

### **The long journey to completing a railway**

**Philip Laird University of Wollongong/ANU**

The completion in 1872 of the overland telegraph line between Adelaide and Darwin through Alice Springs was a major achievement. For decades to follow, the telegraph line guided development of the Stuart Highway and encouraged the goal of a railway linking Adelaide to Darwin.

On 1 January 1911 the Northern Territory was transferred from South Australia to the Commonwealth. As part of the transfer agreement, with enabling Legislation (Northern Territory Acceptance Act 1910) the Commonwealth undertook to *"Construct or cause to be constructed a railway line from Port Darwin southwards to a point on the northern boundary of South Australia proper."*

Some 50 years later, the South Australian Government asked the High Court to require the Commonwealth to complete the line (see *South Australia v The Commonwealth* (1962) 108 CLR). This action cited the above legislation and also the Railway Standardisation (South Australia) Agreement Act 1949 with provisions including the construction of a new standard gauge railway from Alice Springs to Birdum. The action failed. One reason was that no time period was specified in the legislation.

The granting of 'self-government' to the Northern Territory on 1 July 1978 was a major impetus for eventual construction of the railway. Each Chief Minister (Everingham, Tuxworth, Hatton, Perron, Stone, Burke and Martin), and each Opposition Leader, has strongly supported construction of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway line.

By comparison, construction of the Transcontinental railway between Port Augusta and Kalgoorlie proceeded relatively quickly after Federation and was completed in 1917. This 1690 km line required (Burke, 1991) some 2 500 000 sleepers and 140 000 tonnes of rail, and demanded the shifting of 5 000 000 cubic yards of road and earth and was accomplished with a minimum of mechanical assistance. Yet in one year, 712 km of track was laid.

The following is a 'time line' with some events relevant to attempts to build a narrow gauge line, and then the events leading to completion of a standard gauge line between Adelaide and Darwin. Other efforts of note included those of former Commonwealth Railways Commission Mr Keith Smith to secure a new Tarcoola - Alice Springs standard gauge line.

## Narrow Gauge

- 1873 The English writer, Anthony Trollope, on a visit to Adelaide, asked of the proposed north-south line "*...who would travel by it and what would it carry?*"
- 1876 SA Act to build a 322 km narrow gauge line from Port Augusta to Government Gums.
- 1878 January 28, SA Governor Sir William Jervois officially started work on the line to Government Gums (Farina). In a report to the Colonial office, he wrote "*It will be the Southern terminus of a Transcontinental Railway, about 1800 miles in length, which will probably, ultimately, be carried through the Province of South Australia to Port Darwin.*"
- This line was officially opened at Quorn on 15 Dec 1879, then Farina on 22 May 1882 and Oodnadatta on 7 Jan 1891.
- 1883 Palmerston (Darwin) and Pine Creek Rail Act SA. This was a 238 km narrow gauge route on the basis of a survey following the 1872 Overland Telegraph and requiring a jetty.
- 1889 September 30 Opening of the line to Pine Creek.
- 1902 October 1 Transcontinental Railway Bill Introduced to SA Parliament by Premier J.G. Jenkins. This allowed for calling of tenders from the private sector to build a railway to link Adelaide and Palmerston. No tenders were received.
- 1913 Pine Creek to Katherine River Railway Act (Commonwealth - narrow gauge with provision for eventual conversion to standard gauge).
- 1916 The Annual Report of Commonwealth Railways noted surveys to extend to Mataranka (permanent survey 104 km), Daly Waters (trial survey, 153 km) and Oodnadatta (proposed exploratory survey, 1370 km).
- 1917 December 4 Opening of the line from Pine Creek to Emungalam (near Katherine).
- 1923 Commonwealth NT Railway Extension Act passed.
- 1928 July 1 Line from the north reached Mataranka.
- 1929 August 2 Opening of railway to Alice Springs.
- 1929 September 4 Line from north reached Birdum (507 km from Darwin).
- 1976 June 30 Line from Darwin closed (railhead was Larrimah after WWII and the railway moved iron ore up to 1975).
- 1980 December 31 Closure of old narrow gauge railway from Marree to Alice Springs.

