

The
Economist

Energy policy in Quebec

High-speed gas

Too fast for a green province

Sep 23rd 2010 | OTTAWA

MOST people would be delighted to discover that they were sitting on top of natural gas reserves that could potentially supply their needs for the next century or so. No more worrying about complicated Middle East politics or whether oil supplies are past their peak. Yet in the Canadian province of Quebec, news of abundant gas in the shale beneath the St Lawrence river basin has not been met with unalloyed joy. Although Nathalie Normandeau, the minister of natural resources, calls future self-sufficiency in natural gas a historic opportunity for the French-speaking province, a surprising number of people have stepped forward to say “no thanks” or “not yet”.



That is partly because of Quebec’s good fortune in generating so much hydroelectricity that it exports its surplus to Ontario and to north-eastern United States. It has plans to seek additional customers in both countries. The James Bay project, the biggest clutch of the 60 generating stations owned by Hydro-Québec, a utility owned by the provincial government, generates eight times the power of the Hoover Dam.

This abundance of cheap renewable electricity is the main reason why Quebecers are “finicky” about shale gas, says Christian Bourque, a pollster based in Montreal. It has allowed them to be proudly green. At the Copenhagen summit on climate change in December, officials from Quebec publicly chided their counterparts from Alberta over their failure to reduce carbon emissions from the tar sands in the western province. They also called on the federal government to speed up its lackadaisical efforts to bring in a national plan to reduce emissions.

Environmentalists fret that development of the St Lawrence basin gas deposits would enlarge the province’s carbon footprint. Farmers have a more pragmatic reason for worrying about natural-gas development in what is the most fertile part of the province. They point to complaints in Pennsylvania that hydraulic fracturing or fracking—the high-pressure injection of water and chemicals into the shale to free the natural gas—has polluted water below the surface and on the ground. The governor of New York says that development of a shale formation in the catchment area for New York City will not go ahead until he has “overwhelming evidence” that fracking will not harm water supplies. The Quebec farmers’ union wants the provincial government to allay such concerns before allowing full-scale production.

While the existence of the deposits has been known for some time, it is only recently that new technologies have made the extraction of gas from shale commercially viable. The provincial government plans to issue regulations for the new industry next year. It has expedited the timetable for a public consultation. All this strikes some Quebecers as too rushed. The Parti Québécois, the main opposition, has called for a moratorium.

Officials in Jean Charest’s Liberal provincial government point out that Quebec imports oil and gas worth C\$14 billion (\$14 billion) a year, mostly from western Canada, and will benefit from having supplies closer to home. Use of natural gas emits less carbon than oil. Mr Charest’s administration has been weakened by minor scandals and by revelations that some businessmen in the gas industry have ties to the Liberals. While these charges are unlikely to stop natural-gas development in the province, they may slow it down. Quebec’s governments, including those of

Mr Charest, have spent decades telling Quebecers that they are greener than green. It seems many have believed them.

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