

Fastrail to fiasco

By Nick Hudson

It all started with a state election campaign by the Victoria Labor Party. Believing it had no chance of winning in 1999, the party made a number of madcap promises, one of which was to run trains between Bendigo and Melbourne non-stop in 84 minutes.

Party leaders were reckoning without the unpopular arrogance of the incumbent administration, and found themselves victorious.

So, seven years later, what happened to the promises? On the face of it, they did not seem to present technical problems. The track was double all the way, and the distance was around 100 miles, requiring an average speed of roughly 75 mph – a fairly modest achievement for a modern railway. Indeed, with minimum track upgrade, the existing trains, with a maximum speed of 84 mph, could have done it, but for the fact that the last few miles of the route lay through the congested suburbs of Melbourne.

There were many ways in which the suburban sections could have been upgraded, with resultant advantages for all traffic.

One of these is worthy of special mention. Since the arrival of standard gauge, first from Sydney and later from Adelaide, Victoria railways for the first time were seriously troubled by break-of-gauge problems. Instead of having just one break, at Albury, the two systems are now intertwined.

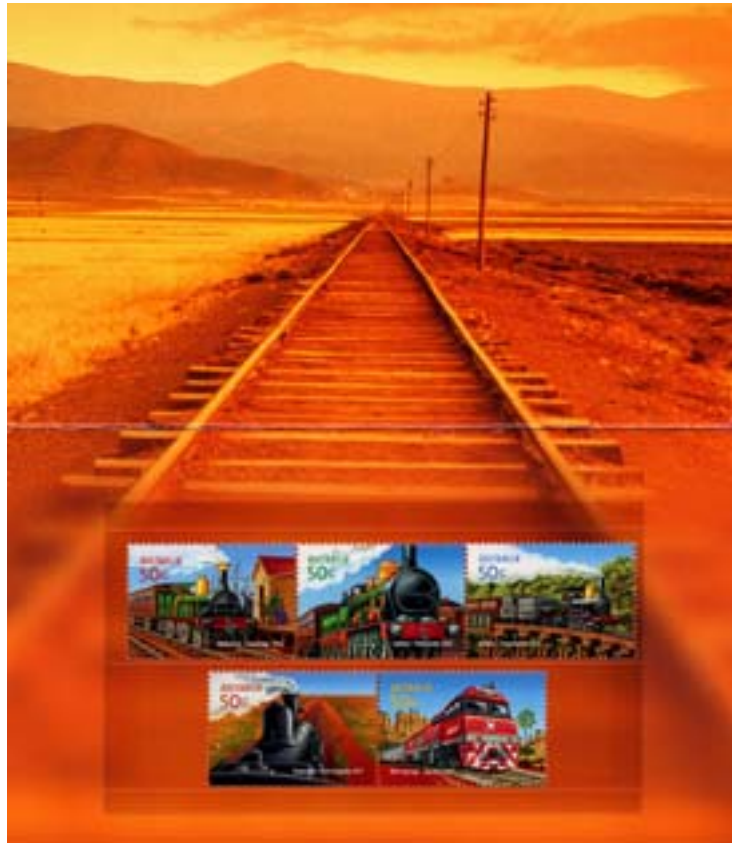
The standardisation of the lines to Ballarat and Bendigo would have made it possible to eliminate all break-of-gauge problems in western and central Victoria, and the 1999 upgrade promises provided a once-in-a-century opportunity to do this at minimal extra cost.

The adoption of standard gauge for these lines would have enabled trains to enter the city on the under-used standard gauge tracks rather than the congested broad gauge suburban system.

This proposal was rejected by the minister on the astonishing proposition that broad gauge should be retained for passenger services while standard gauge should be for freight. As these were primarily passenger lines, they had to be broad gauge.

To make sure the opportunity was truly lost, he rejected a proposal that the sleepers used for the new line should be convertible. The South Australian railways had been using convertible sleepers on all track upgrades for decades, resulting in massive saving when conversion was carried out.