### Standard gauge

- 1926 Railways Agreement Act (SA) noted inter alia that the Commonwealth will at its own expense construct a railway on standard gauge from Port Augusta to Red Hill, and notes options of either a railway on a narrow gauge extending to Alice Springs from Oodnadatta; or a standard gauge extending to Alice Springs at a point on the Kalgoorlie to Port Augusta Railway east of Tarcoola.
- 1937 July 26 Opening of Port Augusta - Port Pirie standard gauge railway.
- 1945 Sir Harold Clapp's report advocating, in part, a line to Darwin via Queensland.
- 1949 Railways Standardisation Agreement Act (Commonwealth).
- 1957 July 27 Opening of the Port Augusta - Marree standard gauge railway (from Telford).
- 1970 January Opening of Port Pirie - Broken hill as a standard gauge line.
- 1972 October 6 Opening of Port Augusta - Whyalla railway.
- 1975 Passage of Tarcoola Alice Springs Railway Act by Whitlam Government.
- 1977 Bureau of Transport Economics (BTE) report favours upgrading of Stuart Highway over construction of Alice Springs - Darwin railway.
- 1980 October 9 Official opening of Tarcoola - Alice Springs Railway by Princess Alexandra.
- 1980 September 23 Sydney Morning Herald Editorial 'That railway' with the view that **"...there is no economic justification for building the line"**.
- 1981 February The Fraser Government commits to completion of the railway to Darwin, with an immediate commitment of \$10 million over 3 years for route surveys and design. In January 1983, the target completion date is advanced to 1988 (Bicentennial).
- 1982 December Standard Gauge completed between Crystal Brook and Adelaide freight yards using loan funds raised by Australian National.
- 1983 May 6 Advertisements placed in the Sydney Morning Herald with a picture of rail track noting the cost of Alice Springs -Darwin railway at \$545 million and the large caption **"The Territory Government has a one-track mind"**
- 1983 Hawke Government appoints "Independent Economic Inquiry into Transport Services to the NT" by David Hill (SRA NSW) to examine completion of the railway by 1992 or accelerated upgrading of Stuart Highway
- 1984 February 20 Hawke Government releases the Hill Report and concludes that the Alice Springs - Darwin project **"...cannot be justified on economic or social grounds."**

- 1984 October 16 NT Chief Minister tables two reports "Defence implications of the Alice Springs – Darwin railway" by the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre of the Australian National University (later published as a book "Defend the North – The case for the Alice Springs – Darwin railway" by Ball et al), and a report from Canadian Pacific Consulting Services that finds that extension of a standard gauge railway from Alice Springs to Darwin **"...is an economic break even proposition."**
- 1986 NT Railway Executive Group feasibility study finds that railway would cover operational costs and recommends an equity partnership with private sector.
- 1988 Railnorth Pty Ltd (Darwin), Lou Marks keeps the dream alive and in a talk, suggests that **"... through the tenacity of Northern Territory Chief Ministers, and the support of the Commonwealth, the rail service will be extended from Alice Springs to Darwin."** Cites defence and depletion of Bass Strait oil supplies in support of the railway.
- 1992 Australian Asia Integrated Transport System: Feasibility Study and Business Plan released by Morrison Knudsen of Australia.
- 1993 February NT Chief Minister Marshall Perron goes to Adelaide to seek support for the new railway, noting inter alia, that the NT will contribute \$100 million towards the project, and the NT will pay for a new port. Also notes the 'vision and faith' of the SA people in the 19th century in completing a 3000 km overland telegraph in 1872, and construction of a railway between Adelaide and Oodnadatta and from Darwin to Pine Creek by 1891. Also following a conference hosted by Whyalla City Council, Hewson and Keating promise \$3 million to complete the line survey and design work.
- 1993 December 8 Following a feasibility study by Australian National Chairman Dr Don Williams, the South Australian Opposition Leader Dean Brown commits SA to provide \$100 million towards the new railway.
- 1993 BTCE Report released: A Review of the Alice Springs to Darwin Railway Project.
- 1994 Federal Department of Transport report notes a \$1 million Budget allocation for Survey work for an Alice Springs – Darwin railway link.
- 1994 BTCE, Alice Springs to Darwin Railway Project: the Economic and Financial Issues
- 1995 The Committee on Darwin, Final Report. Alice Springs to Darwin Rail Link Study, Travers Morgan Pty Ltd
- 1995 Wran (Committee on Darwin) finds rail could be viable - as Mr Wran said **"Not if, but when"**.
- 1996 July Final centreline survey for the new railway completed to Darwin terminal.
- 1996 November 13 Inter-governmental agreement between NT and SA signed in Adelaide with provisions for a new railway.

