



## CHAPTER 23 - IT'S THRU AND IT'S TIME

### Plotting the rise and fall of Australian National Railways

On 3 January 1962 the standard-gauge railway from Wodonga to Melbourne was opened with the locomotive bursting through a banner stretched across the track declaring *It's Thru*. It was followed in March 1962 with the inaugural journey of the *Southern Aurora*.

It is tempting to imagine that the correction of gauge anomalies, when viewed in isolation, would have been the panacea that would finally fix the problems of the railways.

For 80 years the commercial dealings of enterprises in Melbourne and Sydney had been encumbered by the break-of-gauge at Albury. In the earlier years the merchandise between those two cities went by sea. And as we moved into the 1950s there were trucks. These businesses had enjoyed long and productive relationships with their transport providers. The task before the railways was to win back the business.

That was a challenge because the railways had long taken a passive role regarding marketing, with an approach that they were there to provide the service but they weren't in the business of chasing business. To add to the woes of the railways was the Hughes and Vale case on appeal to the Privy Council in 1954 that favoured the interstate trucking businesses. From the 1950s and 1960s air travel became more popular and most families now had a private car and even two cars were common.

Much of the freight that came through Albury was destined for businesses in Victoria that were served by broad-gauge lines. The bogie exchange at Dynon Road was faster but it was still the source of delay. They were still trans-shipping steel from standard gauge to broad gauge at Albury in the mid-1990s. Regarding freight movement on the Sydney to Melbourne corridor we had long known that rail's share was languishing and more recently was being quoted as a single digit percentage. But it came as a shock when the *Railway Digest* of January 2024 arrived to learn that it is now 2%.

Bill Wentworth's plan, had been, once the standard gauge had reached Melbourne, to then proceed with the standard-gauge lines to Perth, and from Port Pirie to Broken Hill.

ON 1 FEBRUARY 2004 the inaugural *Ghan* passenger train to Darwin running parallel to the 3 ft 6in heritage track and train of the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society on the approach to Port Augusta. **BOB SAMPSON.**

The latter would include a line to Adelaide, thus achieving standard-gauge connection of all mainland capitals. From Ron Fitch in *Australian Railwayman*:

In 1958, two standardisation proposals were put forward. One was approved and the other rejected. SA sought, in terms of its 1949 Act, to proceed with the standardisation of its narrow-gauge Peterborough Division. It was met with outright hostility from the Commonwealth. Three years later WA... was given preferential treatment in 1961 with the development of the Koolyanobbing iron ore deposit ... providing the impetus for approval for the construction of a standard-gauge railway from Kalgoorlie to Kwinana.

Ron Fitch has commented that Pat Hannaberry, Commissioner of the Commonwealth Railways, long harboured a grudge against South Australia over the deal that Tom Playford had done to get cheap transport for his Leigh Creek coal and has suggested that this was the source of the sour relationship between the Commonwealth and South Australia.

In the realm of Federal politics the untimely death of Harold Holt brought us a succession of weak leaders: McEwen, Gorton, and McMahon. The Federal Leader of the Opposition during the 1960s had been Gough Whitlam. His rhetoric had mainly been one fuelled by the failings of Gorton and McMahon and we heard very little about Labor's ambition for railways. Then\*, in the lead-up to the 1968 elections he presented a paper at the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Melbourne where he outlined his concept for a National Railway administration. He lost that election but in the lead-up to the 1972 election Labor strategists had come up with a catchy slogan, *It's Time*. \*Advertiser on 9 April 1968.

There is one last word from Ron Fitch:

On Friday 1 December 1972...Gilbert Seaman, South Australian under-Treasurer and with whom I had enjoyed a cordial working relationship, phoned me and said, 'There's going to be a change of Government in Canberra tomorrow and the State will want to hand over all but suburban train services'.

Think about that a minute. It was South Australia, or more specifically Premier Dunstan, who wanted to be rid of the regional railway operations. Gough Whitlam had schemed Australian National Railways. Whitlam and Dunstan had obviously put this together before the Federal election.

Murray Stockley was the Railway Commissioner who replaced Ron Fitch but his role was much diminished. The Government was running the railways. Murray Stockley was now called the General Manager of the Rail Division of the State Transport Authority. As the painful and protracted carve up of the old SAR proceeded, what had been the old Commonwealth Railways was now Australian National Railways. Murray Stockley had only ever worked for the railways. His replacement was Tony Flint who was a highways engineer.

The transfer of the non-metropolitan assets of the South Australian Railways required an Act of Parliament but when the Bill had been passed in the Lower House it needed the Upper House to agree. They found cause for concern, mainly arising from the provisions relating to the interests of the workers, and rejected the Bill. Premier Dunstan called an election on 12 July 1975 and won, but with a small majority. Gough Whitlam's Australian National Railways had come into being on 1 July 1975. It took nearly three years to attend to all the formalities.

The various government railway systems of Australia had each developed their individual culture. It was almost as if each had its own religion. It was unusual for a railway employee to transfer from one system to another. For the workforce of the Commonwealth Railways it was business as usual on 1 July 1975 and it seemed that it was only the name at the top of the stationery that had changed. K A Smith was still at the helm. He had been the Commissioner, but was now the Chairman.

Des Smith remembers those early years in the merging of Commonwealth Railways (under its new name, Australian National Railways) with the South Australian Railways into the new entity, to bring Gough Whitlam's vision to reality. He became Chief Civil Engineer of ANR in 1979. He said that there was some initial angst on both sides. A few South Australians saw it as a hostile takeover and some CR people found South Australians 'uppity' and treated them as bush mechanics. But the majority tried sincerely to make it work.

