

Crikey

MDB stakeholders call for RSPT-style campaign against government

The government faces another well-funded campaign against its policies, this time on water.

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The government faces the prospect of an RSPT-style campaign against it over the Murray-Darling Basin Plan after a meeting of key stakeholders on Monday agreed to establish a group to force alterations.

The summit, convened by the NSW Irrigators' Council, attracted more than 100 representatives of a wide range of groups: irrigators, banks, supermarkets, local government, business groups, and the Australian Workers Union. The hard Right environmental astroturf group, the Australian Environment Foundation, also attended, urging the meeting to dispute the science behind the MDBA's guide. There were calls from smaller players for the establishment of a group of water scientists, hydrologists and economists to support the views of irrigators against groups such as the Wentworth Group and mainstream economists.

Andrew Gregson, CEO of the NSW Irrigators' Council, told *Crikey* that the meeting, which the Council had been proposing since May, essentially considered four issues. "First, do we have a problem? Yes, we do. Second, should we take a collective approach? Yes we should. Third, how do we develop that approach? We established a steering committee. Fourth, we agreed on what instructions to give the steering committee." Gregson said one of the reasons so many groups had been asked to participate was that, compared to other groups in regional communities, irrigators were one of the groups likely to be least harmed by a reduction in water allocation — "irrigators will be paid for our water. But the local Bunnings might have to close down."

A number of attendees called for a campaign like the Minerals Council's campaign against the mining tax, which led Labor to abandon its RSPT and helped remove Kevin Rudd from the prime ministership.

Unlike the MCA campaign, however, the anti-MDBA campaign would reflect a wider variety of stakeholders, if ultimately approved. The steering

committee, said to be composed of the National Irrigators' Council, the NFF, representatives from the big banks, local government and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (but not the NSWIC) was charged with developing a strategy and resourcing model for consideration by the summit in several weeks' time, with the idea of a professional campaign being developed with external expertise. The campaign, however, would not seek to contest the science behind the Plan but seek to "reframe" the debate and, partly, address the poor image of irrigators in urban communities.

One source said the highly-regarded Liberal-connected pollster Toby Ralph had made a presentation to the summit suggesting a campaign based around higher food prices, the impact on families, using individual case studies and the overall economic impact (attempts to contact Ralph's firm Agitating were unsuccessful).

The meeting is said to have also discussed the possibility of changes to the *Water Act*. Gregson told *Crikey* "[Water Minister Tony] Burke has said 'do you really want to re-open the Act' and our answer was 'yes' given how concerned we are about the MDBA." Another source at the meeting, however, suggested demands for amendments to the Act might be useful for extracting non-legislative concessions from the Government.

While the MCA campaign set a new standard for politically-effective campaigns to overturn government policy, even a smaller campaign by such a diverse group of stakeholders is likely to terrify a government that panicked at the first sight of anger in Coalition-held regional seats over the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and which has been back-peddling ever since.