- 1997 May 23 NT Government discourages interest by the Australian Transport Council in revival of older proposals for the construction of a Melbourne to Darwin railway.
- 1997 August 23 PM Howard announces a Commonwealth contribution of \$100 million to assist in the construction of the Alice Springs to Darwin rail link using Federation Funding "*...to ensure Australia realises its potential for the 21st century.*"
- 1997 August 26 Further agreements signed between NT and SA Government at Port Augusta to officially launch the AustralAsia Railway Corporation.
- 1997 August 28 Alice Springs to Darwin Railway Act SA came into operation. The Act included provision for a financial contribution totalling \$100 million.
- 1997 Federal Government agrees to exclude Tarcoola - Alice Springs from the sale of Australian National railway assets.
- 1998 April 8 Three Consortiums (Asia Pacific Transport, Southern Cross and Northlink) out of 30 submissions given approval to bid for new railway.
- 1998 June 7 Asia Pacific Transport Consortium selected as preferred bidder.
- 1999 AustralAsia Railway (Third Party Access) Act SA
- 1999 March Submission of NT/SA Rail Access Regime to National Competition Council
- 1999 September 29 Joint statement by **Opposition Leaders** Kim Beazley (Cth), Mike Rann (SA) and Clare Martin (NT) calls on PM Howard to increase his financial support for the new railway.
- 1999 October 28 Following a meeting with NT Chief Minister and SA Premier, PM Howard announces an agreement that all three governments will increase their contributions to \$480 million with a Commonwealth contribution at \$165 million. The Asia Pacific Transport Consortium will need \$750 million in private capital to build the project.
- 1999 December 16 Alice Springs to Darwin Railway (Financial Commitment) Amendment SA Act came into operation and included an amended provision for a financial contribution totalling \$125 million plus a loan of \$25 million.
- 2000 March 23 Federal Treasurer Costello announces approval of a 30 year certified rail access regime for services on the line from Tarcoola to Darwin.
- 2000 Alice Springs to Darwin Railway (Miscellaneous) Amendment Act SA inter alia allows further special provisions relevant to the Railway Project to be introduced by regulation.
- 2000 October 18 Preconstruction agreement signed in Adelaide between NT Chief Minister Burke, SA Premier Olsen, and Asia Pacific Transport Consortium. Includes construction to take place on four fronts north and south of Katherine and Tennant Creek.

- 2001 Alice Springs to Darwin Railway (Financial Commitment) Amendment Act SA provides, inter alia, for the underwriting of an additional loan of up to \$26.4 million.
- 2001 March 29, LLDCN shipping interests editorial '*Alice to Darwin? Kill it off now!*'
- 2001 April 20 Documents signed in Sydney to complete financial closure for the rail project.
- 2001 July 17 Work officially starts by PM John Howard, SA Premier John Olsen and NT Chief Minister Denis Burke.
- 2001 November 8 Official start of production of concrete sleepers at Katherine. Together, with a larger plant at Tennant Creek, about 2 million sleepers will be produced in a very efficient operation. Tracklaying would officially start some five months later.
- 2002 December 13 Rails joined near Buchanan Highway on the 633 km Tennant Creek-Katherine section.
- 2003 September 18 Track reaches Alice Springs from Tennant Creek with last weld performed by SA Premier Mike Rann and NT Chief Minister Clare Martin.
- 2003 September 25 Rails reach Darwin from Katherine with last Pandrol Clip inserted by NT Chief Minister Clare Martin and Darwin's first Lord Mayor (1975-79) Dr Stella Stack. Dr Stack had been presented in 1979 with a Pandrol clip from the Tarcoola - Alice Springs line "*...in the hope that one day the line would reach Darwin.*"
- 2004 January 15-17 First official freight train to move from Adelaide to Darwin.
- 2004 February 1 - 3 First official passenger train to move from Adelaide to Darwin.

### Some References

AustralAsia Railway Corporation website [www.aarc.com.au](http://www.aarc.com.au)

Ball D Langtry JO and Stevenson JD (1985) Defend the North – The case for the Alice Springs – Darwin railway, Allen and Unwin, Sydney

Burke D (1991) Road through the Wilderness, UNSW Press

Donovan P and O, Neill B (1992) The long haul- Australian National, 1978-1988, Focus Books

Quinlan H and Newland JR (2000) Australian Railway Routes 1854 - 2000 Australian Railway Historical Society NSW Division, Sydney

Stevenson IR (1979) The Line that Led to Nowhere, Rigby, Adelaide