It was evident from the start that there would be problems in forming the new pecking order and some would feel aggrieved when a job had to be filled from two equal candidates from the former organisations. Des talked about one such case where the problem was averted when one contrived to clear long service at half pay for double the time to take him to his early retirement.

Des reflected that ANR was little more than an enlarged CR or SAR without having either VR or NSWGR. Also in the mix it simply didn't have the critical mass or the influence to grow to become anything like Gough Whitlam's grand vision.



**BROKEN HILL.** Commonwealth Railways CL16 on its delivery run, 29 February 1972. Lionel Noble on the left, and the Commonwealth driver. It was necessary to have an SAR person in the cab as the driver would not have 'learnt the road'. I never saw Lionel not wearing a grey coat.

Lionel Noble was a Peterborough locomotive inspector whose attachments to the railways, the Garratts and the town of Peterborough were rock solid.

Unlike the locomotive inspectors on the broad-gauge, who regarded us train enthusiasts (probably with good reason) as menaces, Lionel took the trouble to see us looked after, with access to the depot and cab rides, and was freely forthcoming with information.

I first met him in November 1965 when, with fellow enthusiast, Ian Hammond, we rode to 5.00am Monday goods to Quorn. There were many subsequent visits to Peterborough.

The last occasion that I recall meeting Lionel was in Broken Hill in 1972. Commonwealth Railways CL16 was on its delivery. He was to stay overnight in the Hill, so we bundled him into the car to the other end of Chloride Street to our hospital house and talked trains over dinner.

It has been a pleasure to have used some photographs from his collection in this book. The collection is now managed by his son Jeff.

The efficiencies of the ANR operations required the downsizing of Peterborough. Lionel had departed Peterborough and moved to one of the southern suburbs of Adelaide.

Intuitively I knew that Lionel would have grieved when leaving Peterborough, but that same intuition told me he harboured a deep loyalty to the South Australian Railways and would have dutifully accepted his lot. I invited Jeff to send me a few words:

*Broadly speaking, I am aware he struggled with the change, I think largely because, in his view, the people running the show were not railway people but (presumably) bureaucrats who didn't know the railways. He retired at 58 and was glad to be out and that was because of the change involved.*

That was a period of uncertainty and a lack of direction and in the end, the workforce was put in the difficult position of choosing their way forward. To stay with the State or transfer to ANR? For the locomotive crews who had worked *The Overland* and the Broken Hill line there had been a certain prestige attached to these roles. To stay with the State and drive suburban railcars was quite a come-down.

There were two major problems with the network that Gough Whitlam had cobbled together. Firstly, it was comprised of 9 separate systems that were separated from each other by either distance or conflict of gauge. The second was that Whitlam's vision had been for all of the states to be part of his grand scheme, which would have had the trains working all over Australia. But, to the west, his locomotives could go to Kalgoorlie and no further. To the east they were halted at Broken Hill and Serviceton.

Australian National Railways had achieved a network that operated all three gauges along with the inefficiencies that went with it. Those nine components were:

1. The standard-gauge operations of the Commonwealth Railways based on Port Pirie to Kalgoorlie, Whyalla, and Marree. Add the (former SAR) line from Port Pirie to Broken Hill and the line to Alice Springs approaching completion.
2. The broad-gauge lines of the SAR, to Serviceton and Port Pirie, and numerous branch lines of doubtful viability.
3. The Tasmanian lines, 3 ft 6 in.
4. The North Australia Railway from Darwin to Birdum, 3 ft 6 in (but this line had been rendered out of action from damage caused by Cyclone Tracey and ceased operation in 1976).
5. Marree to Alice Springs, 3 ft 6 in. This line was in very poor condition.
6. The isolated Eyre Peninsula lines, 3 ft 6 in.
7. The line from Peterborough to Quorn, 3 ft 6 in.
8. From Gladstone to Wilmington, 3 ft 6 in.
9. And finally, the railway in the ACT (that was 13.6 km operated by the NSW Government Railways).

For Des Smith, his involvement with the South Australian system came early. On 24 October 1975 there was a major train wreck at Crystal Brook, when a bridge collapsed under a freight train. The bridge had been built only 6 years before as part of the Port Pirie to Broken Hill gauge conversion. As this route would eventually be under the control and ownership of Australian National Railways it was important that they had full knowledge regarding the cause of the collapse and input regarding the restoration of the structure. There were also questions about the design of all the other bridges on the Broken Hill line.

The cause of the collapse had been the piers that had been set too shallow and were resting on alluvial gravel when they should have been taken down to bedrock.

Harking back to page 9 where I posed the question of what is or isn't a break-of-gauge, Whyalla is an example of a town with two gauges that is not a break of gauge.

The BHP company, in 1901, had constructed a private narrow-gauge railway from Hummock Hill (Whyalla) to the Iron Knob for the purpose of obtaining ironstone flux for its lead smelters at Port Pirie. The ironstone was sent across the Gulf in barges. From 1915 the company diversified into steel production, hence the steelworks at Whyalla. Within the steelworks there had developed an internal railway system of narrow-gauge tracks that functioned independently of the Iron Knob mainline.

In 1958 the Company reviewed its forward needs and could see the merit in having an internal system consistent with trackwork at Port Kembla and the projected steelworks at Kwinana in Western Australia. There was another advantage that flowed from having a 4 ft 8½ in gauge system in the works. The Company could see that eventually there would be a railway from Whyalla to join the Trans-Australian Railway at Port Augusta. The narrow-gauge railway would continue mainline operations. This created the inevitable situation where there were two gauges within the steelworks, but there was no routine transfer from one gauge to the other. Thus there was not a break-of-gauge within the steelworks. This conversion was carried out in 1962.

Des Smith recalls that it was about this time that the Commonwealth Railways asked him to prepare estimates for a railway from Port Augusta to Whyalla.

