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Murray-Darling authority losing the spin war with councils' PR flacks

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As the beleaguered Murray-Darling Basin Authority sank deep into the public relations mire following its disastrous run of community consultations last month, the other side of the debate had a powerful ally in prominent spin doctors Socom.

[Socom](#), a team of crisis management experts headed by veteran spinner David Hawkins, has emerged as a crucial player in amplifying grassroots discontent in regional Victoria, running a series of community meetings in parallel with the disastrous shouting matches auspiced by the MDBA. The firm, operating on a fee-for-service arrangement and representing the Murray River Group of Councils and the Greater Shepparton City Council, has organised nine community meetings in the basin and has drafted form letters with rent-a-quotes from local mayors. It has also liaised with newspaper editors and news crews to secure positive coverage for their clients' plight.

The Murray Group of Councils consist of the Shire of Campaspe, Gannawarra Shire Council, Loddon Shire Council, Mildura Rural City Council, Moira Shire Council and Swan Hill Rural City Council.

And while irrigators have enjoyed a dream run thanks partly to Socom's savvy ahead-of-the-curve tactics, the MDBA appears to have been lagging in the spin war.

Speaking on ABC Radio National's *Bush Telegraph* program [two weeks ago](#), veteran PR practitioner Noel Turnbull claimed the authority's message had been "hijacked" by the format of the community events, which had seen

those with loudest voiceboxes dominating discussion. While Socom has been on the front foot, the MDBA, without an external firm on board, has suffered a string of humiliating defeats.

As dissent over the basin plan exploded last month, Hawkins led a delegation of mayors to Canberra to lobby Agriculture Minister Tony Burke, regional development minister Simon Crean, independent powerbroker Tony Windsor and opposition Murray MP Sharman Stone. Just days earlier, the government had announced a parliamentary inquiry into the water buybacks headed by Windsor.

In a series of identical media releases distributed across regional Victoria, Socom argued that irrigators' livelihoods were threatened over the planned boost to environmental flows, despite the changes being mooted for years. "It was clear to us from reading the *Guide to the Murray-Darling Basin Plan* that the Murray-Darling Basin Authority had not considered the drastic effects its cuts to the water allocations would have on our communities; judging from the large groups that have been attending the Authority's consultations, we weren't the only ones who felt this way," one release reads, with the quote attributed to "Cr XX", the "Mayor of XX":



Although not playing a direct role in the ugly scenes at Shepparton, where MDBA bureaucrat Mike Taylor was assailed by mobs, Hawkins said he had successfully secured media interviews for Shepparton mayor Geoff Dobson. The group followed up the fiery meeting with two community events the following week at Mooroopna and a Shepparton TAFE.

Hawkins is a veteran of the PR scene, emerging as a crisis management expert after he successfully handled the Mars/Snickers extortion attempts in 2005 in which a mystery figure claimed to have poisoned chocolate bars across New South Wales. He told *Crikey* the Murray-Darling gig had spun out of Socom's existing work with Regional Cities Victoria.

But his firm's work has been the tip of the iceberg. As Bernard Keane reported [two weeks ago](#), the NSW Irrigators Council and the Australian Environment Foundation have been keen players in the engineering of an RSPT-style campaign to stir up anger. In early October, irrigators' council president Andrew Gregson was [forced to defend](#) its website, basinplan.com.au, from allegations that it was designed to mislead the public into thinking it was an official publication.

At the Griffith MDBA meeting, irate farmers burnt copies of the authority's draft plan, although sources have told *Crikey* that the bonfire was kept alight by television news crews.

Hawkins denied Socom was drumming up dissent beyond organic levels: "I'm absolutely flattered that some people talk about our reach...but it's really nothing like that."

"A PR company cannot orchestrate this level of response...historically I've worked on a lot of issues and you just can't do it. We tried to do it in terms of smaller campaigns at Deer Park where we wanted to underground the road under the railway station. And it completely fell flat."

Hawkins said other groups were far more nefarious:

"In terms of the groups that are likely to do it, you've got Danny O'Brien from the National Irrigators' Council, the cotton growers and the National Farmers Federation. But even then, if there isn't genuine anger, you're just not going to be able to generate the response."

Hawkins slammed the MDBA's processes that led to the meltdowns in Shepparton and Griffith, saying that the format of the meetings were flawed. "How can you actually have a meaningful meeting with 4,000 people on the other end?"

Asked how Socom became involved, Hawkins said that "Phil Pearce from Shepparton (council CEO) gave us a call and said 'can you give us a hand with this?' and we had a teleconference and away we went."

Hawkins said he already worked with local councils on a range of different issues and that the current work was "a natural extension".

"We're assisting the seven councils who are quite concerned about the plan...it certainly doesn't recognise the social and economic impact...the bunnies left to pick up the pieces are local government."

Socom will present the findings of its community meetings to the government at the end of November, with the submissions then used as evidence in Windsor's parliamentary inquiry. "When we do the report it will contain the views of up 3-400 people so it should stack up as a credible piece of research," Hawkins said. The firm is currently working on a plan to involve all 114 councils across the MDBA basin in the Canberra convoy before parliament adjourns for summer.

Meanwhile, a MDBA spokesperson confirmed that it was running all its PR internally: "The Authority is implementing its own stakeholder engagement process. The Authority has not employed a public relations company to run the consultation for the Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan or to create a media strategy." However, the Authority did say it employed an internal engagement team of "less than 15" people to assist with pre-planning and logistics.

The popular Socom meetings will continue tonight at the Yarrawonga Community Hall. Local Moira mayor and beef and hay farmer Ed Cox told *Crikey* that there was a "lot of community angst about the whole plan" and that local submissions will be collected and sent to Canberra.

"We'll all be singing off the same hymn sheet on that," he said.