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## MUTANT MESSAGES 3:

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### VICTORIA'S INDIGENOUS FAMILY VIOLENCE PLAN

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by Kyllie Cripps & Leanne Miller

On 27 June 2008, the Victorian Government launched *Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: Towards a Safer Future for Indigenous Families and Communities*, a ten year plan responding to Indigenous family violence ('the ten year plan').<sup>1</sup> This paper, the third in an annual series,<sup>2</sup> critically reflects on the current status of the ten year plan. Two years since its launch, we again ask the question: will this plan break the silence of acceptance that exists around the issues of family violence, sexual assault, elder abuse, child abuse and neglect?

#### BACKGROUND

In 2001 the Victorian Government commissioned an Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce ('the Taskforce'), which reported its findings in December 2003. The Taskforce defined violence as:

An issue focused around a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. It extends to one-on-one fighting, abuse of Indigenous community workers as well as self-harm, injury and suicide.<sup>3</sup>

Using this broad definition, the Taskforce estimated that '1 in 3 Indigenous people are the victim, have a relative who is a victim or witness an act of violence on a daily basis in communities across Victoria'.<sup>4</sup>

The Taskforce also reported that the typical mainstream service response of refuges and criminal justice sanctions did not encompass broad categories of relationships or address the complex and interrelated causes of violence as it occurs in Victorian Indigenous communities. A holistic approach to family violence that factors in the historical and familial contexts in which the violence occurs was considered the most appropriate way forward. The Taskforce recommended that any interventions involving Indigenous community members needed to be community driven and needed to reflect local priorities in an empowering way.

Consistent with the above approach, the Taskforce recommended the establishment of nine regional

Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Groups ('IFVRAGs') as a mechanism for ongoing community engagement. These are administered by the Victorian Department of Human Services ('DHS'). IFVRAGs are not legal entities. They consist of elders, women, men, young people and community leaders from local Indigenous communities as well as local Indigenous organisations and service providers. The skills, capacity and activities of each IFVRAG varies depending on its membership. Importantly, Indigenous community members participate in the meetings and activities on a *volunteer basis*. Their work at the local level is committed to:

- assessing local Indigenous community needs and mapping service provision and service utilisation
- providing advice on preventing, reducing and responding to Indigenous family violence as well as related community issues
- developing cross-agency linkages and partnerships to improve the provision of services to people affected by family violence
- assisting mainstream family violence and other support services to provide culturally competent services for Indigenous community members, and
- supporting the development of holistic approaches to family violence in regional and local Indigenous communities, encompassing the social, emotional, spiritual, physical and cultural wellbeing of families.<sup>5</sup>

IFVRAGs work with their communities to continue the community dialogue necessary to address the complexity of problems associated with family violence.

A further recommendation in support a 'whole of government' and 'whole of community' response to family violence<sup>6</sup> was the creation of the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum ('the Forum'). Aboriginal Affairs Victoria is the lead agency providing Secretariat support to this body. Membership of the Forum includes the chairs of each IFVRAG, as well as representatives from relevant state and federal departments.

Established in 2005, the Forum has overseen and coordinated all State Government activities associated with

Indigenous family violence including the development of the ten year plan. In May 2006, the Forum expanded to include four Indigenous community service providers.

### THE TEN YEAR PLAN AND ITS CONTENTS

*Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: Towards a Safer Future for Indigenous Families and Communities* sets out the overarching vision, guiding principles and values for the ten year plan. It provides background information, reflects on achievements to date, and spells out eight strategic objectives and specific actions to be undertaken over the life of the plan. Importantly, it does not prioritise the actions to be undertaken, nor does it provide timelines for their completion. There are no details as to the delegation of responsibilities and no financial commitments outside of those announced as part of the Victorian Budget 2008, which allocated \$8.1 million over four years to fund:

- Indigenous men's behaviour change programs (\$1.07m)
- intensive case management for Indigenous men (\$0.75m)
- Indigenous family violence outreach services (\$2.79m)
- family violence list and court diversion (\$1.3m)
- extension of local safety campaigns (\$0.4m)
- Indigenous prevention framework and Indigenous prevention projects (\$1.2m) and
- Indigenous workforce development (\$0.56m).<sup>7</sup>

Two years later, details have not been released publicly as to when or how these programs will be implemented or evaluated. The public is also not privy to the progress of expenditure against these items. A detailed review of departmental annual reports from 2008/09 and Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Reports for the period 2008–2010 provides scant information on expenditure and outcomes relating to these items.

