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RESPONSE TO STATEMENT OF GOVERNMENT INTENTIONS

E&OE

The first Statement of Government Intentions in 2008 was a fizzer. Lots of pomp and ceremony but a fizzer.

The second was a fizzer too. So much so that even the Labor Party faithful forgot to turn up that day last year.

The third statement delivered on Tuesday of this week was no better. Once again a fizzer. Proclaimed by the media as providing nothing new.

But at least this time some of the faithful turned up, as no doubt they were instructed to do. And oh how they must have been hauled over the coals for embarrassing the Premier last year.

It's a trifecta of fizzers.

But at least the spin doctors had some fun with this year's statement. They conjured up a new title. A little alliteration.

This statement was, they said, about "Families, Fairness and the Future". The Premier even hammed it up further and said he was firmly focussed.

But there are plenty of other words that might more fittingly and forever be applied in labelling this statement.

They might have well been included in that cute title. They are words that neatly sum up this Government.

Consider just one – failure.

This Government has failed over nearly 11 years to deliver an improvement in basic services for Victorian families.

And this Statement, like its predecessors, has failed to deliver any prospect of change.

Any objective evaluation of previous statements shows clearly that the Government even failed to deliver the commitments in those statements.

But perhaps the most obvious failure from last year's statement was what the Premier described then as his respect strategy. It was a key commitment, a key priority for 2009, he said. It was groundbreaking, he said.

But nothing happened. It seems – frankly – they forgot.

Someone in the Premier's office must have realised at the end of last year and found it. Whoops. What to do? Cobble it together quickly. Appoint a Minister. Heaven forbid – not that one. Never mind. Oh well. Muddle through anyway. It's another chance for an advertising campaign

Now it's a Respect Agenda. An idea stolen from Tony Blair who launched it in 2005 and abandoned it in 2007. And they gave it to a Minister whose credibility vanished in Brimbank and who routinely ignores constituents.

And now they roll it out again in this year's Statement. Now that's respect.

This Statement is little more than a list of Government activities. It disappeared as quickly as it was delivered.

Amongst other things, the Statement recycles previous projects, repeats announcements from the past of things not yet done, promises changes that simply reflect the Government's failures over 11 years, and even proposes, quietly, changes that implement Opposition policy

This document is all about the Government's interests

What Victorian families need and want is their story told.

A report that updates the Parliament about the position of Victorian families.

An audit of the conditions in which Victorians find themselves. A benchmarking of key issues for all Victorian families. A base on which to measure improvements in the future.

This is what a Coalition Government will deliver. An Annual Families Statement.

And that is what we present today. It is an undertaking we made last year and which we honour in this first instance in Opposition and which we will continue and develop in Government.

What this report is about, is part of the Coalition's commitment to Victorian families. It aims to do three things. One, provide a snapshot of Victorian families and households, and the financial and other challenges affecting their lives in Melbourne and regional Victoria. Two, look at how Victorian families are affected by the taxes, charges and borrowings of the Labor Government since 1999. And three, look at particular state government services that directly affect families, to gauge whether Victorian families' lives are better or worse after more than a decade of Labor.

This is not intended to be a comprehensive and exhaustive report, but it will include the facts that those opposite seek to hide. It's about the support families get to deal with the challenges of illness and disability. It's about being able to walk down the street without fear of violence. It's about getting the best education for our children. It's about quality of life. An hour spent waiting in a traffic jam, or waiting on a platform for a delayed train, is time far better spent with loved ones.

In short, Victorian families are finding life harder under this Government.

They face bigger bills and failing services. They have lost faith in the Premier and his ministers. They simply don't trust them anymore.

And as we have seen again this week, as the failings of this Government are exposed, the Labor Party resorts to smear, innuendo and political thuggery. Even the Bushfire Royal Commission is being heaved. More respect from this Government.

The Premier remains in denial and turns his back on Victorian families. And spends instead, hundreds of millions of dollars on self promotional advertising

Over several years this Government has continually ignored warnings about a range of issues that affect families.

