



EXTRA

INTO THE DARK Liam Mannix visits a laboratory that could unlock one of the universe's biggest secrets **PAGE 18**

OUT OF THE LOOP

It is a \$50 billion rail line, hailed as a vote-winner that will change the face of the city. But could it have been doomed from birth?

Timna Jacks, Chip Le Grand and Paul Sakkal report.

At one minute past 7am on August 28, 2018, as people were boarding trains for their morning commute, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews' Facebook page lit up with plans for an ambitious new rail project.

The slick two-minute advertisement opened with a Lego-like animation showing passengers moving around a new underground station. "The biggest public transport project in history is coming to Victoria," a woman's voiceover claimed. As the music swelled, the narrator informed Victorians it would carry 400,000 passengers a day, create 20,000 construction jobs and link to more than a dozen suburban stops.

Originally codenamed Operation Halo, this was an infrastructure project so secret that board members of the government agency responsible for its delivery knew nothing about it until it was announced and the senior transport bureaucrat working on its design was legally gagged from telling his boss. All but a handful of government ministers were also kept in the dark.

By the time the Facebook video was posted, the project had its final name: the Suburban Rail Loop. A 90-kilometre orbital line, this mammoth project was estimated to cost \$50 billion but is expected by insiders to finally land at twice that amount.

But as Victoria prepares itself for another election next year, troubling questions hang over the project.

For a can-do Premier and a government eager to promote its "Big Build" infrastructure program heading into the 2018 election, the promotional video was on-brand. And politically, it worked. The project is considered by analysts to have been the most popular single policy leading into an election Labor won in a landslide.

But within Development Victoria, the government's development arm, the Facebook video hit a jarring note. The public agency was charged with overseeing the project, but the board was left out of its planning and only a few trusted insiders were aware it was coming. Among the inner circle were Labor's go-to board director James MacKenzie, former Labor

Continued Page 16

