

Gas pull-out sparks WA blame game

- **Ruth Williams**
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IT was supposed to be a world-leading example of co-operation - a chance to prove that, even when a pristine environment was at stake, government, resource companies and diverse traditional owner groups could work together.

But it has ended in recrimination. Last week's announcement by Japanese gas giant Inpex that it would build its \$25 billion gas processing plant in the Northern Territory, instead of Western Australia's Kimberley region, has dashed hopes of long-lasting benefits for traditional owners and opened a deep rift between the new State Government and the Kimberley Land Council.

Last week, Inpex cited "certainty" in its decision to pipe the gas to the NT from the liquefied natural gas-rich Browse Basin, off the Kimberley coast. WA's new Premier, Liberal Colin Barnett, blamed the former Labor government for taking too long to find a suitable site.

But Mr Barnett said a key factor in Inpex's decision was the traditional owners' "right of veto" over the project, which he said was granted by the former Labor government. This was rejected by the KLC, which said traditional owners merely had a UN-sanctioned right to "informed consent".

KLC executive director Wayne Bergmann said that he was "extremely disappointed" by Inpex's decision. "But what really cuts deep is the unfounded accusations against the KLC and Aboriginal people," he said.

On ABC Radio, Mr Barnett blamed the former Labor government for the lost development. When asked if the traditional owners and KLC were also to blame, he said "they are, unfortunately".

"The great tragedy of this was that the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley stood to get a total benefits package, which would include employment, training, housing ... valued at over \$1 billion spread over 40 years," he said.

Mr Barnett was not available to speak to BusinessDay and a spokesman for Opposition Leader Eric Ripper could not be contacted.

A State Government taskforce had been working since June last year to find suitable sites for a "multi-user hub", designed to reduce the environment and social impact of multiple developments on the pristine coast. The taskforce unveiled nine potential sites in July.

At the same time, the KLC had been consulting 14 Kimberley traditional owner groups to find their own preferred sites, in a process funded by the former Labor government. It was a break from established process, whereby a company would negotiate with one or two groups over a single site.

Inpex's decision, rumoured to have been made months ago, was announced on Friday, just two weeks after the KLC identified four potential sites. Mr Bergmann said the KLC would continue with its process, and would reduce the four preferred sites to two.

"It's disappointing because we believe that we have worked hard and we have complied with every deadline," Mr Bergmann said. "It doesn't mean the show is all over because Inpex is gone. There are still five to six companies drilling off the coast."

Although other companies are drilling in the Browse Basin and might proceed with production, only Inpex has committed to a project. An Inpex spokesman was not available.