Rising levels of violence in our streets, shortages of Police in our streets, sentencing, child protection, mental health services, secret hospital waiting lists, a shortage of hospital beds, Catholic school funding, international education, arts education, literacy, flaws in the ticketing system, faulty trains, capacity shortages on public transport, the cost of housing, corruption in local government, water shortages, the impact of drought on regional communities, ambulance response times, liquor licensing reforms, bushfire preparation, the Government investment of superannuation funds. And many others.

It's a sign of the deep-seated arrogance of this Government. Of incompetent ministers. And it's reflective of a Government that is tired, out of touch, and out of ideas. And it is families that are suffering as a result.

So what do Victorian families face after 11 years of Labor and 11 years of John Brumby?

Let's first take a snapshot of Victorian families. In regards to income, Victorian households are under pressure as costs and taxes and charges outpace their incomes.

Average weekly earnings have been increasing over the last ten years. But since 2005, Victorian earnings have lagged behind the national average, and the gap is growing. Victorians' real increase in average weekly earnings has been 40 per cent below the national level.

The decline of Victoria's share of GSP per capita, from significantly above to significantly below the average, shows how real production and relative income capacity has declined under this Government.

Victorian families are struggling to keep pace. They now have relatively less to pay mortgages, rents and other bills, and Victorians have to work harder to maintain their standard of living. Many do this by working longer hours, taking second jobs and taking on greater debt. And that is *before* this Government's taxes and charges.

Look at housing. The great Victorian dream of home ownership is less and less affordable for those on modest and medium incomes. The REIV's recent quarterly median house price survey indicates that the median house price in Melbourne is now \$540,000. The survey also found that house prices increased in key centres in regional Victoria as well. In Ballarat \$265,000; \$261,000 in Bendigo; and in Geelong over \$340,000.

Real earnings in Victoria increased 11 per cent over the decade to 2008, but the cost of median priced houses rose by more than ten times that rate. Victorian families are paying off home loans with a disproportionate share of their net income. Increasingly, home ownership is out of reach for the average Victorian family.

Given these pressures, it is no wonder home ownership rates have fallen. From 75 per cent of Victorians owning their own home in '99 the rate has now fallen to 71 per cent by 2008. The latest study on housing affordability by Demographia shows

Melbourne is now one of the most unaffordable cities in the world – ranked eighth out of 272 major urban housing markets. The study described Melbourne as “severely unaffordable”. Households spending 30 to 35 per cent of their gross annual income on the mortgage are regarded as under stress. In Melbourne, 50 per cent of households are in that position, and as prices continue to rise the situation is expected to deteriorate further.

And the study identifies the cause. It’s the lack of competent planning and foresight – a direct responsibility of this Government.

And as buying becomes more expensive, rents have also increased. Between ’99 and ’09, metropolitan rents increased by 77 per cent and regional Victorian rents by 66 per cent.

And look at expenses. It’s not just the cost of housing that’s increasing. Since 1999 Victorian families have faced price rises in many areas including property rates and charges doubling; water and sewerage costs almost doubling; meat, fruit and vegetables rising by 40 to 60 per cent, with cost spikes at times of high demand or scarcity; urban transport fares climbing by more than 50 per cent; and other transport costs rising by more than 30 per cent. What’s more, for many of these basic household expenses, Victoria runs at or significantly ahead of the national average.

And taxes and charges. While costs keep going up for family staples, this Labor Government is imposing greater taxes and charges on Victorian families.

26 new and extended State taxes over the last decade, taking hundreds of millions of dollars every year in additional taxes from families and businesses. And there are more to come.

At the same time payroll tax is up over 80 per cent; land tax by more than 220 per cent; stamp duty by more than 180 per cent; insurance taxes by over 24 per cent; and police fines are five times what they were in 1999, and now raise \$500 million a year.

