

NT government calls August 9 election

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Voters in the Northern Territory will head to the polls next month, almost a year early, in a bid by Labor to provide "certainty" for a \$12 billion Japanese gas plant.

Northern Territory Chief Minister Paul Henderson had until June next year to call an election, and had consistently said he would see out a full term unless there was an "exceptional circumstance".

But on Monday he announced an August 9 poll at which Labor will seek a third successive term in power, after ending 27 years of Country Liberal Party (CLP) rule in 2001.

Announcing the poll, Mr Henderson said the Japanese oil and gas giant Inpex, which is currently weighing Darwin harbour against a site in Western Australia for a liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant, needed "certainty".

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity ... every vote in this election will be vital for securing the Inpex gas plant."

But Mr Henderson's explanation for the early poll prompted outrage from CLP leader Terry Mills, who said Labor was "scurrying" to the polls to avoid scrutiny of its law and order failings.

"That is nonsense ... the Country Liberals are 110 per cent behind the Inpex project," Mr Mills said.

"There is no difference between the two positions, Inpex knows that, the chief minister knows that, I know it, most Territorians know it."

Inpex had originally planned to build an LNG plant on the Maret Islands, about 200km north of Broome, to process gas shipped from its Browse Basin's Ichthys gas field.

But environmentalists seeking to protect the Kimberley coast have put a brake on negotiations while Darwin, with a deal that would see gas piped 900km to a new LNG plant at Middle Arm, threw its hat into the ring.

Mr Mills initially opposed the building of a gas plant at Middle Arm but backflipped earlier this year following an assessment of the site.

Mr Henderson on Monday sought to capitalise on the CLP's backflip.

"Terry Mills and the CLP would risk this project for the Northern Territory, let me not understate that," said Mr Henderson, who last week released a report that found the project would inject \$50 billion into the NT economy over two decades.

He said Inpex would make a decision in the next "couple of months" about where it will build the plant, ahead of a final call on the site in late 2009.

Mr Henderson, who took over from Clare Martin as chief minister in November last year, sidestepped questions about whether he would resign if the territory lost its bid for the project.

He also made no promises about the final outcome.

"I can't issue that guarantee," he said.

Labor came to power for the first time in the NT with victory in the 2001 election.

It was re-elected in a historic landslide in 2005, winning 19 of the 25 seats in parliament. The Country Liberals have four seats and there are two independents.

Mr Henderson said the election would be close.

Over the next 19 days Territorians will hear more tough talk on crime, education initiatives and "strong plans" for closing the gap on indigenous disadvantage, he said.

It would need a swing of 16.2 per cent against Labor to unseat the government.

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