**FAR RIGHT.**

Chairman, Keith Smith and locomotive GM1, on the occasion of the unveiling of the new corporate colours and the rebadging to Australian National.

**NATIONAL RAILWAY MUSEUM 1-3-S04167**

**RIGHT.**

The Crystal Brook wreck of 24 October 1975.

**BOB SAMPSON**





Nothing came of it at the time but Des then commented, with a philosophical air, that it can take a long time from talking about it to seeing track on the ground. No doubt the BHP Company and the Commonwealth Railways could see a lot of rail eventually going north for the line to Alice Springs and Darwin. The railway from Port Augusta to Whyalla was opened on 6 October 1972. Commonwealth Railways used this line to establish the future for concrete sleepers. There are 7 pages, specific to concrete sleepers, that I have taken, with permission, from Des' book, *Tracks Across Australia* and these are presented as an Appendix item.

There was the matter of bringing the standard gauge to Adelaide. There had long been resistance by South Australian Premier of the early 1920s, Sir Henry Barwell, and it had become part of the Playford Government mantra through the 1950s. But there was an operational problem that had to be addressed.

*The Overland* was the longest train to use the Adelaide station. *The Ghan* and the *Indian Pacific* were much longer.

The construction of a standard-gauge railway into the greater Adelaide had been one of broken promises that had been deferred twice. The route had been identified as joining the existing standard-gauge line at Crystal Brook with new construction south from Crystal Brook to Merriton, from where the broad-gauge line to Adelaide would be converted.

The conversion/construction of the Crystal Brook line was undertaken in 1982 with the standard-gauge line into Dry Creek where a bogie exchange was established. The official opening was on 8 December 1982. With no standard-gauge access to the Adelaide Railway Station and the new terminal still another 2 years away the Adelaide passengers for the *Ghan* and the *Indian Pacific* travelled to Port Pirie by bus.

**TOP OF PAGE.** *The Overland* ready for departure from the Adelaide Railway Station. This photograph shows the Piping Shrike State emblem prominently displayed on the front of the locomotive, and thus identifies the date as pre March 1978. It was 17 December 1972. *The Overland* used Platform 11 at the Adelaide Railway Station. It was the longest platform and could accommodate the 18 cars of *The Overland*. JLW.

**RIGHT.** The standard-gauge *Overland* about to depart from the Terminal. c1996. JLW.

For passenger services a new terminal was built at Keswick with enough length of platforms to handle most passenger trains operated by AN. The first train to use the terminal was *The Overland*, arriving from Melbourne on 18 May 1984. The first standard-gauge train was the departing *Ghan* on 28 May. The passenger terminal had dual gauge. Thus it functioned as a break-of-gauge. By this time Port Pirie had ceased to operate as a break-of-gauge. It was a situation of shifting the break-of-gauge from one place to another.

But the terminal at Keswick (it was officially called the Adelaide Rail Passenger Terminal) could claim a third gauge. There was a short section of 3 ft 6 in gauge on the platform that became the new home of the *Sandfly* that had previously been a feature on the platform at Port Augusta. It had no historical connection to Port Augusta nor Keswick and now rightfully resides in the museum at Darwin.

It has been an unfortunate failing that the passenger terminal has no public transport connection despite the main suburban line running parallel and a short distance from the terminal. It has been told by one engineer, who has preferred to remain nameless, that he prepared drawings which provided for a pedestrian underpass from the terminal across to the suburban line where a new station would be provided. When he presented the plan to the relevant Minister he was told to put a line through it.



## A CHRONOLOGY OF GAUGE-RELATED ITEMS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

- 1897 Eastern Goldfields Railway open to Kalgoorlie.
- 1911, Dec 12. Kalgoorlie to Port Augusta Railway Act.
- 1913, Feb 12. Turning of the first sod at Kalgoorlie.
- 1917, Oct 17. Joining of the rails
- 1960, BHP outline plan for iron ore mine.
- 1961, Oct. WA and Commonwealth agree re new line.
- 1966, Feb 15. Opening of Avon Valley line.
- 1966, July. Hammersley iron ore railway 1435 mm.
- 1967, Apr 10. Standard gauge to Koolyanobbing open.
- 1968, Aug 3. Koolyanobbing to Kalgoorlie open.
- 1969, Sep. Name for express Indian Pacific.
- 1969, Nov 29. Joining of rails at Broken Hill
- 1970, Jan . Sydney to Perth freight.
- 1970, Feb 23. Inaugural VIP Indian Pacific from Sydney.
- 1974, Sep. Gauge conversion Esperance.

This Chronology has been constructed taking into account matters and events up to the end of 2003.

There was then the matter of the rail corridor from Adelaide to Melbourne that was still broad gauge. In 1992 there was funding from Paul Keating's One Nation Programme of infrastructure projects for conversion to standard gauge. AN had anticipated the gauge conversion and in consultation with Monier had developed a gauge-convertible concrete sleeper. AN had, initially installed a short trial section of this track on the South line and then proceeded to have the entire line from Adelaide to Serviceton fitted with concrete sleepers. On the Victorian side the decision had been made to have the standard-gauge line via Maroona and Cressy. It had been said that this route offered better gradients than the direct line through Ballarat. The major barrier to the direct route was the complexity and cost of running both gauges through the busy corridor via Bacchus Marsh.

The whole Melbourne to Adelaide conversion was underfunded. The track in Victoria was not of the same standard as on the South Australian side and was subject to speed restrictions. The track upgrading in Victoria was not completed until 1999. The conversion process was carried out in April and May 1995. It involved trains being diverted through Pinnaroo. There were many places where other lines joined the mainline. Some were not converted.

