

25

PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH AT THE COMMEMORATION DINNER,
PORT AUGUSTA, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

11.4.75

Mr. Wallis, Mr. Smith, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are meeting tonight at the road and rail crossroads of Australia and we are meeting on a very great occasion - an important place, an important landmark in our history. It was from this place in 1912 that the East-West Railway commenced construction and tomorrow at Tarcoola we will see the commencement of construction of the biggest railway project since then.

This has been a remarkable week in the history of railways in Australia. On Wednesday we tabled in the Federal Parliament the terms of agreement by which the Commonwealth Railways acquired the South Australian Railways with the consent of South Australia. Yesterday we passed through both Houses of the Federal Parliament the Australian National Railways Commission Bill, and, once the Governor-General has signed that Bill, the Commonwealth Railways will become the Australian National Railways, the A.N.R. And yesterday, too, we introduced in the Federal Parliament the Inter-State Commission Bill to establish that great instrument of national co-ordination and unity which the Constitution ordains.

Before I come to describe some of these things, may I pay a tribute to the manner in which the Commonwealth Railways has just met a great test. For the first time since 1912, the creek at Zanthus flowed and broke through the railway. Within a fortnight the breach has been restored. The Commonwealth Railways proved well able to cope with sudden emergencies, unprecedented emergencies and ruptures.

What I want to speak about tonight is the great constructive, creative role which is being played by the A.N.R. and, by railways in general in our nation. In no area of Government responsibility is there a greater need for modernisation and reform than the railways. In no area have there been greater Constitutional and administrative obstacles to reform. The railways are usually historically regarded as the great instrument for unifying a continent. It was Transcontinentals that united the United States, united the Canadian provinces and united the Soviet Union from the Baltic to the Pacific. One would have thought that railways would be the great instrument for uniting Australia. It has not turned out that way, because our railways were started in the middle of last century by the States and they are still run, with the exception of the A.N.R., by the States. This occurs in the Australian Federal system only. In West Germany the railways are run by

the Federal Government. In Canada there are two great railway systems, one run by the Canadian Government and the other by a nationwide, an international company. In the United States all the railway systems are co-ordinated by the Interstate Commerce Commission. In Australia, far from uniting our country, the railway systems have been organised so as to disrupt the unification of the nation. They have been used to centralise our settlement, our commerce, in State capitals. There is, fortunately, a provision in the Constitution which enables the Commonwealth with the consent of the States to build or to acquire railways. It was because the States of South Australia and Western Australia permitted the Commonwealth to build a railway, that we got the East-West railway. It was for that reason that we got the old railway, which is always prone to floods from Oodnadatta up to the Northern Territory border. It is because of that provision that the Commonwealth, with the consent of the State of South Australia, is now acquiring the non-metropolitan railways in South Australia. And this will transform the railway scene in Australia, east and west and north and south. It will be a very significant system and it will be an immense re-inforcement and multiplication of the things that can be done.

I look back to the first year or so I was in Federal Parliament. The Chifley Government, under a Prime Minister who was a dedicated railway man, had placed the orders to modernise the Commonwealth Railways which had always been the most losing railway proposition in Australia. I came into Parliament just when the orders were being fulfilled. The Commonwealth Railways became the first in Australia to have every locomotive a diesel, to have every carriage air-conditioned, to have every wagon with bogies. Within the course of a year they became the most profitable railway system in Australia. That illustrated to me that, with proper equipment and proper capitalisation, railways could be profitable.

But the railway system still ran from nowhere to nowhere in national-commercial terms. It ran from Port Pirie to Kalgoorlie, which meant that every load, every passenger, every piece of freight had to come over another system.

In 1972 one of the first Acts of my Government was to make an offer to each of the States to accept responsibility for the railways of that State. You see the first acceptance of that offer, by South Australia. We will now have a system where there will be a merger of the South Australian Railways and the Commonwealth Railways. It will be possible to cross the whole continent, east or west, with the same carriages, wagons and diesel locomotives. It will put an end, I hope, to this absurd situation that, even after we had the same gauge right across the continent, the locomotives had to be changed at Broken Hill and at Pirie and

at Kalgoorlie. It has been a farce up till now. The Commonwealth Railways, the Australian National Railways, the A.N.R., are now the key to rail transport, the basic form of transport in this nation. They will soon join with the Victorian Railways in operating between Adelaide and Melbourne. We shall soon see how unified a force, how excellent an investment it is to have railways of a national character. Railways can more safely, more quickly, more economically, transport goods long distance than any other transport mode that man has devised.

I now come to another achievement of this week - the Bill to establish the Inter-State Commission. In my 1972 policy speech, I said - "The Inter-State Commission was intended to end the centralisation fostered by all the State governments through their railway systems. It should now provide not only for the co-ordination of our six mainland railway systems and our major ports in the period before the Commonwealth, like other federal governments, inevitably takes responsibility for railways and ports; it is also the ideal instrument for co-ordinating our major roads and airlines and pipelines."

"A Federal Labor Government will promptly restore the machinery the Constitution intended and vest it with the Commonwealth's full constitutional powers to plan and provide modern means of communications between the States."

One of the pieces of legislation we were able to put through last year was the agreement between the Australian and South Australian Governments for the Australian Government to build the standard gauge railway between Adelaide and Crystal Brook. When that is finished, it will be possible to go by train from any State capital to the next State capital and, except for Melbourne, from any State capital to any other State capital without a break of gauge.

One of the great handicaps to profitable railway operation in this country has been the lack of adequate rolling stock. At present railways need over 3,000 extra wagons for inter-system travel alone. It has been estimated that the Victorian, South Australian, New South Wales and Commonwealth Railways lost over \$66 million in 1972-73 because they were not able to meet the demands of inter-system travel. Therefore, in this year's budget, last September, we embarked upon a continuing rolling stock purchasing program which, over the next two years, will provide some 1300 modern bogey wagons for inter-system use. These wagons will be available for lease to the States.

Tomorrow we embark upon the construction of the railway from Tarcoola to Alice Springs, the largest railway project which Australia has undertaken since before the First World War and one which will make an immense difference to the people in The Centre. It will make a great difference to the tourist industry, the cattle industry, the mining industry.

I have always found romance in the construction of railways. Railways were a distinguishing feature of those industrial countries which were settling vast new areas. The United States, the old Tsarist Empire, Canada, all did it. Australia had to wait to do it this century. A new railway has always carried with it an aura of romance, a spirit of pioneering. Nothing suggests more vividly the determination of a vigorous society to develop its resources and improve its communications. Something was missing from our national life during the long years when the railways were allowed to decline. Men and families who have given a lifetime of service to the railways were encouraged to lose faith in the importance and future of a great industry. I hope and believe that we are seeing tonight the rebirth of the railways in this continent, the beginning of a new era of growth and development. You can be sure that my Government will do its utmost to see the railways prosper and resume their rightful, their historic role as the basis of an efficient, modern and economical transport system.

A remarkable week it has been. A great disaster strikes the Transcontinental railway; it is overcome within a fortnight. We set out to re-establish the Inter-State Commission ordained in the Constitution. With the consent of South Australia, we acquire the South Australian Railways. We create the Australian National Railways.

It is appropriate to have this commemoration in Port Augusta where it all began, where it all passes. Prosperous and efficient railways are an efficient and essential condition of a prosperous and efficient nation.

I give you the toast - The Railways of Australia.
