

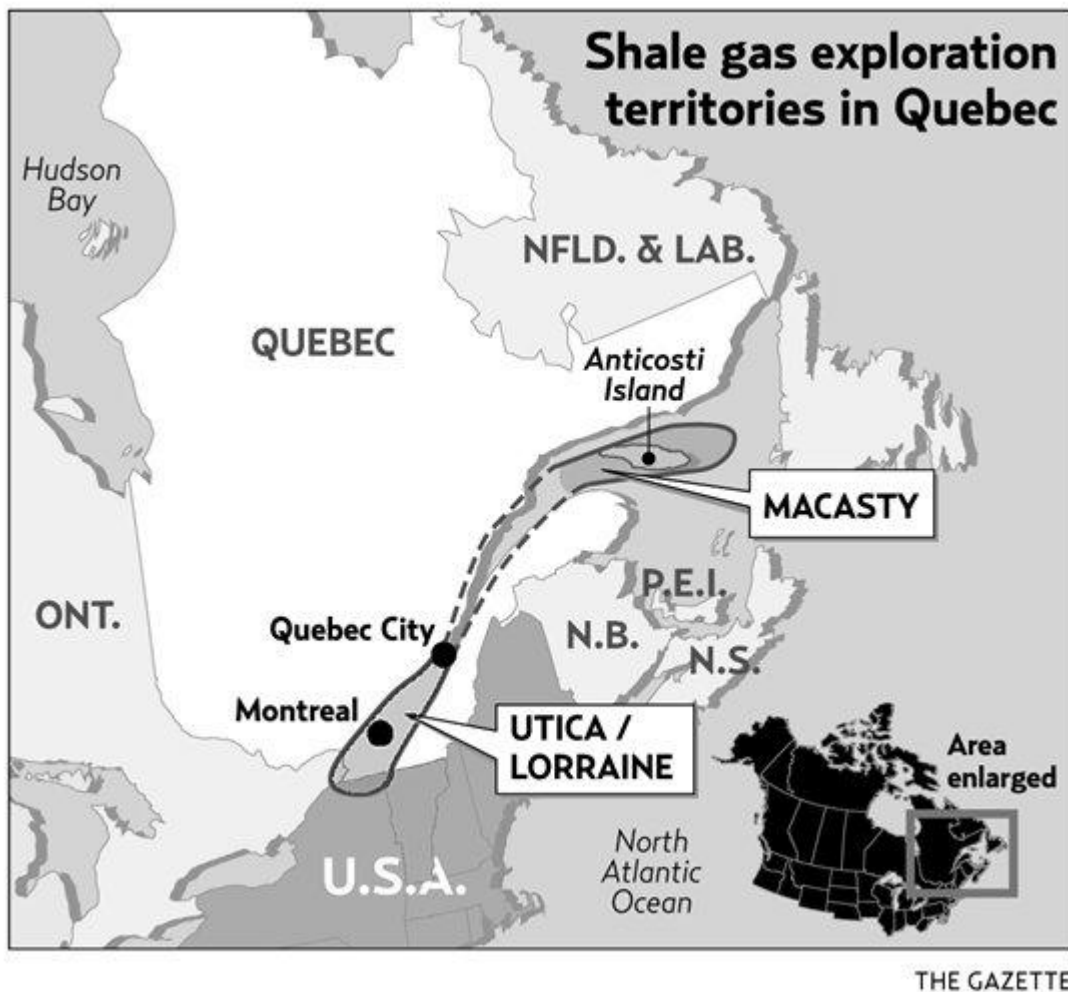
## Committee widens offshore drilling probe to include shale gas, oil sands

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A parliamentary committee is launching a study of all sources of "unconventional" petroleum development in Canada, including not only deepwater drilling but also shale-gas exploration and oil-sands development.

Before Parliament rose for the summer, the House of Commons Natural Resources Committee had been studying Canada's preparedness for an offshore oil spill on the scale of the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. But the committee will now expand the scope of its efforts to look at the entire issue of Canada's "energy security" as oil and gas firms push into uncharted territory in their quest for unconventional energy sources.

In a recent study, the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto warned that shale-gas development could threaten water supplies unless properly regulated.



*Map of shale-gas exploration in Quebec*

Source: Montreal Gazette

"The security of the environment and the economy are connected to this question: what you do about shale gas in Quebec, what do you do about Arctic drilling, what do you do about very, very deep offshore drilling off the coast of Newfoundland?" said New Democrat MP Nathan Cullen, who has been pushing the committee to take a hard look at offshore drilling. "There's a (regulatory) vacuum. There's a gap. And I would argue what happened in the Gulf is a result of exactly that kind of gap."

Naturally, there's a political angle to the expanded study by the committee, where the opposition has a majority of the members. This summer, the House of Commons unanimously passed a motion put forward by New Democrat MP Linda Duncan that called on the government to launch a "thorough review" of all federal laws, regulations and policies pertaining to the development of "unconventional sources of oil and gas." But even though the Conservatives supported the motion, the government has since deferred to a review of offshore drilling being conducted by the National Energy Board, which oversees drilling in Canada's Arctic waters. The opposition clearly feel the government isn't living up to its commitments, and are hoping to embarrass the Conservatives with the expanded committee probe.

The committee also plans to invite officials from the National Energy Board, which oversees offshore drilling in Canada's Arctic, and the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board, which regulates drilling off the Newfoundland coast, to further discuss regulation of the offshore oil industry.

Last month, Cullen urged the committee to recall NEB chairman Gaétan Caron to explain his testimony in the spring about digging relief wells, widely seen as the most reliable way to kill a leaking well, in the Beaufort Sea. When asked how long it would take to drill a relief well during his last appearance before the committee, Caron said he didn't have that information, even though briefing notes obtained by Postmedia News estimated it could take three years. Caron has denied misleading the committee in his original testimony.

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