*The Overland* had become a casualty in the conversion of the Melbourne to Adelaide route. It had always had good passenger numbers at Ballarat. At that time it was in need of a faster schedule but the standard gauge delivered the opposite. It was burdened by the additional hour to be going the long way via Cressy, add in the speed restrictions imposed by the poor quality track.

It is a fact that passenger services do not make money in the sense that ticket sales do not meet operating costs. But Victoria has been the standout example that fast and frequent regional passenger services are essential to vibrant rural communities.

**Wolseley to Mount Gambier.** This became disconnected and has been left to rot. The State and Commonwealth Governments have failed the people of Mount Gambier. A consultant's report is said to have concluded that it would not be economically viable to convert the line. But what had happened to that deal struck by Premier Playford with the Commonwealth that South Australia would convert the line to standard gauge when the mainline was converted. Des Smith has posed the question of whether, in 1978, when the Mount Gambier line was transferred to the Commonwealth, whether the transfer included the offloading of the obligation by the State to complete the conversion to standard gauge.

Gough Whitlam closed his comments in *The Perspective* by challenging the borders. Most of what Gough Whitlam had written in that *Perspective* was what had been tried and hadn't worked. But his closing paragraph however, shone a light for the future. I agree and had independently come to the same conclusion (Chapter 20). Whitlam again:

Nevertheless, by the turn of the century a new generation of political leaders may well have the confidence to challenge the 19th century confines in which railway management has remained in Australia and to acknowledge that other federal nations - US, Canada, India and Germany, pay no regard to state borders in the management of their railway.

**THE OVERLAND** circa 1983, having passed though the suburban Keswick station is about 5 minutes away from reaching its destination. The ANR branding of the locomotives was almost stencil-like. In the background construction is underway for the Adelaide Rail Passenger Terminal.

**BOB GRANT**



In 1991 Australian National produced a book, *The Long Haul* that proudly touted the success of the first decade. In December 1980, ANR had rebadged to Australian National and with a striking green and gold livery. There was a stylised AN logo that resembled a snail. One was dubbed the organisation 'Snail Rail'. But there had been some serious head winds appear in the couple of years between the end of that decade (1988) and the publication of the book.

The Annual Reports of AN told the story. One didn't have to read what was inside. From 1993 to 1994, the presentation of the annual reports changed from a glossy colourful production to a smaller and aesthetically dull format.

Gough Whitlam wrote several pages in the front of the book *A Perspective*, in an egotistical style that was in keeping with the nature of the man. Reading between the lines one could sense an element of apology from Whitlam for not getting it right. But Whitlam was not one for apologies. It was the others who had let the side down.

This book describes the economic, technical and industrial success which Australian National has achieved in the following ten years from March 1978... By contrast, there was a relentless deterioration in the railways which remained in the jurisdiction of state governments...AN successes are due to the political will exercised by Premier Dunstan of SA and me... the failures in the other states are due to the lack of will by previous and succeeding Prime Ministers and Premiers...Dunstan and I commenced negotiations in Sydney on 10 December 1972, eight days after the elections...The only other Premier who cooperated in the transfer of railways was Premier Nielsen of Tasmania.

But on the mention of Tasmania, it has never been relevant to discussion on the break-of-gauge. Maybe if there was talk about a train ferry. More from Gough Whitlam:

The Hawke and Burke Governments discussed the transfer of the Western Australian railways to AN but their junior ministers wavered...When the standard gauge reached Adelaide, floundering Victorian officials could not make up their minds whether a standardised line to Melbourne should pass through Geelong or Ballarat...Possessive New South Wales officials balked at the AN proposal to transfer the railway between Broken Hill and Parkes.

Some head winds had been:

Deregulation of the airlines had an impact on passenger numbers on the three interstate trains.

The recession that Treasurer, Paul Keating, declared in November 1990, 'that we had to have'.

Concerns from Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales that they were excluded from a national network.

Concern by the Commonwealth that Australian National was not achieving savings.

The Federal Government had responded to this in part by carving off the passenger business to have it function as a separate entity that was supported by a community obligation subsidy.

More from Gough Whitlam:

At the end of 1990...the heads of Australia's nine governments decided to establish a National Rail Freight Corporation...The NRC legislation may be a transitional scheme. It does not preclude a more comprehensive approach to national management of Australia's non-metropolitan railways...the NRC is to conduct interstate rail freight operations in Australia.

The origins of the National Rail Corporation have been described in some detail in *Australian Railway History*, Vol. 74, No. 1029, November 2023, by Frank Hussey, a former locomotive driver. He had joined the NRC in August 1992 as Transportation Manager.

Even though the capitals had been joined by standard-gauge connections there remained many barriers to interstate freight movement. The NRC had been a recommendation to the Hawke-Keating Government. Australian National Railways was in opposition:

- after all they were to be completely absorbed into the NRC – their opposition was intense and the Trans-Australian line became the last operation to be taken up in late 1995.

The National Rail Corporation (NRC) came into being on 1 January 1992 - a private company with government shareholders. The Commonwealth was the largest shareholder and it was seen as the harbinger of privatisation of the rail freight network in Australia ...The plan was that as soon as it started to turn a positive cash flow it was to be sold off. In every state it was discovered that the distance between the rails was not the only impediment to operating inter-system trains:

The break-of-gauge mentality had seeped into every aspect of railway operations from different safe working systems, locomotive types, communication equipment, signalling and rolling stock management and recording. Until the NRC it was not possible to transfer as a driver from one state system to another. One had to resign and start again with no recognition of prior learning and no seniority...To use the example of the section from Dimboola to Adelaide, no one driver was qualified in both AN and V/Line rules and this included operation of sidings, yards and switches all along the way. We got around this problem in the short term by rostering a Victorian and an AN-qualified driver together, using what we called the 'buddy' system.

