

Territory leader Paul Henderson stands by early election call

Natasha Robinson | *August 13, 2008*

CHIEF Minister Paul Henderson yesterday stood by his decision to call an early election in the Northern Territory to secure a gas plant, despite the electoral backlash on Saturday that cost the Government a third of its seats.

But the Japanese company behind the proposed plant, Inpex, said the question of which government was in power in the Territory was not a factor in its decision on whether to build the plant in Western Australia or Darwin.

In his first public comments on the issue, Inpex spokesman Sean Kildare yesterday denied a report that the deal to build the gas plant in Darwin was almost clinched.

While not commenting directly on the Chief Minister's decision to go to the polls early using the gas plant issue as a mandate, Mr Kildare dismissed the notion spruiked by Mr Henderson that only Labor could provide certainty for the \$12 billion Inpex investment.

"There are many things for us to consider and evaluate about the Darwin option, and which party is in power is not one of those," Mr Kildare told ABC radio.

"We work with whichever party forms government and are more than happy to do so.

"We do not involve ourselves in politics, and Inpex is pleased to work with all governments."

Mr Henderson last month called an election 11 months early, claiming the opposition Country Liberal Party would threaten the \$12 billion gas plant, which would process gas piped from the Browse Basin off the Kimberley coast to Darwin.

Inpex is assessing whether to process the gas in Western Australia or Darwin.

However, bipartisan support existed for the plant and the Government's election platform was widely seen as bogus.

Mr Henderson was yesterday still refusing to claim victory in the knife-edge election, which looks to have left Labor with 13 seats in parliament, the CLP 11 and independent Gerry Wood one.

However, CLP leader Terry Mills conceded defeat on Monday after it became clear the Opposition's candidate had virtually no chance of winning the deciding seat of Fannie Bay. Labor went into the poll with 19 seats and the CLP four.

Mr Henderson said Labor was assessing why it was so heavily punished, but believed many traditional Labor voters might have not turned out to vote because they believed Labor would "bolt home".

The turnout was as low as 60 per cent in some seats.

The Chief Minister accepted that calling an election may have contributed to the bad result for the Government.

"I certainly think some people don't like going to the polls early and that played a part," he said. "I stand by the reason for going to an early election.

"I still believe we are more likely to secure the investment from Inpex with a Labor Government, but I do concede some people didn't think that was a good reason to call an early election."

Mr Henderson denied it was a mistake to take over the leadership of the party from Clare Martin last November.

The final election result will not be known until all of the postal votes, which are still trickling in, are counted.