



THE MURRAY BRIDGE, built in 1925, and made necessary by the progressive stressing of the original bridge and the impending arrival of the big engines. It was the most demanding single construction of many works carried out in South Australia in the 1920s as part of Chief Commissioner Webb's rehabilitation. The photograph features locomotive 526, with an ARHS special. **JLW.**

CHAPTER 19

THE DECADE OF LOST OPPORTUNITIES - THE 1920s

Looking back at the 20th century there were times that were opportune for getting on top of the gauge problem and there were times that were not.

The noughties (1901 to 1910) offered no opportunity. The new Commonwealth Government was finding its way, and on matters of railways their attention was with Western Australia. The nineteens (1911 to 1920) were dominated by the war and the construction of the Trans-Australian Railway. The decade ended badly with the political divide over the conscription issue and the influenza pandemic.

The 1930s was a decade when the governments had no money. In the 1940s we were again at war. There were opportunities in the 1950s, 60s and 70s but this was a time when railways were regarded as being old-fashioned. Hence this chapter will deal with the 1920s, which offered a stable political environment for the Federal Government and the availability of sources of finances.

Throughout this saga of railway gauges there is one sentiment which seems to be stating the screaming obvious, but of which I have never found articulated by any politician or historian, nor anyone else for that matter. So here goes! I think I am the first to have ever put this in writing.

Starting in the 1920s, well-meaning statesmen have set about fixing the problem by throwing some Commonwealth money at it, but still with the expectation that the States would be contributing. Even as I write this (14 November 2023), Prime Minister Albanese has made known to Victoria that funding for transport infrastructure projects will require 50% contribution by the State. I expect that included in this basket of infrastructure projects will be some that involve conversion from 5 ft 3 in gauge to 4 ft 8½ in gauge.

Now, maybe I live in fairyland, in that I believe in natural justice, which is quite different to the type of justice that we find in the law courts and Parliament. This gauge mess was not the doing of Victoria. It was New South Wales that created the problem and in the new Federation it was the New South Wales gauge that was chosen to be the national standard. Natural justice was not a consideration.

The decision was made because it was vastly cheaper to shift a rail in than to shift it out. For Victoria this was a breach of natural justice on two fronts. If there was to be payment to fix the problem then it should have been by New South Wales, but that State had no lines to convert, and thus had got off 'scot-free'. The second injustice has been that Victoria has been of no contribution to this but has been expected to pay. To put it simply, it wasn't fair.

On the face of it we should not have to drag the other States into this and the circumstances of their decision to adopt the 3 ft 6 in gauge would have been essentially of their own doing. But there is another way of looking at it.

Here I draw attention to the 1887 Annual Report of the South Australian Railways in which the Minister, the Hon. Alfred Catt has provided a history to that date. The inference is that New South Wales, in electing to be out of step, had established an example:

The Imperial Government recommended the Australian colonies to adopt the 5 ft 3 in gauge and their advice was adopted by all the colonies,New South Wales was determined to alter the gauge to 4 ft 8½ in and when the Select Committee on the Port Railway in 1853 examined the engineer of the line, Mr Babbage, on the advisableness of following the example of New South Wales, he recommended the 5 ft 3 in gauge because Victoria had decided but there is little doubt that had Victoria been appealed to she would have seen the wisdom of having a uniform gauge throughout the colonies and had that been the case it is hardly likely that Queensland would have adopted a different gauge from all the other colonies, and thus all the trouble and expense of two gauges would have been spared to this colony.

Australia had entered the 1920s with a spirit of optimism. Prime Minister, Billy Hughes took the initiative. The Commonwealth had been in existence for nigh 20 years when he declared, in May 1920, that it was time to make some plan for resolving the gauge problem. ***The Register (Adelaide), 28 May 1920:***

A uniform railway gauge is an Australian necessity, and Australia should pay the cost (says The Melbourne Argus). No State should bear a disproportionate share of the whole charge...The first step, there-fore, should be the appointment of an expert commission charged with the duty of recommending a gauge and of estimating the cost. The problem could then be viewed as it is in reality—a Commonwealth work, to be paid for by all the States on the mainland.

The Royal Commission was then established following a recommendation that had been made at a conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers.