The NRC functioned as such until early-2002, when it became part of a consortium that would then become Pacific National.

Winding up of Australian National was at a cost of \$2 billion. That was \$779 million to pay off debt, \$580 million to meet superannuation liability and the balance to put the assets in good order to sell. AN's freight business became part of NRC, the passenger trains went to Great Southern Railway, which has subsequently become Journey Beyond, and the track was the last asset to go. In July 1998, the Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) was established.

There remained the problem of the section between Adelaide and Melbourne that was broad-gauge. Intersystem working over this section was only possible because there was a bogie exchange at each end. (See Appendix Random Comments).

We are in an environment where we must question how much of the transport task we are getting from a litre of diesel fuel. Murrayville is in Victoria but only just. If the wheat from Murrayville could be railed to Port Adelaide, that would be 287 km. We will call the diesel fuel requirement 'x'. It is generally agreed that rail is more efficient in this regard by a factor of about 3:1. As the road route closely follows the railway, the road haul would consume 3x units to Port Adelaide. Presently some of it goes to North Geelong by rail (600 km). That's 2x but some also goes by road (500 km), which is a more direct route but consuming a whopping 5 units of diesel fuel.

## PINNAROO CHRONOLOGY

**1903.** Victoria opened the railway to Mildura. Broad gauge.

**1906.** Railway opened from Tailem Bend to Pinnaroo. Broad gauge. 160 km length. 260 km to Adelaide.

**1912.** Railway open from Ouyen (on the Mildura line) to Murrayville. Length 107 km. 572 km to Melbourne.

**1915.** The railway from Murrayville to Pinnaroo (26 km) was opened. For the next 80 years rolling stock and entire trains crossed the border. There was an unconfirmed report that in the early 1970s, *The Overland* was diverted through Pinnaroo. In May 1995 it was a very busy railway because freight trains that normally used the Melbourne to Adelaide mainline were diverted due to the standardisation works.

**1995.** Thereafter the Pinnaroo line was disconnected at Tailem Bend. There were broad-gauge locomotives and grain hoppers that were captive on the line and the grain was unloaded at Tailem Bend into the bulk handling facility. We could say that the grain changed trains and, that for a few years, Tailem Bend was a break-of-gauge station. The effect of conversion of the line to Portland required the broad-gauge train to go via Ballarat to North Geelong. It had been 600 kms from Murrayville to Portland before the standardisation. It was also about the same distance to North Geelong.

**1996.** Victoria closed the railway from Pinnaroo to Murrayville.

**1998.** Tailem Bend to Pinnaroo was converted to 4 ft 8½ in.

**2001.** The Victorian Bracks Government announced that it would convert the line to Mildura to standard gauge and also the line from Ouyen to Pinnaroo. That made sense because it would restore the through traffic capacity of the line and would enable containers to travel by rail from Mildura to Port Adelaide. The movement and storage of grain in Victoria was by Graincorp, and hence an obstacle to sending grain to Port Adelaide. Thus, the border has twice impacted negatively on the viability of this railway. The estimated date of completion for that conversion was late 2002.

**2002.** But when 2002 had come and gone it was evident that the planned conversion had suffered a funding crisis. It has been said that there was opposition from within the ranks of the Bracks Government and also from some officials. The result was a half-done gauge conversion, of which it could be said was worse than no gauge conversion at all.

**2015 (about).** Viterra was the grain-handling authority in South Australia and had a preference for road, rather than rail transport of grain on the line. The railway on the South Australian side has remained out of use since then. In Victoria the Government has noted the damage being done to the roads by the grain trucks and has invested in rail rather than road. In South Australia the approach has been the opposite. The Horrocks Highway in the mid-North is in constant repair but remains in poor condition.

**2018.** It was announced that the Mildura line would be converted. This was commenced in 2018.

**2019.** Conversion of the Murrayville line was completed in 2019 but there has been no work done beyond Murrayville and there has been no work done on the section between Murrayville and Pinnaroo, nor has there been any statement. The railway that has been built to Murrayville is a very solid track with concrete sleepers and has been built to a higher loading capacity (21 tonne axle-loading).

**2024.** We presently have two branch lines that are almost within cooe of each other. We have regressed back more than a century to the old colonial model.



**THERE'S A CARTOON ON PAGE 60.** The intention was that it was a silly situation that would bring some mirth. Here is some more cause for mirth. That's the Mallee Highway and the track in the foreground is broad-gauge (1600 mm or 5 ft 3 in). The track in the distance is standard gauge, and with concrete sleepers. To follow the highway to the right leads to Murrayville about 1 km further on. December 2023. JLW.

The map on page 142 is relevant to the topic of this page.

**Pages 203 and 204 are a chronology** of events that are relevant to the era of Australian National Railways and the Darwin line. References are DS (Des Smith, *Tracks Across Australia*), the Recorder of the ARHS (SA Division) and the *Here & There* supplements of the *Bulletin* of the ARHS which are shown as eg (Jan/86). The mention in the latter can happen some months after the event.

## A chronology of events related to the rise and fall of Australian National Railways and the railway from Alice Springs to Darwin.

**1975**  
**GOUGH**  
**WHITLAM**

**Tarcoola to Alice Springs Rwy.** Turning of the first sod by Prime Minister Whitlam. 12 April 1975. DS.  
**Australian National Railways Commission.** Established 1 July 1975. DS  
**The Railway Bill.** On 18 June the Liberal controlled South Australian Legislative Council rejected the transfer Bill. Premier Dunstan called an election for 12 July. Labor narrow win (*Recorder* Jul/75).  
**Crystal Brook** bridge collapse and derailment 24 October 1975.

