

## RIM's Jim Balsillie: A man in motion

**CHRIS JOHNSTON, THE CANADIAN PRESS**

WATERLOO -- It's hardly surprising that Jim Balsillie, one half of the entrepreneurial Canadian duo that taught the world to type with their thumbs, has been rubbing elbows of late with some of the planet's most powerful movers and shakers.

This time, though, it's not about expanding the reach of the revolutionary BlackBerry or resurrecting Balsillie's own controversial, on again-off again bid to own a National Hockey League franchise.

Indeed, the latest big project for Canada's most prominent billionaire businessman is a lot like the man himself: powerful, complicated and, if all goes according to plan, a great deal larger than the sum of its parts.

"It's wildly important, but it's (also) wildly complex and ambitious," the 47-year-old co-chief executive of BlackBerry inventor Research In Motion said during an interview at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, his global think-tank.

"I sort of figured that because I was young and I was energetic that this is something that I could stay with for a long time."

It's Balsillie's goal to give Canada more of a leading role on the world stage, and he's not afraid to use his stature and his money on giving some of the country's brightest minds a chance to make it happen.

Balsillie has donated \$100 million in recent years to establish separate think-tanks on global issues and Canadian foreign policy, as well as the Balsillie School of International Affairs in his adoptive hometown of Waterloo.

Each of the three initiatives aims to give Canadian academics and analysts the resources needed to become authorities on international issues.

"I'm a big believer in the power of compounding, which is kind of how we approached RIM," he said. "You just stay with it, stay with it, and all of a sudden momentum comes. You're not looking for something overnight."

Philanthropic pursuits are nothing new for the billionaire set. But Balsillie chases his with a zeal that makes his contemporaries look like they're standing still.

Consider his schedule, for instance. He spent the weekend hosting a conference on China's emergence as a world power, joined by more than 200 leading experts in international affairs, including Joe Clark, former Swedish prime minister Ola Ullsten and members of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

On Monday, Balsillie co-hosted a gala dinner for the Canadian International Council, which he founded last year with the ambitious goal of strengthening Canada's role on the world stage.

During the lavish dinner at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Balsillie held the attention of hundreds of people in the room -- Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, a number of prominent Liberals likely to run for the party's leadership and a wide array of academics and business leaders among them -- as he talked about the "financial mushroom cloud" that has hit the world.

As was the case during the weekend conference, the focus of the evening was on China -- a country Balsillie predicted would play a key role in the world economy's eventual recovery.

He also sent a subtle message to the Conservative government, urging closer relations with the Chinese.

"We need to press the reset button on our view of China."



THE CANADIAN PRESS/ Dave Chidley  
Jim Balsillie, Co-CEO of Research In Motion, poses in the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), in Waterloo.



Despite an MBA from Harvard, Balsillie doesn't have a background in academia or policy-making, but the passion in his voice makes it clear he thoroughly enjoys the company of those who do.

"I'm comfortable because I don't try to pretend I'm the smart guy," he said during the interview. "I enjoy hearing what these people have to say, I enjoy learning and I enjoy asking questions. But I don't pretend I'm the expert, any more than when I play pick-up hockey with NHLers that I start to believe I'm an NHL-calibre hockey player. I'm just a kid playing a bunch of great athletes."

It's an opinion that Balsillie began to form more than a decade ago as RIM's growing business took him to different parts of the world and got him thinking more about international affairs.

Around the same time, he developed a desire to contribute to the social sciences in much the same way partner Mike Lazaridis decided in 1999 to foster natural-science research with the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics.

Lazaridis's pet project began research operations in 2001, and has grown to include more than 60 resident researchers plumbing the depths of science's most complex theoretical corners -- areas like particle physics, quantum gravity and superstring theory.

Following his partner's lead, Balsillie founded CIGI in 2002, and has continued with his other initiatives in the years since, with a common thread running through them all.

"He's always had this desire to move beyond the North American continent to find out how the world works," said John English, CIGI's executive director and a friend of Balsillie's for about 15 years.

"I think the success of what he's done -- in business as well as this -- is to think broadly and internationally. He's intrigued by the rest of the world."

In Balsillie's view, an understanding of what's happening abroad has never been more important, with issues in a global "borderless society" -- the U.S. credit crisis, climate change, international conflict -- impacting Canada more than ever before.

His goal is to educate and engage Canada's brightest minds on global issues so they can better promote Canadian interests and values while playing a key role in helping to solve burning global issues.

A major part of that vision is the Balsillie School of International Affairs, where students examine international affairs across a variety of disciplines.

For Thomas Homer-Dixon, a Victoria-born professor and the school's CIGI Chair of Global Systems, the atmosphere is reminiscent of MIT, where he completed his PhD two decades ago.

"This is not a risk-averse crowd," Homer-Dixon said. "In that sense it's very un-Canadian .... The risk adversity sometimes in this country is a real obstacle to our development and our progress. I feel that less in Waterloo."

Even though Balsillie's fortune was built by the BlackBerry, his contributions to international affairs might ultimately prove his most important and lasting legacy, Homer-Dixon said.

After all, the schools and think-tanks he's building and the people he's helping educate could very well be around long after new technology has made the BlackBerry redundant.

"He said to me that he wants it to last a century," Homer-Dixon said. "There are very few people with that kind of perspective on their personal accomplishments."

True to form, not even Balsillie is certain where it's all headed.

Beyond his next project -- establishing a law school in Waterloo -- Balsillie isn't thinking very far down the road, choosing instead to concentrate almost exclusively on all the little things he needs to do to be successful.

He's learned that there's not much point in focusing on outcomes.

"Any really successful entrepreneur or whatever, it's really about navigating cascading circumstances," Balsillie said. "I don't believe anybody knows precisely how anything's unfolding, not that the least of which is the policy-makers in our current world. It's an illusion of certainty."

His interest in global issues seems genuine, which explains his strong commitment to the causes he's taken up.

"It's very reciprocal in every sense of the word -- it's a life fully lived," he said. "How can you not want to engage with the world and what's going on? For me, it's a great privilege to be part of it."

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Jim Balsillie, shown in the Seagram Museum, home to the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), in Waterloo.



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