

Territory chief dines with Japanese gas giant Inpex

Natasha Robinson, Darwin correspondent | *September 23, 2008*

AS Western Australia reels at the likely loss of a multi-billion gas plant for the Kimberley, the Northern Territory's Chief Minister Paul Henderson and Treasurer Delia Lawrie went sailing on Darwin Harbour last night with the Australian manager of Japanese gas giant Inpex.

Inpex's announcement on where the gas plant - to process gas from the Ichthys gas field off the coast of the Kimberley - is imminent.

But Inpex's manager of external affairs Sean Kildare, who attended the harbour cruise and gave a speech at a dinner that followed at Cullen Bay's Boardwalk Café, was giving nothing away last night.

"It would be fair and reasonable for me to take this opportunity to make an announcement ... that tonight there will no announcement," he said.

But Mr Kildare was keen to point out how closely executives at the Japanese-French joint venture Inpex had watched the moves of the WA and Territory governments.

"Our partners and the partners in any project need to all want to do it for the right reasons at the right time," Mr Kildare said. "A government needs to be a supportive and a willing partner and (have) its priorities in the right order.

"I must acknowledge that the Government here in the Northern Territory - and on both sides of the house - clearly understands what projects like this are about and clearly have voiced their support for this project.

"That has not gone unnoticed in the boardrooms of Toyko, Paris and London."

The dinner and cruise last night - hosted by the Palmerston Regional Business Association - was also attended by NT opposition leader Terry Mills.

The dinner and cruise were organised by the association's president Wayne Zerbe - who also manages Chief Minister Paul Henderson's Palmerston office, opened during the election campaign.

If the Inpex gas plant is built at Darwin's Middle Arm, it will pipe gas more than 700 kms from the Browse basin off the coast of the Kimberley to Darwin.

The Territory Government thrust the Inpex gas plant to the centre of the Territory's recent election campaign, claiming Inpex needed certainty that a supportive Labor

Government would be in power in order to consider Darwin Harbour as an option for its gas plant.

However, the opposition Country Liberal Party had offered bipartisan support for the plan. Labor was harshly punished in the polls and only just held onto power.

Treasurer Delia Lawrie said last night that the NT Government had done all it could to secure the Inpex gas plant for the Territory. "We respect the right of Inpex to make its own decision on where the project will go," she said.

Mr Mills said it looked increasingly likely that Darwin would be the site for Inpex's gas plant.