Over \$300 billion has been provided by taxpayers to this Government over the last decade with the Budget almost doubling in size. Victoria is now running neck and neck with New South Wales as the highest taxing State in Australia. Victorian families are entitled to ask – have State Government services also doubled in size, or quality, or effectiveness of delivery?

At the same time this Government is plunging every Victorian family deeper and deeper into debt. In four years’ time our State debt will have increased 700 per cent since 2008. The result is that every man, woman and child will soon owe nearly \$6,000 each in State debt, that will have to be paid off – even though Labor has no plan to actually pay off that debt.

The interest bill alone on this debt will soon be two and a half billion dollars a year, and rising. That’s more than the annual budget of Victoria Police, or enough to build and operate several public hospitals, train and employ thousands more teachers and nurses, or renew and expand the struggling road and rail network, or invest in the people, equipment and infrastructure essential to protecting Victorian families from bushfires.

Let’s turn to the services that this government delivers to our families. And indeed the Victorian Government provides a wide range of services that affect families – or should affect them. Victorians rely on those services to be cost-effective, efficient and timely. If they aren’t, the effects on family life can be deeply damaging.

Let's look at transport. This Government gave Victorian families myki – the most over-priced, absurdly complex and unworkable 'smart card' anywhere in the world. A winner. The ticketing system no one asked for. The system that doesn't work on buses and trams. The system that doesn't work for students. There are third world countries with smart cards that work better than myki and at a fraction of the price.

Victorians don't have enough trains. Those we do have can't stop. Platforms at train stations remain dangerously crowded at each and every rush hour. Train services are cancelled and delayed every day – adding up to thousands of affected services every year. One day Victorian families see blokes hosing the tracks to stop them buckling. The next they see them applying glue to keep the trains on the tracks.

The confidence of Victorian families dependent on the public transport system is eroded every day. And Victorians face an increasingly congested road system. That means longer and longer commutes for families trying to get to work, trying to get to school, even just doing their shopping. And dangerous regional road problems remain.

Crime, safety. It is unacceptable that families in this State should be afraid to go to the local shops at night or travel on a train for fear of being assaulted. But that is precisely what is happening in this city and in various places across this State. And why? Well it's no surprise. Victoria has the lowest number of police per capita, the least spend of all States per capita on policing, and Victoria has the lowest proportion of operational staff of any State in Australia.

Escalating problems with violence around Melbourne's night clubs and bars can be directly linked to the lack of available frontline police to maintain an adequate presence on the streets.

As the incidence of violent crime has hit new records over the last few years, police patrols have declined by more than 20 per cent, from 1.9 million hours to 1.5 million. Police rosters have also revealed there are more than 1,400 officers missing from their frontline positions across Victoria. Between 1999 and 2009 according to the police's own data, violent crime has skyrocketed. Assault up nearly 70 per cent; weapons offences up nearly 57 per cent; total violent crime up over 40 per cent.

It is not an illusion, as some in the Government have suggested. It is not a statistical blip. It's real. It's a major cultural problem. And random reckless ruthless violence is ruining lives, destroying families and undermining confidence in this State.

And when the criminals are finally caught there is now a long wait for justice to be done and seen to be done. Victoria now has Australia's longest criminal case waiting lists in every court in the State. There are more than 42,000 criminal cases awaiting trial in Victoria's courts, compared with just 26,000 cases in New South Wales. Since 2003, backlogs in Victorian courts have leapt by more than 36 per cent.

Years of delays are causing greater distress for victims, their families and witnesses – and worse again many of those guilty of violent crimes walk free on suspended sentences. Justice and Victorian families are being taken for a ride.

Let's look at water. The Labor Government is playing catch-up for the years they neglected water security. Victoria's water infrastructure spending per head of population has been the lowest of all States. Victoria has been in drought for a decade, but not until 2007 did Labor commit to any substantial initiatives to combat water shortages, and even then they lied about it to do it, and they got it wrong.

