

PM Kevin Rudd backs Colin Barnett push for LNG hub

Victoria Laurie | *December 24, 2008*

THE Rudd Government has backed West Australian Liberal Premier Colin Barnett's aggressive push to establish a controversial liquefied natural gas hub along the pristine Kimberley coast, north of Broome.

In what looms as the next big national environmental battleground, the West Australian Government yesterday announced that the gas precinct, which will process billions of dollars worth of LNG from the Browse Basin, would be at James Price Point, 60km north of the tourist town.

The decision has effectively stripped local Aborigines, led by the Kimberley Land Council, of any major political ally after the KLC rejected a \$500million package from Woodside in return for approvals over four potential sites.

The KLC has spent 14 months and \$7million of taxpayers' money in negotiating possible sites.

Mr Barnett said he would not allow another major development to fall over "on his watch". He was referring to Japanese-owned gas producer Inpex, which announced in September it would move to Darwin, abandoning its \$15 billion bid to build a Kimberley gas plant amid uncertainty over a site.

The Premier said the commonwealth had accepted the possibility of compulsory acquisition of land if indigenous traditional owners, who had registered a native title claim over the area, failed to reach agreement with the state by the end of March. "These are the biggest projects in the land," Mr Barnett said. "I do not intend to lose another."

He said his Government had delivered long-sought certainty to the leading contenders to build the gas plant, the Woodside joint venture partners, over a site. He was also hopeful Inpex would reconsider Western Australia as an option.

Hundreds of jobs, millions of investment dollars and long-term economic diversification for Broome and the West Kimberley were at stake, he said.

The Carpenter Labor government had been wrong to offer Aborigines veto over gas developments, Mr Barnett said.

The West Australian Government has agreed to a commonwealth proposal to appoint a facilitator to work with indigenous claimants towards a negotiated outcome.

Federal Resources Minister Martin Ferguson said Mr Barnett had made "a welcome step forward at a time when investment is desperately needed to create jobs and generate export dollars and revenue for the nation".

KLC executive director Wayne Bergmann said he was reassured by the commonwealth's role in land negotiations. But he accused the state Government of wedge politics, after Mr Barnett announced that he would deal with the KLC and "any other indigenous parties" with an interest in James Price Point.