

The great \$12billion gas heist

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WHAT started as a bit of outrageous cheek led to a multi-billion dollar gas heist yesterday.

Then chief minister Clare Martin was almost laughed out of the room when she conducted a secret meeting with Japanese resources giant Inpex in Tokyo almost one year ago to the day.

She told Inpex executives that a gas plant should be built in Darwin, not in Western Australia.

The company chiefs needed help finding Darwin on a map and sent an investigation team to the Territory only out of politeness.

But yesterday, Inpex and the NT Government signed a deal for the largest single private-sector project in Australian history.

The four-year construction of the plant - due to start in 2010 - will create 2000 jobs.

A further 300 workers will be needed to run the plant.

The first exports are due to start in late 2014 or early 2015.

The \$12billion gas plant, the pipeline and the rigs off the WA coast will cost a total of \$US20billion (\$A24.2billion), according to information on the Inpex website yesterday.

Inpex president Naoki Kuroda said that Darwin was chosen for the LNG plant because it had provided "certainty" to the group.

"We preferred the certainty of our investment, the certainty of our timeframe and the certainty of the support of the government," Mr Kuroda said.

But when asked if the outcome of the Territory election - which was called early to give Inpex certainty - affected the decision, Mr Kuroda said: "No. I don't think so. This is a commercial decision.

"I don't like to get involved in any political movement.

"Of course, we needed some social and political support, but the decision itself was purely commercial."

Chief Minister Paul Henderson was jubilant as he saw the long-awaited deal come to fruition - turning the Territory into an international gas processing hub for the region.



BIG DAY: Federal Minister for Resources and Energy Martin Ferguson, Chief Minister Paul Henderson and Inpex president Naoki Kuroda announce the \$24billion Inpex project is headed for Darwin. Picture: CLIVE HYDE

He said Inpex originally thought the idea of piping the gas 850km to Darwin was "a little bit crazy".

"The Northern Territory started a long way behind in the race to get this project to Darwin," Mr Henderson said.

"But I firmly believed, from day one, that we could do it."