A leaked report commissioned by the Government itself shows that the north-south pipeline and the desalination plant were both highly questionable. The \$750 million pipeline not only steals water from country Victorians. It now seems that the water being taken to Melbourne won't even be needed.

The desalination plant as modelled will cost Victorian families approximately three and a half billion dollars, and result in a rise in family water bills by over 60 per cent – even if we don't need the water.

The Coalition is committed to long-term, sustainable water solutions. That's why we support initiatives such as recycling, stormwater capture, storage solutions and water tanks. Victorian families should not have to worry about running out of water. Future supplies must be guaranteed.

Let's look at education and schools. This Government has been responsible for school education for a decade – but now it is clear our children have been short-changed for resourcing and results. The OECD rates Victoria as having the lowest basic skills levels of any mainland State – the lowest mathematical, scientific and reading literacy.

In the Australian Education Union's *State of our Schools* survey released in April 2009, 72 per cent of principals said they did not have adequate funds to deliver their education programmes, 85 per cent said their schools needed equipment upgrades, and 88 per cent of principals relied upon fundraising to provide basic services for their schools. And this Government's making parents pay for toilet paper at a primary school.

Victoria spends less per head on its students than any other State according to the Productivity Commission. Victoria's population is growing, but there was a drop of 1,300 students enrolling in Government schools between '08 and '09 – twice the decline seen in '07 and '08. During the same period, enrolments in Victorian non-Government schools grew by 4,000 students.

In health – this Premier promised to “fix the health system” but he's failed dramatically. Performance has deteriorated since 1999 and failed to meet key benchmarks. This has hurt most the vulnerable and elderly, those waiting for desperately needed elective surgery and hospital emergency patients.

The Auditor-General, in his recent report, exposed Victorian hospitals' declining performance under Labor. Every hospital showed a falling share of patients admitted within 90 days; a falling percentage of semi-urgent patients treated within 90 days across the State; falling statewide performance for triage patients; falling emergency access with more patients than ever waiting over eight hours for admission. It's telling that the capacity of the Victorian hospital system has actually declined in this time, even though the Victorian population continues to grow and age.

In 1999 there were 2.48 acute public hospital beds for every 1,000 Victorians. In 2009, ten years later, there were just 2.38. The AMA has identified a shortage of 600 beds in Victorian public hospitals, but its advice has been ignored by this Government. Victorian families, who want to know that their loved ones will be looked after in times of need, are missing out.

Let's look at mental health. Recently released FOI material shows this Government has failed families and individuals that have been touched by mental illness. The number of mental health beds relative to our adult population has recently fallen. 30 per cent of mental health patients wait for more than eight hours in busy public hospital emergency departments for a bed. 66 per cent of hospitals fall short of the Government's own admission performance benchmark. 43 per cent of patients with a

mental illness fail to get adequate care in the community before entering hospital. And 26 per cent of patients with a mental illness fail to get adequate care in the community after they are discharged from hospital, with 14 per cent of all patients being re-admitted within a month.

These figures don't show the suffering, the frustration and the pain of many highly vulnerable Victorians, their families and other carers. After a decade of Labor essential facilities and services are inadequate. Neglected by the Labor Government, people with a mental illness, their families and carers are increasingly struggling in this State.

Let's look at the disabled and their carers. Victorians with a disability and their families are waiting years to access support services and accommodation, and they face a system that is under-resourced and under-funded. Thousands of families needing support and accommodation now can't access it. Almost one in five of those waiting to access accommodation are cared for by someone aged over 75. Victorian families and carers are desperate and frustrated with a Government that has consistently failed to support our most vulnerable.

The Auditor-General found that the Labor Government has not invested in one new supported accommodation bed since 2003. He also found that Labor's system is unable to meet the current demand for service, let alone plan for future demand which is increasing by four to five per cent annually. With demand for supported accommodation places expected to grow by more than 50 per cent in the next six years, even further pressure will be placed on a system in crisis. Another system, essential to families, is in crisis.