The plan is still missing core elements and crucial details including: delineation of roles and responsibilities, particularly across government departments; timelines; implementation strategy; procedures for risk management; monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. There is also no process for reporting expenditure. This raises serious questions as to the status and progress of these budgetary commitments.

### VICTORIAN FAMILY VIOLENCE POLICY

Over the past year, two key documents have been released with respect to Victoria's family violence policy. The first, *A Right to Respect: Victoria's Plan to Prevent Violence Against*

*Women 2010-2020*<sup>8</sup> (*A Right to Respect*), has been described as the 'world's first systematic, sustained and cross sectoral policy to build skills, attitudes and cultural values that reject violence'.<sup>9</sup> It provides a ten year framework to promote respectful, gender-equitable relationships in communities and homes across Victoria. Immediate actions to be undertaken throughout 2010 include the establishment of expert, cross-sectoral steering structures to develop an initial three year implementation plan that will provide 'timelines, roles and responsibilities, and a performance monitoring framework'.<sup>10</sup>

Early in the development of *A Right to Respect*, it was recognised that its focus on violence against *women*, as opposed to violence within the context of *family*, does not speak adequately or appropriately to Indigenous community experiences. The Forum thus decided that an Indigenous-specific prevention plan was needed. In the mean time, *A Right to Respect* committed to supporting Indigenous initiatives, particularly the development of cultural competency guidelines for mainstream services.

Cultural competency is 'a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together as a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations'.<sup>11</sup> It is a developmental process that evolves over an extended period and requires participation by both individuals and organisations. There are various levels of awareness, knowledge and skills along a defined cultural competence continuum that dictates the quality of competence achieved.<sup>12</sup> To date, cultural competence in the field of family violence has focused on 'cultural awareness'. This is often delivered by way of 'one-off' training sessions; few organisations seek to build competence over a longer term in a more structured way.

We would argue that the approach taken to date has been misguided: the focus should be on creating cultural *safety*.<sup>13</sup> This requires effective care to be provided by practitioners who have actively reflected on their own cultural identity and who recognise the impact of their professional culture on their practice. Unsafe cultural practice covers any action that diminishes or disempowers the cultural identity and wellbeing of an individual.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, cultural safety is measured not by organisations but by their client groups: is the physical venue accessible and safe to access? Do clients feel respected and cared for appropriately? Do they feel comfortable in using the services and would they recommend them to others? These are essential questions that must be incorporated into any framework designed to build 'cultural competency' in mainstream services.

The need to move past the *ad hoc* approach of the past is paramount to improving access to services for those affected by family violence.

The second major policy document is *A Right to Safety and Justice: Strategic Framework to Guide Continuing Family Violence Reform in Victoria 2010-2020*<sup>15</sup> (*'A Right to Safety'*).

The overarching goal is to build

an integrated service system so that wherever a woman or child experiencing family violence goes for help ... she will be provided with help to access the right information and support to stay safe. The services that are needed will work together to ensure that her immediate and future wellbeing are safe and protected and that she has support in the aftermath of family violence.<sup>16</sup>

Like the Indigenous ten year plan, this document details specific strategies and actions for the work ahead. Unlike *A Right to Respect*, it neither specifies actions for the coming 12 months nor provides details as to responsibilities, timelines or financial commitments outside those made in the recent budget announcements.

The broader national campaign to end violence against women, *Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009-2021*<sup>17</sup> set the standard for long term plans by specifically itemising and prioritising actions so that the public can expect deliverable outcomes in given timeframes. It is reasonable to expect the same standard from the Victorian Government.