**1976**  
**MALCOLM**  
**FRASER**

**New trading name** for Victorian Railways, 12 April 1976.  
**Retirement of Murray Stockley**, General Manager of Rail Division of State Transport Authority and former last Commissioner of the SAR. April 1976 (*Recorder* May/76).  
"The SA railway take-over was the most stupid deal ever made by a Federal Government", Mr Nixon, Federal Minister of Transport 26, May 1976. (*Recorder* Jun/76).

**1977**

**ANR to relocate** administration from Melbourne to Norwich Centre in Adelaide. (Oct/76).

11 Nov

**Darwin.** Last public train on 30 June 1976. (Dec/76).

1975

**Alice Springs line**, first consignment of sheep and wool from Gina (96 km nth of Tarcoola) January 1977 DS.  
**ANR wants to close** Wilmington and Quorn lines. (Dec/77).

to

**1978**

**Self-government of Northern Territory.**

**Australian National Railways** transfer of SA non-metropolitan operations, 1 March 1978.

**The old Alice Springs Railway** was in poor condition and a 40 kph limit on the whole line. July 1978. DS.

**Port Pirie by-pass** (Coonamia loop) in use in July 1978.

**Australian National Railways** will not close grain lines this season, said Minister Nixon. (Dec/78),

**Australian National Railways** will retain the old Ghan until the new line is open.

**Australian National Railways** will establish the first SA regional freight centre in the Riverland. (Aug/79).

**Prime Minister Fraser** at Kulgera, Sept 1979 - Alice Springs line by Des Smiths birthday, 3 Oct 1980.

**Mangalore to Tocumwal.** (Jun & Dec/80).

11 Mar

1983

**1979**

**1980**

**Darwin Line**, start of Darwin line. (Sep/80).

**Alice Springs line.** (577 km from Tarcoola to Kulgera) handed over to Operations Branch early 1980. DS.

**Alice Springs Railway.** 3 October 1980. Rails joined to Alice Springs (Des Smith's birthday. DS.

**Alice Springs** official formal opening on 9 Oct 1980. DS.

**1981**

**Australian National Railways rebrands** as Australian National. Green and gold. 9 Dec 1980 (Feb/81).

**Keith (K A) Smith**, first chairman of ANR retired on 15 March. (Apr/81).

**Northern Territory Gov't** announced that the train to Darwin will be called *The Maluka*. (Apr/81).

**1982**

**Adelaide to Crystal Brook** standard gauge, and Dry Creek bogie exch operative 1 December 1982. (Mar/83).

**Adelaide Freight Terminal.** Opening ceremony on 8 December 1982. (Mar/83).

**The Alice**, from December 1982, being run by AN in conjunction with SRA of NSW. (Dec/82).

**Keating mini-budget** funds for Darwin line withdrawn. (May/83).

**Port Pirie passenger service** terminated on 3 November 1982. (Jan/83).

**Darwin line** to go ahead (announced by PM Fraser and to open in 1988 for Bicentennial (Mar/83).

**New passenger terminal** - earthworks underway. (Aug/83).

**Darwin line on hold** pending economic assessment - report to be by David Hill & Assoc. (Oct/83).

**Assessment report.** (Dec/83).

**Passenger terminal** official opening. 15 June 1984.

**1983**

**1984**  
**BOB**  
**HAWKE**

**AN considering a 'liner' concept** for the *Indian Pacific* and *The Ghan*. (Mar/86).

**Whyalla Iron Triangle Limited** commenced 3 April 1986. (Aug/86).

**Southern Aurora and Spirit of Progress** on 2 August 1986 make last runs.

**Silver City Limited** from 14 Dec 1986. (Dec/86).

**Last broad-gauge Bluebird** from Peterborough. (Dec/86).

**Brisbane Limited** ceased September 1986. (Feb/87).

**Wilmington and Orroroo grain. Quorn line to close** beyond Eurelia. (July/87).

**The Alice**, Sydney to Alice Springs cancelled. (Apr/87).

**3801** to visit South Australia in June.

**Walleroo broad gauge** terminated. (Jan/88).

**Flying Scotsman** unloaded on 16 October 1988. (Jan/89).

**Opera in the Outback** 3 September 1988, involved 5 trains and 200 carriages. (Nov/88).

**AN Passenger service** as separate business and community obligation funding. (Mar/89).

**AN Pokies car** made first run to Broken Hill, 31 December 1988. (Apr/89).

**Alternative route Cambrai/Truro** to replace via Murray Bridge route gets AN support. (Aug/89).

**Flying Scotsman arrived in Alice Springs** 14 August 1988. (Dec/89).

**Peterborough all broad-gauge lines** in the station removed by 30 Nov 1989. (Mar/90).

**Concrete gauge-convertible** sleepers by Monier. 115 installed on trial for Adel- Melb. (Aug/90)

**National Rail Freight Corp.** Early discussion plan for a national freight corporation. (Jan/90).

**Silver City Comet** last run. (Mar & Sep/90).

**Deregulation of airlines** 31 October 1990.

**Paul Keating** "This is the recession we had to have". Nov 1990.

**AN aims to cancel passenger services** to Broken Hill, Mount Gambier, Whyalla. (Feb/91).

**SA Mallee lines** to close but Loxton and Pinnaroo to remain. (Feb/91).

**Mount Gambier passenger service** - arbitrator appointed. (Aug/91).

11 Mar

1983

**1986**

to

**1987**

20 Dec

1991

**1988**

**1989**

**1990**

**1991**

**KEATING**

1991  
PAUL  
KEATING  
1992  
20 Dec  
1991  
to  
1993  
11  
March  
1996  
1994  
1995  
1996

1997  
John  
Howard  
1998  
1999  
2000  
2001  
11  
Mar  
1996  
2002  
2003  
to  
3 Dec  
2004  
2007

**The Budd Cars end of economic life.** *Iron Triangle Ltd* and *Silver City Ltd* ceased 2 Jan 1991.  
**Broken Hill pokies** train to continue for another 2 years under present contract. (Mar/91).

