

# Stop stoning Chinese plea

ZACH HOPE

## Former chief minister slams criticism of port lease

THOSE calling for the lease of Darwin port to be put on hold need to “stop bashing the Chinese”, former chief minister Shane Stone says.

The 99-year lease of the port to Chinese-based Landbridge Group for \$506 million has come under renewed scrutiny since reports in *The Australian* newspaper alleged defence experts and officials – despite the department giving the deal the green light – had national security concerns.

Liberal MP Bill Heffernan has called for the lease to be reviewed, while Opposition Leader Bill Shorten – in Darwin yesterday – asked for all the facts before committing his party to a position.

“There is no doubt there is some concern,” Mr Shorten said. “Whether or not that concern’s actually warranted, Labor wants to see what the details are ... I do not, as a starting point, think there is something

untoward here, but there has been sufficient concern raised.”

Mr Stone, who has extensive business contacts in China, said the debate coming so close to arguments on the merits of the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement damaged Australia’s reputation as a business and investment partner.

“I want to deliver a very firm message: stop bashing the Chinese,” he said. “It’s sending all the wrong messages to our most

important trade partner. This (port lease) is such an important investment for the Territory.

“My own Chinese contacts, one of whom I had interested in the six-star hotel site, talked to me recently in Sydney and they’re saying, ‘Are you sure our investment is welcome’.

“It’s very easy for people to be critical and negative, but they run the risk of de-incentivising serious investment into the Territory.”

Landbridge Group denied reports it had its own private militia and said its billionaire owner Ye Cheng had never been in the People’s Liberation Army, nor did he sit on boards of state-owned companies.

Australia China Business Council (NT) president Darryl Guppy, who returned from Shanghai on Sunday, joined Mr Stone in his criticism.

“One of their concerns is sovereign risk – that is, can

Australia’s word be trusted? That Australia seems to agree to things and then things become far too difficult,” he said.

“The idea that because a company has done some work for the Chinese military that therefore it must be an arm of the Chinese military is a pretty fallacious idea.

“If we apply that idea here in Darwin, there are a lot of Darwin companies precluded from doing any export work at all because they’re suppliers to Tindal, to the (US) marine rotation and so on.”