Energy prices. Residential electricity prices have shown the greatest increases in Victoria. Melbourne is now the most expensive capital city in Australia for electricity. The Brumby Government's bungling of the smart meter rollout in 2009 has seen the cost of smart meters to Victorian families blow out from \$800 million to \$2.25 billion, with Victorian families now required to pay for smart meters **before** they are even installed.

Victorian households' annual electricity bills will rise by between \$68 and \$135 in 2010, as a direct consequence of the cost of rolling out these so-called smart meters. In addition, a University of Melbourne report commissioned by the Ministerial Council on Energy found that an average Victorian pensioner with a smart meter faces an additional price increase of \$113.

Because of the Brumby Government's mismanagement and incompetence, smart meters have become the myki of metering.

These are just a few of the areas in which this Government has failed Victorian families. Our Families Statement sets out more.

The record of this Government speaks for itself. Families are under greater pressure. Bills are rising and services are failing.

The Coalition is committed to five key themes. A growing competitive economy. Services that actually work for all families. Secure water resources and environments. Government that can be trusted. And strong families and vibrant communities.

A strong family is the greatest source of support and comfort an individual can possess. That's why the hopes and dreams of Victorian families are the focal point of Coalition policy development.

We believe Victoria should and must offer the highest quality and standard of services to those families. Our Families Statement represents the next step in a continuing dialogue with Victorian families, and we will continue to actively engage and listen and discuss with Victorian families, as we release policies before the next election.

Unlike Labor, we will keep our commitment with openness, transparency and accountability. We have already made a string of announcements, setting the base for these changes. In the last few months, we have announced key policies that will help Victorians reclaim our streets for families.

We will introduce tough new anti-hoon laws, including immediate 30-day vehicle impoundment for a first offence; up to three months for a second offence; and forfeiture and crushing of vehicles for a third offence, after parts are stripped and sold.

We will end Labor's soft home detention laws, abolish suspended sentences, ban the sale of bongos to reduce the harm to Victorian families caused by cannabis, restore access to street-by-street crime data to Neighbourhood Watch, launch a liquor licence infringement demerit points scheme, targeting problem venues which continue to disobey liquor licensing laws, establish a five star rating system that will reward liquor licensees who act responsibly and observe the law.

And we will make Victoria's train network safe again by putting Victoria Police Protective Services Officers on every train station in metropolitan Melbourne and the major regional centres after 6pm, seven days a week. Additional Victoria Police officers will also patrol the train, tram and bus networks.

We will ban violent drunks from entering licensed premises for two years, and we will guarantee communities a say about packaged liquor sales in their local area by ending the planning permit exemption of bottle shops.

There are other commitments we have made, and there will be more, in health, disability, mental health, carers, water, transport, education, housing, planning, taxes, regional and rural development and services.

The future of families is best served not by PR gloss and TV ads.

The future of families is best served by an understanding of what the problems are, what the shortcomings in Government services are and how they can be improved. We know that what's needed are effective policies to tackle these problems and shortcomings, not advertising campaigns.

This first Families Statement is the start of that process.

But finally, there are a few other words fit for the fancy title of the Government's Statement of Intentions.

They are words that send a compelling message about this Government's priorities.

These words are cutting through in the Victorian community. They are words now being uttered around the barbecues. Words being volunteered by the people of Altona in the shopping centres.

And they are words increasingly being reviled by the people of Victoria.

Fairy lights.

\$20 million for fairy lights. That's the Roads Minister's solution to traffic and congestion issues in Melbourne. Fairy lights on the West Gate Bridge. If it's not advertising it's fairy lights.

How out of touch this Government has become, and this announcement marks a new low in arrogance for this Government.

Where next for the fairy lights of Labor? The Minister may be away with the fairy lights, but this Government is out of touch. They're out of time. And in due course they'll be out of office.

And when they go, they can take their fairy lights with them. It's families that count.

The Government Statement of Intentions is as feeble and forgettable as this Government.

Victorian families deserve a stronger, better and fairer Victoria