As agriculture sinks, water predicted to become choppy issue

PRECIOUS RESOURCE

By Phillip Thomson

Water could become the biggest single issue for the new-look Parliament, academics said at a post-election talk in Canberra yesterday.

Public policy expert Jenny Stewart predicted a “huge fight over water” was brewing and said the decline of Australian agriculture would be a big challenge for the Parliament, whoever formed Government.

The University of NSW’s public policy professor said the biggest focus would be on allocations in the Murray-Darling Basin.

The future of allocations in the basin are uncertain.

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Professor Stewart was one of four speakers from different universities at a discussion hosted by the University of Canberra.

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She predicted future poll results would also be close.

“I don’t see either party being able to produce that unifying leadership,” she said.

Australian Catholic University professor Scott Prasser agreed parliamentarians holding the balance of power would most likely lock horns over scarce water.

He expected the Greens, who will control the Senate, to disagree with the water policy of the rural independents, particularly Bob Katter and Tony Windsor, who will wield power over the House of Representatives.

The Greens want to see cutbacks to water licences so more can flow through to the environment.

Meanwhile, Mr Windsor’s New England electorate and Mr Katter’s seat of Kennedy each have large numbers of farmers who need water for their businesses.

“Regions are back on the agenda,” Professor Prasser said.

He did not, however, believe this would see a resurgence of The Nationals.

“The National Party think they’re back in business,” he said. “I don’t think they’re back in business at all.”

Professor Prasser said more policymaking would be done with the regions in mind.

He found it confounding the three independents were receiving Treasury briefings. “Why doesn’t everyone know about [this information]?” he asked.

Another trend he and Professor Stewart noticed was a blurring of the boundary between state and federal issues.

“I found some of the requests from independents odd,” Professor Prasser said. “The member for Denison [Andrew Wilkie] was talking about poker machines. I thought gambling was a state issue.”