This was known as the Garvan Royal Commission. John Joseph Garvan was a businessman and financier who was well-connected to people in high positions but he did not have a background in railways. That was intentional in the sense that it was considered best that the Chairman be completely independent of any railway administration. However, it was unfortunate because the Commission had no expertise that could offer input regarding the history and culture of Australian railways. Garvan had, prior to this appointment, been with the Federal Finance Commission involved in raising war loans.

It was a three-man show. It had been agreed that there would be two experts from overseas. These were Mr F M Whyte, a mechanical engineer from America, and Mr R Blake, a civil engineer from England. Whyte's legacy to the railways had been the Whyte wheel notation, that was defined in 1900, of classifying locomotives according to their wheel arrangement. Thus a Mountain type was a 4-8-2 and a 4-8-2+2-8-4 was a Garratt with eight driving wheels on each of its two bogies.

There were four questions:

1. Which railway gauge should be adopted in Australia and the reasons for selection?
2. What is necessary to be done to unify the gauges?
3. What will be the estimated cost for
 - (i) main trunk lines;
 - (ii) for all lines;including and showing separately
 - (a) alterations to existing railways and structures;
 - (b) any new lines necessary;
 - (c) adjustments to rolling stock;
4. The order in which in the work should be carried out and the methods by which it is to be executed and controlled?

This Royal Commission had the full support of the States and their undertaking to abide by the recommendations. The report called for the following:

1. A direct railway from Adelaide to Port Augusta. The Commission said of this railway:

...it may be pointed out that the section between Terowie and Port Augusta is most undesirable. Is is 3 ft 6 in gauge, 120 miles in length, with sharp curvatures and steep gradients. To convert this section to standard gauge will produce the greatest improvement with the least expenditure.
2. A 4 ft 8½ in gauge line from Kyogle to South Brisbane.
3. Conversion of the 5 ft 3 in lines of South Australia and Victoria.
4. A standard gauge line from Kalgoorlie to Perth and Fremantle.

This was to be paid for by the Commonwealth meeting one fifth of the cost and the participating States would fund the greater part, which would be collected on a per-capita basis.

South Australia and Victoria stood to gain the most in that they had substantial mileages of track to be converted. New South Wales stood to be paying most but gaining least, but stuck with their undertaking to abide by the outcome.

An understanding of the situation of the various State railways in the 1920s must necessarily require us to look at the previous decade, and that in turn requires us to consider some baggage that had been carried forward from the 1880s and 1890s.

In 1911 the decision had been made to build the railway from Port Augusta to Kalgoorlie. At both ends the Trans-Australian Railway would connect with 3 ft 6 in lines. In this history of muddled railway gauges there have been very few good-news stories.

This was one of them. There was a view (mostly in South Australia) that the Trans-Australian Railway should be built to the 3 ft 6 in gauge, for to do otherwise would be to create another two break-of-gauge stations.

THE ROLE OF THE RAILWAYS IN THE WAR OF 1914-18.

The railways did not have a strategic role in the Great War. Their involvement was the transport of troops to the port of embarkation and mobile recruiting centres. And at when it was all over and the diggers came home the local railway station would be decked out with flags and flowers. **STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.**



Looking back at the last century, in the mid-1880s, South Australia had come to terms with the reality that there were better ways to make decisions about its railways than to thrash it out in the Parliament. It was agreed that there needed to be an expert in charge. This was at the same time as Victoria and New South Wales had been similarly inclined, although it is noted that Victoria was a couple of years ahead of the other two colonies. South Australia and New South Wales modelled their reforms on the Victorian process, but it soon emerged that there were serious problems in Victoria. In 1888, South Australia had appointed Joseph Henry Smith, formerly of the the Great Western Railway in England, as the Chairman of the Board of Railway Commissioners. Smith was a competent administrator but had the misfortune to arrive in South Australia at the time of the ascendancy of Charles Cameron Kingston, who became South Australian Premier in 1893.

Chapter 10 had closed with Kingston fuming over the action by Richard Baker, the President of the Legislative Council, in giving approval for leave of absence for Smith and his family, to the extent that Kingston challenged Baker to a duel in Victoria Square. Smith's term of office expired in 1895 and Kingston made sure that it was not extended.

