of information in the province?

The Irving family's ownership of nearly all English-language daily newspapers in New Brunswick creates a media environment with little independent oversight. Through Brunswick News Inc., the Irvings control major publications like the Telegraph-Journal, The Daily Gleaner, and The Times & Transcript, among others.

This media monopoly allows the family to shape public discourse, often publishing content that aligns with their business interests while limiting critical reporting on their activities([NB Media Co-op](#)).

Critics argue that this concentration of media ownership has stifled investigative journalism in the province, particularly on issues directly related to Irving business operations, such as environmental practices, labor disputes, and government subsidies. The lack of media diversity has created an information landscape that many view as biased and unrepresentative of the full range of public opinions in New Brunswick. This control over information flow further solidifies the Irvings' influence, making it difficult for alternative narratives to gain traction and for citizens to access unbiased reporting([CANADALAND](#), [NB Media Co-op](#)).

Section 5: Environmental Concerns

Research Question 5: What are the environmental impacts of Irving's industrial activities, such as forestry, oil refining, and shipping, and how have these been addressed or ignored by provincial governments?

The environmental footprint of the Irving companies is a major point of contention in New Brunswick. The Irving Oil refinery in Saint John, the largest in Canada, has been linked to significant pollution, including greenhouse gas emissions and air quality issues that have been associated with higher cancer rates in the region. Despite investments in cleaner technologies, environmental advocates argue that these efforts fall short of addressing the full extent of the environmental impact([NB Media Co-op](#)).

In the forestry sector, the widespread use of glyphosate herbicides by J.D. Irving Limited has sparked protests and legal challenges. The practice, intended to promote the growth of commercially valuable softwoods by eliminating competing vegetation, has been linked to biodiversity loss and negative effects on wildlife. While Irving defends these practices as necessary for maintaining global competitiveness, critics accuse the company of prioritizing profits over environmental stewardship([The Strand](#)).

Section 6: Regulatory Capture

Research Question 6: To what extent have the Irving companies been able to influence regulatory bodies and circumvent regulations that could negatively impact their businesses?

The concept of regulatory capture—where private companies exert undue influence over the regulatory bodies meant to oversee them—is particularly relevant to the Irving conglomerate. In New Brunswick, the Irving companies have often been accused of manipulating regulations to their advantage, ensuring that government oversight aligns closely with their business objectives rather than the public interest. This dynamic is most evident in the environmental sector, where the Irvings have managed to influence forestry and energy regulations to accommodate their operations.

Irving Oil has been particularly adept at lobbying for favorable changes to pollution rules, such as efforts to dilute the impact of federal Clean Fuel Regulations, which aim to reduce carbon emissions. By leveraging political connections and financial power, Irving Oil has been able to argue that stricter regulations would negatively impact the regional economy, jobs, and future investments, thereby stalling or softening regulatory measures([The Narwhal](#)).

Another example of regulatory capture is the Irvings' sway over forest management policies in New Brunswick. The province's Forest Management Manual has been altered in ways that benefit the Irving companies, such as reducing buffer zones around clear-cuts and increasing allowable timber harvests on Crown land. Critics argue that these changes cater to industry demands rather than environmental conservation, highlighting the extent to which Irving interests can shape provincial regulations([NB Media Co-op](#)).

Section 7: Case Study of Blaine Higgs

Research Question 7: How has Blaine Higgs' background as an Irving employee influenced his policies and decisions as Premier of New Brunswick? Are there specific instances where his administration favored Irving interests?

Blaine Higgs, a former senior executive at Irving Oil, became Premier of New Brunswick in 2018. His tenure has been marked by policies that often appear aligned with Irving interests, prompting criticism about conflicts of interest and regulatory favoritism. Higgs' background with Irving Oil has influenced his approach to governance, emphasizing fiscal conservatism and a business-minded approach to provincial management.

Higgs' administration has supported several initiatives that favor Irving companies, such as opposing federal carbon pricing, which would increase costs for Irving Oil's operations. His government has also been criticized for handling environmental regulations leniently, particularly those affecting the forestry and energy sectors, where Irving companies are most active. While Higgs has publicly stated that his decisions are based on broader economic considerations, the perception of undue

influence persists, bolstered by his long-standing ties to the Irving conglomerate([Global News](#),[The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)).