**AN broad-gauge livestock** to be discontinued. (Jun/91).

**Wilmington line demolition** nearly complete. (Sep/91).

**Mount Gambier passenger service** - arbitrator says it must continue. (Oct/91)

**AN running Westliner** fast freight to Kewdale. (Nov/91).

**Indian Pacific** to come under single management of AN 1 July. (Apr/92).

**National Rail Corp.** 1 July may not be met. WA still to legislate. (Jul/92).

**Tasrail** - closure recommended. (Aug/92).

**National Rail Corporation** to take over interstate freight. Double stacking.

**South Aust Mallee** lines to close Peebinga. Alawoona-Paringa. Galga-Waikerie 21 Oct. (Feb/93).

**Victoria - announced** many rail services replaced by buses. (Mar/93).

**Cressy** route preferred. (Mar/93).

**National Rail Corp** HQ in Adelaide. (Apr/93).

**West Coast Rail.** (Feb/94).

**Concrete gauge convertible sleepers** on south line. (Mar/94).

**Standard gauge** will test viability of Barossa and Pinnaroo lines due to captive rolling stock. (Mar/94).

**Standard gauge conversion** (Adelaide - Melbourne) to occur Apr/May with traffic via Pinnaroo. (Dec/94).

**Jeff Kennett** calls for securing the route of the VFT. (Jan/95).

**Daylight XPT** - Sydney - Melbourne commenced in December 1994. (Jan/95).

**Mount Gambier line.** Consultant reports conversion is not viable. (Feb/95).

**First freight** on standard gauge, Adel to Melb. June 1995.

**Australian Railway Association** formed - would have a role similar to ROA. (Sep/95).

**Telford to Marree** railway closed, 10 June 1996.

**Brew Report** 24 Nov 1996 recommends sale of AN and of the Gov't share of NRC (40%).

**AN to be sold.** Fed. Gov't announced on 25 Nov 96, a \$2 billion bale out to meet debt. (Jan/97).

**Tasrail to be sold by 30 June 1997.** (Feb/97).

**Leigh Creek coal contract** - AN stands to lose contract. (Jan/96).

**Monarto South** branch to be saved and converted (Mar/96).

**Great Southern Railway acquires** passenger business of ANRC, 31 October 1997.

**Transport Ministers** conference re national track system. (Jan/98).

**Tasmania** . End of AN and new private operator. Aust. Transport Network 14 November. (Feb/98).

**Short list of three** for Darwin line.

**Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC)** 1 July 1998. (Mar/98 & Aug /98).

**Pinnaroo standard gauge.**

**Federal Government task force** to consider two proposals for Darwin.

**The Great South Pacific Express**, inaugural run 27 April 1999. (Jul/99).

**Australian Rail Regional Expressway** plan for line to Darwin. (Oct/99).

**Pendenis Castle** return. (Jun/00).

**Coffin Bay** removal. (Jul/00).

**Mount Gambier line** relinquished by Australian Southern Railroad. (Jun/00).

**Alice Springs - Darwin** financial closure.

**Bracks Government** (Victoria) announce in May 2001, plan for widespread gauge conversion.

**Darwin** - order placed for rails - Whyalla by John Howard.

**The ceremonial first sod** of Alice Sp. to Darwin by John Howard, 17 July 2001.

**Inland Rail** in 3 parts to Gladstone. (Aug/01).

**ARTC needs \$ 507M** to do upgrades. (Nov/01).

**Great South Pacific Express** collapse of international bookings.

**Tocumwal to Narrandera** reopened. Possible conversion of broad gauge? (Feb/02).

**Consortium of four** to take over NRC. (Apr/02).

**Pacific National** name for consortium. 8 March. (May/02).

**Wolseley-Mount Gambier.** SA Government will offer part payment. (Aug/02).

**Olympic Dam** feasibility. (Jan/03).

**Yinkanie** and other Mallee lines (Jun/03).

**Linking of the rails.** September 2003.

**First trains to Darwin.** First freight departed Adelaide on 15 January 2004, and the inaugural *Ghan* on 1 February 2004.



**MAMBRAY CREEK**, between Port Pirie and Port Augusta.  
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Readers, up to now, I hope, will have enjoyed 200 pages of narrative that has variously filled them with emotions from dismay to laughter as we have tripped from one government railway project to the next. But it has not been all bad news.

Des Smith has privately published two spiral-bound books, from which I have, with permission, extracted a few paragraphs. *The Story of the Tarcoola to Alice Springs Railway*. June 2010, and *Tracks Across Australia*, June 2022.

The 831km Tarcoola to Alice Springs Railway was built to replace the old narrow-gauge line which ran from Marree to Alice Springs. The old railway had been lightly built and was badly run down. It was also prone to frequent and very extensive flooding and washaways. The damage was from the many seasonal streams flowing into Lake Eyre, and from others, such as the Finke River, which drain a large area of Central Australia into the Simpson Desert.

Keith Smith was the Commissioner of the Commonwealth Railways at that time - a true railway man who had started as an apprentice with the railways in New South Wales. He could see that the old Alice Springs line, that had mostly followed the route of the Overland Telegraph, had no future. There was no Royal Commission or lengthy Parliamentary inquiry. Keith Smith was a practical man who invited the important decision makers to come and see for themselves.