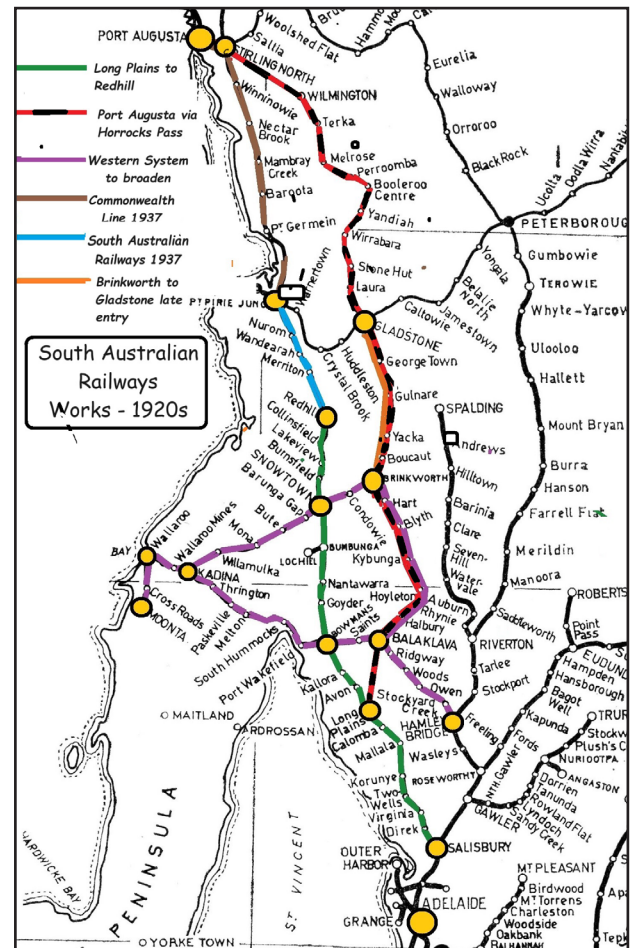
The Act that had established the Board of Commissioners was then amended to provide for only one Commissioner.

Alan Pendleton was that Commissioner from 1895 to 1909. Pendleton had joined the South Australian Railways as Traffic Manager in 1877, having previously been employed in traffic roles in England and India. He filled the role of Commissioner adequately and seems to have steered a middle course of getting done, what was necessary, without causing too many upsets. But Pendleton did not bring any new innovations to the South Australian Railways which, by the end of his time, was slipping behind the times.

Alex Bain Moncrieff was the Chief Engineer of the South Australian Railways. His brother Joseph Cowan Bain Moncrieff, was also an engineer with the SAR. When Pendleton retired, Alex Moncrieff slipped into the position of Commissioner, and in 1912, Joseph became Chief Engineer. Jennings makes the comment that 'such nepotism caused little stir'.

Jennings also makes the comment that 'Joseph Moncrieff had never left Adelaide'. The South Australian Railways was destined to further slip behind the times. The Moncrieffs were effectively running the SAR but were stuck in the 19th century. The most visible teller of the antiquity of the South Australian network was the locomotive fleet.

Alex Moncrieff, despite having given his approval in 1903, opposed the standard gauge for the Trans-Australian Railway. Henry Deane had been the Chief Engineer responsible for the early planning of the Trans-Australian Railway. He had come from New South Wales and stood firm in support of the 4 ft 8½ in gauge.



Alex Moncrieff retired as Commissioner in 1916 and the new Commissioner was James Maguire who had started with the South Australian Railways in 1870 at the age of 14. His sincerity to the task was never in doubt but once again, he would come with no new ideas.

The decision had been made in 1903 to establish the 4 ft 8½ in as our national gauge. In 1911 that directive was reinforced by the decision to build the Trans-Australian Railway to the 4 ft 8½ in gauge. It would have seemed that there was no further need to pursue the matter, but South Australia didn't see it that way. They were faced with the need to provide a direct railway between Port Augusta and Adelaide. Of course, they could have let the Commonwealth build the line, which it would have gladly done to the 4 ft 8½ in gauge. South Australia was already at war with the 4 ft 8½ in gauge. By 1912 the general consensus in South Australia was that this line should be provided but as a broad-gauge railway.