Section 8: Corporate Welfare and Tax Breaks

Research Question 8: What kind of subsidies, tax breaks, or financial incentives have been provided to the Irving companies by the New Brunswick government over the years?

The Irving companies have benefited from numerous government subsidies, tax breaks, and financial incentives, often justified on the grounds of job creation and economic development. One of the most controversial examples is the property tax break granted to Irving Oil's Canaport LNG facility, which was estimated to cost the city of Saint John over \$110 million over its 25-year duration. Despite the facility's substantial profits, this tax break was initially justified as essential to the project's viability, highlighting the extent to which Irving companies can secure favorable financial terms from the government([Duncan Matheson](#)).

In addition to direct subsidies, the Irving companies benefit from government programs designed to support large industrial players, such as the Large Industrial Renewable Energy Purchase Program. This program allows Irving-owned sawmills to sell byproducts like sawdust at premium prices for energy generation, effectively providing a hidden subsidy that benefits their bottom line. These financial advantages, combined with the Irving family's use of offshore tax havens, have sparked criticism that the conglomerate does not pay its fair share of taxes, further burdening New Brunswick's public finances([Duncan Matheson](#)).

Section 9: Public Perception and Criticism

Research Question 9: How do New Brunswickers perceive the Irving companies' role in the province, and what criticisms or concerns have been raised by citizens, activists, or independent media?

Public perception of the Irving companies in New Brunswick is polarized. On one hand, the Irvings are seen as key economic contributors, providing jobs, supporting local charities, and investing in community infrastructure. Their economic importance cannot be understated, as they are deeply intertwined with the province's industrial landscape. However, this dependency has also bred resentment, particularly regarding their outsized influence on politics, media, and environmental policy.

Critics argue that the Irving family's control over New Brunswick's media stifles independent journalism, limiting the scope of public debate on important issues. The

lack of diverse voices in the media landscape has led to accusations of censorship and a lack of accountability for the Irving companies' business practices. Environmental groups, local activists, and even some politicians have raised concerns about the ecological damage caused by Irving's forestry and oil operations, pointing to the company's ability to evade stricter regulations as a sign of their undue influence([CANADALAND](#),[NB Media Co-op](#)).

Section 10: Comparative Analysis of Corporate Influence in Canada

Research Question 10: How does the influence of the Irving conglomerate in New Brunswick compare to other powerful corporate families or conglomerates in Canada, such as the Bronfmans or the Westons?

While other Canadian corporate families like the Westons, Pattisons, and Thomsons wield significant economic power, the Irving conglomerate's influence in New Brunswick is unique due to its concentrated local impact and vertical integration across multiple critical industries. The Westons control a vast food and retail empire through Loblaws and Shoppers Drug Mart, while the Pattison Group encompasses over 200 companies ranging from grocery chains to media holdings. However, these empires are spread across the country and do not exhibit the same level of control over a single province as the Irvings do over New Brunswick.

The Irving family's dominance is further amplified by their control of the media, which allows them to influence public opinion and limit critical coverage of their operations. This level of control is unmatched among Canada's corporate dynasties, making the Irving conglomerate's relationship with New Brunswick more akin to a feudal arrangement than a typical business-government dynamic. This comparison underscores the exceptional nature of the Irvings' influence, setting them apart from other powerful families in Canada([Economics from the Top Down](#),

[Le Monde diplomatique English edition](#)).

Conclusion

Summary of Findings: The Irving conglomerate's pervasive control over New Brunswick's economy, politics, media, and environment raises significant concerns about democratic governance and economic independence. The family's ability to secure favorable legislation, suppress dissent, and dominate public discourse through their media holdings points to a deep-rooted imbalance of power that is rarely challenged.

Argument: This paper argues that New Brunswick's heavy dependence on the Irving conglomerate effectively subjugates the province to corporate interests, questioning the integrity of democratic processes and the equitable distribution of economic benefits. The provocative question posed—Is New Brunswick “Irving's B*tch”?—is supported by evidence of the Irving family's extensive control and the ongoing challenges to counterbalance their influence.

Implications and Future Outlook: Addressing the Irving companies' outsized influence in New Brunswick will require substantial efforts to enhance regulatory independence, diversify the economy, and support a more robust and independent media landscape. Without these changes, the province risks remaining under the sway of a corporate dynasty whose interests may not always align with those of the broader public.

