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Despite good work, the East West Link debacle remains a thorn in the State Government's side

- by: *MATT JOHNSTON*
- From: *Herald Sun*
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Premier Daniel Andrews has made a ‘very impressive start’, says Lord Mayor Robert Doyle. Picture: Mike Dugdale *Source:* News Corp Australia

DANIEL Andrews has been ploughing through his policy to-do list since vowing on election night almost 100 days ago he would “not waste a day” in government.

Within weeks of being sworn in, the premier established a Royal Commission into family violence and set up new authorities to develop a Melbourne Metro rail tunnel and to remove 50 level crossings.

In the past fortnight, as the government’s 100 day milestone loomed, the premier produced a \$46 million plan to tackle the drug ice, formalised safety regulations for cage fighting, and set a framework for council rates capping.

But one issue the premier has not been able to put to bed — no matter how much he may want to — is the East West Link debacle.



An East West Link artist’s render of the western gateway. *Source:* Supplied

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Labor MPs admit the issue, which saw Mr Andrews suspend a State Government-signed contract for a \$6.8 billion toll road, is frustrating and has overshadowed some of the work they are doing.

But there are few signs of panic just yet, and the issue wasn't raised by a single backbencher during the first three Caucus meetings of this parliament.

“Having said that, no one wants it hanging around,” one MP said.

Negotiations are ongoing, but Labor faces a big and embarrassing compensation bill if it breaks the contract Mr Andrews claimed before the election was “not worth the paper it's written on”.

100 days of Dan

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Fans and critics of Labor recognise Mr Andrews and his team have moved quickly to progress their wider policy agenda.

Lord Mayor Robert Doyle, who as a Liberal leader sparred with Mr Andrews between 2002 and 2006, said the premier had “made a very impressive start”.

“If they (the government) can work with you it’s productive, if they can’t then it’s said plainly,” he said.

“They have stuck by what they said they were going to do.”

Mr Andrews himself is quick to remind Victorians he is “getting on with it”; producing a glossy booklet with that title to back his declaration.

“Every day is a busy day, let me assure you of that,” he told reporters this week.



Daniel Andrews has shown a clear vision, on most things, and says he is ‘getting on’ with the job. Picture: Yuri Kouzmin *Source: News Corp Australia*

The Coalition has also hit the ground with energy, but is landing few punches.

Labor learnt the lesson of the Baillieu Government’s inertia after the 2010 election, which one senior Liberal described as a time when leaders went into a darkened room to discuss policies away from prying eyes.

Senior lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at Monash University, Dr Nick Economou, said: “They are looking a lot better than the Coalition were at the same stage.

“But they still haven’t resolved the biggest issue on the agenda: what to do about the East West Link. That’s the big stinker.

“Other than that, it’s been pretty plain sailing. They must be pretty pleased with themselves.”

Partisan supporters, like Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary and former Andrews staffer Luke Hilakari, proudly say the first 100 days of the government show it was “prepared to take action”.

“The Jobs Bill is a big priority for the 200,000 Victorians looking for a job,” Mr Halikari said.

Chief executive of the policy think tank the Committee for Melbourne, Kate Roffey, said rising unemployment was a significant looming issue — particularly when manufacturing job losses flowed through.

Ms Roffey said there had been a lot of good work done behind the scenes by Labor ministers, including on addressing the issue of family violence.



The Andrews government has backed police initiatives, including the war on the drug ice and family violence. *Source: News Limited*

But she said the committee would like to see decisive action on public private partnerships floated under the previous government, including to upgrade the Dandenong rail corridor and to widen the Tullamarine Freeway.

Those projects, Ms Roffey said, were integral to improving the transport system but would also help offset damage from a rising jobs problem.



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That wasn't the only significant challenge on the road ahead, Ms Roffey said, as the elephant in Victoria reared its head again.

"You have got the East West hump still sitting there," she said.

"Our reputation as a place to do business is taking a hit from it."

Whether that issue will be dealt with after another 100 days is anyone's guess.

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