

## St Pierre and Miquelon

### Squaring off for a seabed scrap

May 7th 2009 | OTTAWA  
 From The Economist print edition

#### A French speck takes on Canada

DESPITE the promise of its original name—the Islands of the 11,000 Virgins—bestowed by a 16th-century Portuguese explorer, the French archipelago of St Pierre and Miquelon off Canada's east coast is hardly a paradise. It boasts of baking North America's best croissants. Apart from that, its assets are rocks, fog and a strategic location. A brief period of liquor-fuelled prosperity during the Prohibition era in the United States was followed by a long economic decline mirroring that of cod stocks in the surrounding North Atlantic.

The 6,000 residents of this last remnant of the French empire in North America hope the future lies with offshore oil and gas, which has enriched its neighbour, Newfoundland. Pressed by the islanders, the French government plans to file a claim to an area of the extended continental shelf south of the archipelago to a United Nations body which has been set up to administer claims to the seabed around the world. Countries such as France which ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea before May 1999 have until May 13th this year to file their claims. Negotiations will then follow.



Nevertheless, Canada seems to feel threatened by the impending French claim. It said, wrongly, that the matter had been settled by arbitration in 1992 and that it would "take all necessary measures to defend and protect its rights." (Canada has until 2013 to file its claim.) In fact the 1992 decision fixed the maritime boundaries between Canada and the islands, and did not demarcate the continental shelf.

This tussle echoes the conflicting claims filed by Britain and Argentina to the seabed surrounding the Falkland Islands. The *miquelonais* accuse Canada of spying on France during the 1992 proceedings. They think it unfair that the Canadian government should use as the base point for its claim Sable Island, an islet in the Atlantic inhabited by feral horses, seals and a handful of government scientists.

The islanders also worry that France may not fight hard for them. Some still recall rumours in the 1930s that they would be sold to America. Whereas the French government has filed claims complete with detailed maps and scientific data to the UN commission on behalf of the French Antilles, French Guiana, New Caledonia and the Kerguelen Islands off Antarctica, all that is promised for St Pierre and Miquelon is a letter of intent. Perhaps it's time to join Canada.