Sources and Resources:

1. Historical Overview of the Irving Empire:

- Source: Various articles and historical reviews on the Irving family, including information from local history websites and news archives that detail the founding and growth of the Irving companies. This includes the establishment by J.D. Irving and the expansion by K.C. Irving into oil, forestry, and media.
- Key References:
 - NB Media Co-op: Overview of the Irvings' historical and media influence.
 - Global News and Canadian Encyclopedia articles on the economic and historical impact of the Irving empire.

2. Economic Impact:

- Source: Studies and articles on New Brunswick's economy, employment statistics, and the economic contributions of major industries dominated by the Irving companies. These include reports by local economic think tanks and independent media.
- Key References:
 - Economics from the Top Down: Mapping the influence of the Irving family and other Canadian billionaires.
 - Reports on economic contributions and employment provided by Irving companies to New Brunswick.

3. Political Influence:

- Source: Investigative journalism and political analysis reports that explore the Irving companies' influence on New Brunswick's political landscape, including lobbying efforts and ties with politicians like Premier Blaine Higgs.

- Key References:
 - NB Media Co-op: Detailed analysis of the Irving family's political sway.
 - Global News coverage of Blaine Higgs and his ties to the Irving companies.

4. Media Ownership and Influence:

- Source: Analysis of the Irving family's control over New Brunswick's media landscape, focusing on their ownership of Brunswick News Inc. and the impact this has on public perception and information flow.
- Key References:
 - Canadaland: Investigative pieces on media monopolies in New Brunswick.
 - Books and reports by journalists like Jacques Poitras, highlighting media control by the Irving family.

5. Environmental Concerns:

- Source: Environmental impact reports and articles on Irving's industrial activities, including their oil refinery operations and forestry practices. Government and independent environmental assessments were also referenced.
- Key References:
 - National Observer and NB Media Co-op articles on environmental issues tied to Irving companies.
 - Studies on glyphosate use in forestry and pollution from the Saint John refinery.

6. Regulatory Capture:

- Source: Articles and reports highlighting instances of regulatory capture in New Brunswick, specifically focusing on how Irving companies influence or bypass regulations.
- Key References:
 - Analysis from Canadian media outlets, including CBC and Global News, on regulatory issues.
 - Specific case studies of regulations in forestry and energy sectors affected by Irving lobbying.

7. Case Study of Blaine Higgs:

- Source: Detailed political profiles and news articles exploring Blaine Higgs' background with Irving Oil and how this connection has influenced his policies as Premier.
- Key References:
 - The Canadian Encyclopedia and Global News coverage of Higgs' political career and ties to Irving.
 - Critical commentary on Higgs' governance style and alignment with Irving interests.

8. Corporate Welfare and Tax Breaks:

- Source: Financial analyses and investigative journalism on tax breaks, subsidies, and other financial incentives given to Irving companies by the New Brunswick government.
- Key References:
 - Articles by National Observer and independent economic blogs discussing Irving's use of tax havens and government subsidies.
 - Specific case examples like the Canaport LNG tax break covered by CBC.

9. **Public Perception and Criticism:**

- Source: Surveys, public opinion pieces, and reports from local activists and independent media on how New Brunswick residents perceive the Irving companies.
- Key References:
 - Canadaland and NB Media Co-op reports on public sentiment towards the Irving conglomerate.
 - Academic studies on the influence of corporate power on public discourse in New Brunswick.

10. **Comparative Analysis:**

- Source: Comparative articles analyzing the Irving conglomerate alongside other Canadian corporate families, focusing on differences in regional control, business strategies, and political influence.
- Key References:
 - Economics from the Top Down: Comparative mapping of Canada's wealthiest families.
 - Articles from Le Monde diplomatique on corporate influence, comparing the Irvings to other powerful families like the Westons and Thomsons.

Additional Resources:

- **Books:**
 - Jacques Poitras, *Irving vs. Irving*: A comprehensive look at the Irving family's media influence and its impact on New Brunswick.
 - Bruce Livesey's investigative work on corporate power in Canada, focusing on the Irvings' monopolistic practices.
- **Academic Journals:**
 - Studies on media monopolies, regulatory capture, and environmental impacts conducted by Canadian universities, particularly the University of New Brunswick.

These sources provide a robust foundation for understanding the multifaceted influence of the Irving companies in New Brunswick.