

BHP, Woodside build bridges with ALP

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AS LABOR takes control of the levers of national political power, two big resources companies have built firm links with the new Federal Government. One ALP insider has just joined BHP, while another has left Woodside to take up a lower house seat and a parliamentary secretary's position in Canberra.

BHP Billiton announced on Friday it had appointed veteran ALP backroom operator Geoff Walsh as its director of public affairs.

Walsh, 54, is a former adviser to prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. After the Keating Government's defeat, he served as Australian consul-general in Hong Kong from 1995-1998 followed by a stint as the ALP's national secretary. His most recent job was as former Victorian Premier Steve Bracks' chief of staff.

Walsh's strong Labor connections are expected to help BHP adjust to life under the Rudd Government.

Meanwhile, Walsh's predecessor as national secretary, Gary Gray, quit Woodside early this year to stand for election in Kim Beazley's old seat of Brand and won the seat on November 23.

Incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has appointed Gray as parliamentary secretary for infrastructure, transport and regional development with special responsibility for northern and regional Australia.

Announcing the appointment, Rudd said: "Gary Gray has excellent relations with the business community, he is well entrenched in Western Australia, however, his national experience is formidable including his time in the Northern Territory."

Gray served as ALP national secretary for almost seven years from 1993 to 1999, when he joined Woodside as an advisor and was later promoted to corporate affairs director.

At the time of Gray's departure from the liquefied natural gas operator, Woodside managing director Don Voelte said Gray's political skills and connections had been important in dealing with foreign governments such as China, Libya and East Timor.