He had a particularly close association with Sir Hubert Opperman who was the Federal Minister of Transport from 1960 to 1963. The Smith children knew him as 'Mister Sir Oppy'. Des Smith has given full credit to Keith Smith for achieving approval for line. On the matter of the money to pay for it, Des commented that it took a year longer to build because there was a limit on available funds each year. Des acknowledged that it was Keith Smith's railway from its inception to its opening, and it was gratifying to have 'K A' officiating at the opening by Princess Alexandra on 9 October 1980. Keith Smith retired on 15 March 1981.

The standard gauge railway between Tarcoola and Alice Springs lies roughly 150 km west of the old narrow gauge line, on a route generally outside or near the edge of the Lake Eyre drainage basin, and avoids the many rivers the streams which troubled the old railway. The railway crosses other rivers further upstream where high level bridges could be built... The Commonwealth Railways Commissioner recommended its construction in a report of June 1967, the Federal Government gave approval for survey work to begin at the end of 1970, and construction began at Tarcoola in April 1975.

Des Smith believes that the construction of the Tarcoola to Alice Springs Railway (TAS) ranks with greatest railway construction project anywhere in the world in the 20th century. He acknowledges the construction of the Trans-Australian Railway as an outstanding construction project and is quick to acknowledge its engineers, Henry Deane, and Norris Bell, but adds that the Trans-Australian Railway was twice as long, was built separately from both ends and was unballasted at the start. Tarcoola - Alice Springs was built only from one end and was fully ballasted. He has stated that the Alice Springs to Darwin line was longer but it was also built in two parts.

Des Smith continues:

On the Central Australia Railway the old narrow gauge section from Marree to Alice Springs was deteriorating in its final years. In 1978, after a couple of months of above average rain, there had been about a dozen mainline derailments, mainly on curves, and mainly due to the track spreading on weak sleepers. In July 1978 I made a trip by section car from Marree to Alice Springs to see the extent of the problems. I put a blanket speed limit of 40 kph on the whole of the track from Marree to Alice Springs. There were some sections restricted to much lower speeds.

Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser had visited the railhead in 1979 and had raised, with the two Smiths, the possibility of the railway being completed a year ahead of schedule. As the discussion proceeded it was early October that the PM was aiming for and the comment was made that it would be close to Des' 50th birthday, which was 3 October. "That settles it" the PM said.

And so, at the point known as Todd Junction, where mixed gauge track had been laid 8 km south from Alice Springs, on 3 October 1980, the rails were joined and Des wrote:

We trundled the pair of locomotives over the joint and along the 8 km of mixed gauge track into the Alice Springs railway station. From there the Chairman sent a telegram to the Prime Minister to claim our win.

Traffic Superintendent Max Laidlaw took the historic train order for the first standard-gauge train movement into Alice Springs by phone from the Train Controller - Port August

Through the 1990s the Darwin talk was getting louder and more frequent. There were two lines that were being drawn on maps. Of course, there was the direct line from Alice Springs. The other was from Melbourne, northwards through Parkes to northern New South Wales to Toowoomba and Gladstone and through Central Queensland to Darwin, although the latter section was generally a dotted line. This was not new. In some ways it was similar to Clapp's plan of 1945. There were some parts that had been put forward by Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, a Queenslander in 1915.

The ARTC was formed in 1998 and has taken this up as the Inland Rail Project from Melbourne to Toowoomba and into greater Brisbane, but to Gladstone and Central Queensland is still a dotted line.

Mention must also be made of Victoria's Murray Basin project which aims to have all freight-only lines converted to standard gauge.

Both of these projects have had delays and cost blowouts but I am not privy to the reasons and will not speculate. What is evident is that the Tarcoola to Alice Springs Railway was built within budget and would have served as an example. The concern is that there are other railway projects that must be pushed forward in the future, but they may not get the support, given the experience of these two projects.



Malcolm Fraser had been highly supportive of keeping the momentum rolling and moving straight on with the line to Darwin, \$10 million was provided to move forward with the survey, of which Des was in charge. Even some 40 years after the event there is a touch of disappointment in the tone of Des Smith's telling of how Malcolm Fraser called an election but lost, and Bob Hawke who had initially committed to build the line, had a change of heart and nothing happened for another ten years.

The railway had finally moved into the construction phase after tenders were called in 1997...and the Asia Pacific transport consortium won the job of building the railway and started preliminary work. Although I was not involved in the actual building of the railway, Betty and I were VIP guests at the ceremonial turning of the sod at Alice Springs in July 2001. It was the most miserably cold day I have ever known in Alice Springs. Wind and drizzle and a top temperature just touching 9°C.

Messrs Howard, Olsen and Burke did their thing with long handled shovels near the passenger terminal for the assembled crowd, and the TV cameras at the real start of the railway at the extreme end of the track where the survey line started. The following year in April 2002, I was invited to Katherine for the start of track laying and finally in January 2004, Betty and I saw the first Darwin-bound train leave from Adelaide on 15 January and arrived at the Port of Darwin on 17 January.



**The triumph was that first freight to Darwin and the inaugural *Ghan* passenger train two weeks later. And thus endeth my story. JLW.**

**TO DARWIN.** The inaugural train to Darwin, and with the Special Services Car SS44 popularly known as *The Prince of Wales Carriage* half-way along the consist. Note that it is wider and higher than the other carriages. **NATIONAL RAILWAY MUSEUM 335-1411-00404-10**

**A CLOSER VIEW** of SS44. **NRM 1-1-24966**

**BOTTOM TWO PICTURES** are from our trip on *The Ghan*. We did the Darwin trip and back aboard the first train after the COVID had shut down operations for 5 months. By sheer coincidence the day that train arrived at Alice Springs (31 August 2020) was 97 years from the date when the casual comment was made by the Quorn engineman, Ernie Smith that, 'Struth, we'll have to call it the Afghan Express'. It was subsequently contracted to *The Ghan*.

