

Shale gas a tough sell in environment-proud Quebec

Les Perreux

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The natural gas trapped in rock thousands of metres beneath the tranquil rich farmland of the St. Lawrence Valley can be tough to crack for natural gas prospectors, but tapping support from the skeptical citizens above is proving even trickier.

To free the gas, drillers fracture a dense layer of gas-bearing shale with a high-pressure blast of chemicals and water in a process known as fracking. Up on the surface, that ominously named technique isn't helping as gas men and their government allies try to sell a natural gas industry to a province better known for its hydro-electric power and disdain for Alberta's oil sands.

Four years ago, shale gas wasn't even in the Quebec government's carefully crafted 10-year energy plan. After dozens of pages dedicated to hydro electricity, a small section spoke of the need "to diversify Quebec's natural gas sources." Now those plans are being redrafted on the fly. Gas prospectors have ramped up exploration drilling, but the province has not kept pace – lacking even the laws to regulate and tax the industry. It has convened a quick environmental review, which opens on Monday, and promised new legislation for spring 2011.

Premier Jean Charest's government has left it to André Caillé, an energy executive once hailed as a hero in the province, to sell the new energy industry with his credibility and charm.

It hasn't exactly gone as planned.

Some 400 years ago, French settlers cleared this land and today their descendants produce much of Canada's fruit, vegetables and dairy, including North America's finest cheese. The flat farmland and rolling green countryside is peppered with picturesque

villages that support those farmers, and the acreages and *pied-à-terre* of city dwellers drawn by peace and quiet.

It's not traditionally a centre of noisy activism. But one evening this week, when Mr. Caillé made his pitch in a packed and steaming conference room on the outskirts of Saint-Hyacinthe, the descendents of those settlers greeted him with hoots and hollers of derision.

When Mr. Caillé asked for calm, young and elderly alike called him a liar and a thief. The French words for shale gas (*gaz de schiste*) were quickly transformed into shouts of "We don't want your *gaz de shit!*"

Two minutes later, Mr. Caillé was gone, ushered out by police worried about his safety. He'd lost the room in much the same way the government may be losing the province.

When gas companies went looking for a leader to reassure the people, Mr. Caillé was top of the list. He was the sweater-wearing fatherly figure who helped lead anxious and freezing Quebeckers through the winter ice storm of 1998, when he was president of venerated Hydro-Québec. It was his power lines that failed, but many Quebeckers saw a leader trying to turn the lights back on.

Mr. Caillé, who now heads the province's brand new oil and gas producers association, said he always knew gas would provoke a culture shock. A long line of Quebec leaders have cultivated a green image based on hydro electricity while dismissing the dirty fossil fuel energy producers to the west.

"The tumult you see in the meetings are a tradition in Quebec. Quebeckers have a voice that carries," Mr. Caillé said. "But there has been no violence, and there will be no violence. They just have strong vocal cords. The Jesuits used to teach us, 'When your argument is weak, raise your voice.' It's in our culture."

Much of the current anger is based on exaggeration, Mr. Caillé said, pointing out that just three shale gas rigs are operating in Quebec, compared with 300 drilling in similar-sized fields in British Columbia and Alberta.

But suspicion still grows, and not just among those at a public meeting. Many of the province's opinion leaders wonder what's the rush. They know that improper drilling practices in places like Pennsylvania have contaminated ground, ruined peaceful countryside and poisoned wells. They look at New York state's moratorium on drilling in areas that supply water to New York City and they want a pause, too.

"We're not here to blow up the industry, our "No" is strictly a response to the government saying, 'Yes, yes, yes,' " said Pierre Batellier of St.-Marc-sur-Richelieu, about

40 minutes outside of Montreal, where his community group blocked a recent attempt at exploration.

Chants of “moratorium” ring out at public meetings, echoing calls from municipal leaders, citizens groups and environmentalists. But there will be no halt, according to deputy premier and Natural Resources Minister Nathalie Normandeau – whose critics deride her as “Drill Baby Drill” Normandeau.

“I don’t believe that deep down people are against it. It’s just that they need to be reassured, to have answers,” said Ms. Normandeau, who added that the environmental review will provide those answers.

But the government is sending mixed messages. One day before Mr. Caillé was booed from the stage, Ms. Normandeau announced a moratorium on offshore drilling in the St. Lawrence estuary, pending a full environmental impact study. That study will stretch into 2012. The time allotted for the shale gas review is five months.

“The reaction isn’t completely surprising,” said Christian Vanasse, a comedian who is now a prominent opponent of shale gas. “The white francophones who live in this valley are living with what the natives up north have been putting up with for years. As long as Hydro-Québec was flooding vast distant lands, we didn’t give a shit and thought we were green.

“There must be Indians who are laughing their asses off at us right now.”