There was also consensus that this railway should be built northwards from Salisbury but the accord did not extend to the route it would take. There was agreement that this railway would be in the direction of Long Plains. It became a contest between Balaklava and Bowmans. Thus far, the opposing ambitions of Balaklava and Bowmans could agree, but at Long Plains, their ambitions diverged. These towns were only 9 miles (14 km) apart but the contest between them lasted 4 years. The Bowmans contingent had the railway running north through Snowtown and Redhill, and then west of the Flinders Ranges (the existing alignment). The Balaklava people put the case for the railway to follow the then-existing (narrow-gauge) right-of-way through Brinkworth, Gladstone and Wilmington.

Whichever route was followed, this new railway construction was destined to intersect three narrow-gauge lines which in turn would create three break-of-gauge junctions.

To resolve this, the South Australian Government established the Break-of-Gauge Commission. This Commission was not about resolving whether one gauge was better than the other but resolving the sometimes bitter divide between the adjacent communities and the direction of the railway further north.

In the end it was the Redhill line that was authorised, still quite a way short of Port Augusta. It was opened to Redhill in 1925. It had taken about ten years to get there. The solution to the various break-of-gauge stations that would occur was to convert the whole Western System of narrow-gauge lines to broad gauge. This would solve the long-standing problem at Hamley Bridge but would really be shifting the problem further north to Brinkworth. Here Commissioner Webb intervened and advised that it would be uneconomical to have two locomotive depots in close proximity. Gladstone became the main break of gauge

It is hard to put a date on South Australia's intransigence regarding the standard gauge. The movement towards the adoption of the 4 ft 8½ in gauge as the national standard had its origin in the mid-1890s, with Edward Eddy, the Commissioner of the New South Wales Government Railways. But we were then colonies independent of each other.

It had some support amongst the delegates to the Federation Conventions of 1897 and 1898. The 1897 Federal Convention had referred the matter to a convention of Railway Commissioners later in 1897. In 1901 the Commissioner of the Victorian Railways, John Mathieson said:

There can be no doubt that the adoption of uniform gauge, enabling both passengers and goods traffic to flow freely without changing carriages or wagons standard which would be a great boon to the public, and one that, I think, the community has the right to expect from the Federal Government.

One of its main proponents was Western Australia's Sir John Forrest. In 1903 there was a conference of the Engineers-in-Chief of the State railways and this forum was the strongest yet to advocate for the standard gauge.

Sir Richard Butler was South Australia's first Liberal Premier but his term of office was only about five months after which he was many years with the portfolios of Railways and Public Works.

The Register, 6 May 1914:

It had not yet been settled that they would see the 4 ft 8½ in gauge in South Australia and this State and Victoria would have a voice in that before it was settled... If they had the 5 ft 3 in lines and it should eventually be decided to have a national gauge of 4 ft 8½ in – which he hoped would not come to pass – it would be comparatively easy to alter the width provided the sleepers were good.

Archibald Peake was the Liberal Premier who led three separate administrations between 1910 and 1920. To Archibald Peake we can attribute some quotes that were leaning towards the negative regarding the standard gauge. Premier Peake, in reply to a question about the impending break-of-gauge at Port Augusta. ***The Chronicle, 19 December 1914:***

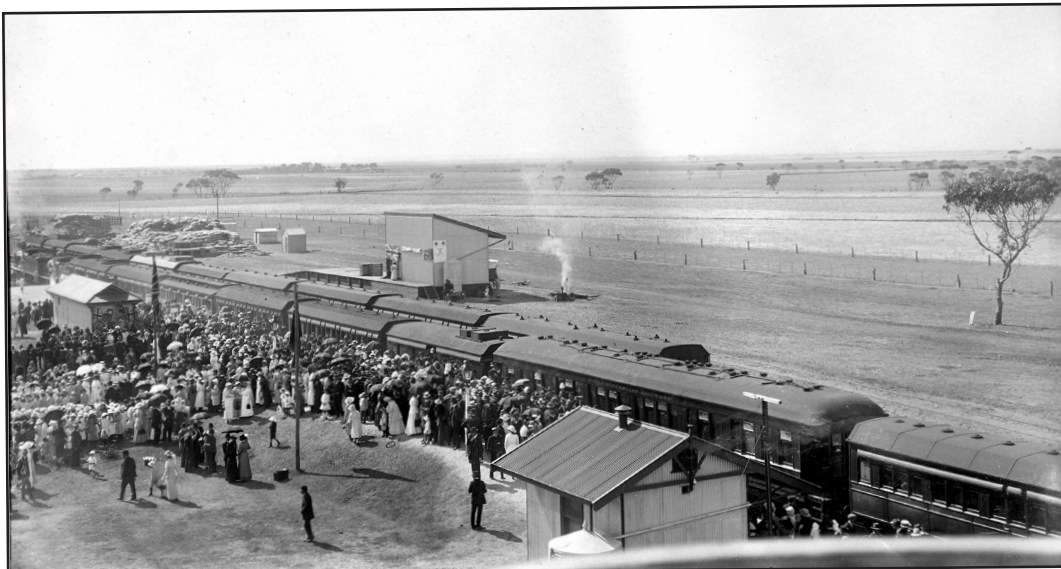
I have the honor to inform you that the question of a gauge for the railway from Salisbury to Port Augusta, which was authorised during last season, was not only carefully considered by railway officers, but was dealt with exhaustively by members of the Railway Commission on Narrow-gauge Extension and Broken Gauge, who in their report unanimously supported the view of the officers that the gauge for that line should be 5 ft. 3 in., and the Legislature endorsed this view when passing the Bill.

