



CHAPTER 17

ON THE DEFENSIVE

There has been a recurring theme in relation to Australia's defence and the desirability of having a railway network not encumbered by numerous break-of-gauge liabilities. An associated problem has been the loss of alternative routes additional to the main inter-capital connections. That theme has gone something like this:

'We'll worry about that when it happens'.

And when the nation has been under threat and we have pulled through, thanks to good allies and good luck, the response has been:

'Well, we came through that OK so we don't need to worry.'

We need to go back to 1888 and the report of Major General Edwards (Chapter 12) and remember that it was concern over the gauge problem and its effect on defence that sent Australia on the road to Federation.

Then in 1911, Lord Kitchener:

Different gauges in each of the States isolate each system, and the want of systematic interior connection makes the present lines running inlands of little use for defence, though possibly of considerable value to an enemy who would have temporary command of the sea.

PHOTOGRAPHS. Perhaps I am being rather hard on the Government to suggest that their approach to this topic has been rather flippant. These photographs seemed appropriate to the situation. **STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA PRG 1435-4-7 RIGHT. PRG 1435-4-6**

Harding had a chapter in his book about defence considerations. It dealt with the subject in considerable detail but then Harding was a military man. I felt that the topic needed to be wider and also consider the extent to which our gauge problem would impede response to natural disasters and national emergency. Australia has a National Emergency Response Agency and when I entered 'railways' into their search engine, it returned two items, both relating to grants to two heritage projects -nothing else.

Historically, it is fairly clear that Major General Edwards and Lord Kitchener summed up the situation quite accurately. During the conflict of 1914-1918 there was talk about building standard-gauge railways for strategic purposes. There was the survey of a line from Kingoonya, on the Trans-Australian Railway northwards to Boorthanna on the Oodnadatta line. The intention was that the standard gauge would then be extended northward to Alice Springs and eventually Darwin. There was serious talk, in 1915, about extending the Trans-Australian Railway at both ends to Perth and Adelaide. Nothing happened.

And when we look back at World War 2, the Australian railways were severely encumbered by the gauge problem.