#### SO WHAT ABOUT PROGRESS & FUTURE PLANS?

Progress on the ten year plan has been slow and difficult to track. While it captures principles and priority areas for outcomes, there is no demonstrable strategy to guide the effort and there remains no identifiable process for implementation or evaluation. We call on the Victorian Government to demonstrate publicly the achievements and progress to date under the ten year plan. When will an implementation plan be available? How will outcomes be evaluated and monitored? And how have the public monies made available to this plan been spent to date? In the context of a looming state election, how will the Victorian Government (whichever party is elected) work differently to achieve the outcomes desired?

It seems that the Victorian Government consistently takes this approach to plans relating to Indigenous affairs. In June 2008, a week before the ten year plan was launched, the Victorian Auditor-General tabled in Parliament a report entitled *Coordinating Services and Initiatives for Aboriginal*

*People*<sup>18</sup> ('the report'). It clearly articulated that, since 2002, the State Government has shown a 'lack of leadership in Indigenous affairs, a poor whole-of-government effort to improve Indigenous outcomes and ineffective coordination and consultation'.<sup>19</sup> Added criticisms include insufficient coordination and communication between departments; unfocused programs and services; ambiguous roles and responsibilities of key participants; incomplete performance monitoring frameworks and data limitations. These have made it impossible to undertake a robust assessment of progress in Indigenous affairs in Victoria. The report's findings echo our concerns, as well those expressed by Indigenous community members and service providers.<sup>20</sup>

We do not dispute the goodwill or commitment of the State Government in responding to family violence but we do question whether the promises of reform and integrated service delivery to better support those experiencing violence can be achieved for **all** Victorians given that there is little evidence of progress with the implementation of the ten year plan. The time to be clear on responsibilities and to producing promised outcomes for our community members is now.

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*The authors are uniquely placed to provide this critique as they have been members of the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum. Both authors were also members of the Victorian Indigenous Women's Ministerial Advisory Committee who in 2007 consulted widely with Victorian Indigenous women about the issues that affected them – family violence was one of those issues. Their role on the Partnership Forum was to represent and ensure that Indigenous women are appropriately acknowledged and supported in the ten year plan.*

- 1 Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum, *Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: Towards a Safer Future for Indigenous Families and Communities*, (2008).
- 2 See Kyllie Cripps and Leanne Miller, 'Mutant Messages: Victoria's Indigenous 10 Year Family Violence Plan' (2008) 7(7) *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 15; Kyllie Cripps and Leanne Miller, 'Mutant Messages 2: Victoria's Indigenous Family Violence Plan' (2009) 7(12) 10.
- 3 Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce, *Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce Final Report* (2003), 123.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 5 Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum, above 1, 14.
- 6 Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce, above n 3, 233.



- 7 Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development, *Family Violence Reform in Victoria State Budget 2008-09*, (2008), 8-9.
- 8 Office of Women's Policy, Department of Planning and Community Development, *A Right to Respect: Victoria's Plan to Prevent Violence against Women 2010-2020*, (2009).
- 9 Ibid, 6.
- 10 Ibid 26.
- 11 National Health and Medical Research Council, *Cultural Competency in Health: A Guide for Policy, Partnerships and Participation* (2006), 8.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Madeleine Dion Stout and Bernice Downey, 'Nursing, Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Safety: So what? Now what?' (2006) 22(2) *Contemporary Nurse* 327.
- 14 Irihapeti Ramsden, *Cultural Safety and Nursing Education in Aotearoa and Te Waipounamu* (D Phil Thesis, Victoria University, 2002).
- 15 Office of Women's Policy, Department of Planning and Community Development, *A Right to Safety and Justice: Strategic Framework to Guide Continuing Family Violence Reform in Victoria 2010-2020* (2010).
- 16 Ibid 5.
- 17 National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, *Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009-2021*(2009).
- 18 Victorian Auditor General, *Coordinating Services and Initiatives for Aboriginal People*, (2008).
- 19 Ibid, 10.
- 20 See generally, *ibid*, 11-29.

**Four Ways 2009**

Jock Mosquito

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