However, the government had said that the money was for country trains, and therefore could not be used to relieve suburban congestion. The trains had to go fast



CELEBRATION: Australian railways 150th anniversary in 2004

enough to do the distance in 84 minutes without any improvement to the suburban approaches.

The solution was to have trains capable of 100mph, and upgrading of the country tracks to enable them to maintain this speed until they entered the suburbs. At this stage the trains were ordered.

However, it then became evident that there were problems with the upgrading of the tracks to the 100mph standard. Of these, the main one was that trains travelling at 100mph would require greater clearances than the existing ones, which meant demolition of bridges and re boring of tunnels. This would have been massively expensive, as well as involving the unacceptable destruction of heritage structures.

Of course, had the trains been ordered to specifications based on the existing clearances, which would have involved only a modest tapering of their profile, none of this would have been necessary.

The idea of ordering trains and then adapting the tunnels and bridges to accommodate them is, to say the least, unusual. But by then the trains had been ordered, and changing the specifications would have meant admitting that a mistake had been made.

The engineers' solution was to single the track over parts of its length, including all the sections through tunnels and heritage bridges. By relaying the track down the middle

of the double-track alignment, all clearance problems were solved. Of course, it also involved an expensive bi-directional signalling system, but the resultant cost blow-out was accepted.

So the services on the line were withdrawn for an "upgrade". It was all to take nine months.

Users of the line were concerned that even with the new signalling system the singling of the track radically reduced its carrying capacity.

The experts had said that the railway was carrying only a fraction of its existing capacity, and that even if singled it had a carrying capacity several times that of the existing traffic.

What they did not say was that this was true only if the calculations were based on traffic capacity over a 24-hour period – there was plenty of unused capacity during the night.

However, in the rush hours the singled sections of the line would be operating at very near to capacity, with resultant reliability problems.

The reopening of the line has been delayed, but a timetable was published which confirmed these fears.

It was released with the catchline "trains will be up to 35 minutes faster", implying that all services would be accelerated. This was a strange claim given that the average timings were in fact slower than before. At a subsequent meeting to discuss the matter, the gov-

ernment spokesman said it was true, because the fastest train was to be 35 minutes faster than the slowest train on the old schedule, an answer of which Sir Humphrey would have been proud.

The government's core promise had been fulfilled: there was to be a train, just one a day each way, scheduled for 84 minutes.

But when was it to run? It was to leave Bendigo at 6.08 am and arrive in Melbourne at 7.32, roughly an hour before most people would want to arrive. The return trip was to leave at 4.45 p.m., roughly an hour before most people would be ready to leave.

When asked about this, the spokesman for the railways said that surveys indicated that these were the times when a fast train was most wanted. However, details of the surveys were not available.

He did admit, however, that it was lucky his survey respondents wanted these early timings, as the expresses could not be run an hour later because of rush-hour congestion.

For citizens of Castlemaine, the second largest country town on the line, the outcome is even more unhelpful. Almost all services are slower than before. This is exactly what critics feared, and is a direct result of the singling of the track.

In order to preserve some semblance of reliability, schedules have had to be slowed by as much as 12 minutes. Until services actually resume (February 2006 was the projected date) we do not know if even these allowances will prove sufficient.

The timetable was released in January. It is virtually identical to the pre-upgrade timetable, except that the average journey is two minutes longer. There is no 84-minute express.

The conclusions

1 The idea of spending money on country rail services was good, even visionary. It went wrong because of a chain of errors, many of which were pointed out at the time. The government refused to listen. A large sum of money has been spent to little or no good effect. It is hard to see how it will seem to be less of a fiasco when the line reopens, and far more likely further problems will become apparent.

2 Victoria Premier Steve Bracks, when asked recently whether he had any regrets about the way the project was handled, replied that he had none, but would do it again in exactly the same way.

3 Since the opposition Liberal party has no enthusiasm for the railways, this fiasco gives them a good argument for rejecting future "upgrades", leaving rail's future in a very parlous state.