A few years on, the situation had deteriorated to the extent, as reported in ***The Chronicle, 16 August 1919:***

For the information of Parliament it is stated that in August 1918, the New South Wales Minister of Railways (Mr Ball) had issued a circular strongly urging the construction of a line from Broken Hill To Quorn on a 4 ft 8½ gauge...the Commonwealth authorities appeared to favour this route..the letter was referred by the Premier to the Minister of Railways (Sir Richard Butler) who returned it with a minute, stating that if the contents of the letter were correct, the Federal Government did not know its own mind.

THE OPENING of the railway to Long Plains. 21 April 1917. STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA. PRG-280-1-34-478

BELOW. The bridge over the River Wakefield. was reinforced concrete and built in or before 1922 and well before there was any thought of engines weighing 200 tons. That bridge was not strong enough to carry the new engines and reinforced concrete cannot be later strengthened, thus requiring a new bridge. JLW



The narrow-gauge railways in the south-east of South Australia and the Western System had long been a source of discontent and there had been many calls for these lines to be broadened to the 5 ft 3 in gauge. The Port Augusta problem had forced the decision and the Western System gauge conversion was incorporated in the legislation that authorised the extension to Snowtown. The people of the South-East would have to wait.

Victoria had not received the recommendations of the Royal Commission graciously and declared that the broad gauge was the better gauge. It was a time when Victoria was still building railways to open up the country. Conversion of existing lines, they reasoned, would offer little benefit to settlers being served by existing lines and the cost of conversion would divert funds away from the construction of much needed new lines.

The Victorian Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways examined the gauge question and reported in July 1922:

Few seem to be aware that while there is a uniform railway gauge between Melbourne and Adelaide, our express locomotives cannot be run over the South Australian section of that interstate line. In the first place they are too heavy to be taken across the bridge over the Murray River at Murray Bridge. Even if that structure was strengthened or a new and stronger bridge erected these locomotives could not be run at the ordinary speed with safety over the curves approaching the tunnels through the Lofty Ranges on the way to Adelaide...

Unification will not reduce the working expenses of the railways nor will it cause a reduction in freight charges to an extent likely to affect trade or traffic, and not being a reproductive work the interest burden will have to be met by taxpayers.

On reading the report of the Standing Committee it becomes very clear that Victoria was intent on sinking the standard-gauge and one is struck by the notion that the task before this committee was to find enough reasons or examples to fill the 12 pages.

They cited the weaker drawbars of the South Australian trucks and then concerned themselves with wartime operations that would see Victorian trains, loaded with troops and armaments, stranded at Murray Bridge. They drew attention to the curves and lighter rails in South Australia. Then they went on to explain how this conversion process would extend over many years and would cause much disruption of services and havoc for travellers.

The 1920s was a period of railway grandeur and opulence. More so overseas than in Australia, but advances in the realm of overseas railways was a favorite topic with newspapers and magazines. It wasn't hard for the people of South Australia to conclude that their railways were way behind the times. Thus the railways became politically important. By 1919 it became obvious that the railways were not capable of meeting the needs of the community. One of the initiatives to emerge at this time was the appointment of Mr Phillip Anthony, of the Federated Malay State Railways who was appointed as the Railway Inquiry Commissioner, which was a position for a closed period.

