



North Island Main Trunk – 100 Years Young

Celebrating the centenary of an infrastructure icon

Comments at a meeting of the RTSA, Auckland, 9 July 2008 by Kevin Ramshaw, GM Public Affairs, ONTRACK

The North Island Main Trunk Line is like a much-loved granny. At 100 years old, it should be treated with reverence as well as affection. Like any granny, there is profound hope for continued survival - tempered with realism about the inevitability of mortality.

Fortunately, the North Island Main Trunk is a piece of infrastructure rather than a human being. The rising price of oil and the hope of greater investment in rail offers the promise of life well beyond its first century.

My comments tonight, which are nominally about the celebrations associated with the centenary, extend a little wider. It seemed a good idea to provide you with some thoughts on the work ONTRACK has been doing around the centenary. With this in mind, I've decided to trace some of the history of the Trunk and to assess the contribution it has made.

In 1908, the year the Trunk was completed, New Zealand's population had just topped the one million mark. The influence of the gold rush was waning and the population of the North Island had overtaken the South.

The settlers were enthusiastic about the future of the country. New Zealand had been granted Dominion status the year before and the early settlers had a vision of one day inhabiting a country with a large population and considerable influence in the region.

An election was approaching. Sir Joseph Ward led a Liberal Government that had lost the reforming zeal that "King Dick" Seddon's leadership had given it. He faced the growing influence of the Labour Party and a capable Opposition Leader in Bill Massey, the man who can be credited with forming the fore-runner to today's National Party.

Meat refrigeration and more intensive farming was leading to smaller land holdings. Processing industries were developing. The price of butter on the

British market was rising. There was growing enthusiasm for opening up the country and expanding the economy.

Railways had been developing since Sir Julius Vogel embarked on his grand vision of creating a thousand miles of railway. By 1908 only a section through the Central North Island remained to be linked.

Newspapers displayed considerable enthusiasm for the project. The Evening Post's Ohakune correspondent noted: "not a score of miles to run before completion. It is estimated that by the end of the current year, through trains will be running between Auckland and Wellington. Thus the last chapter of one of a romance of railroad construction will be closed."

In due course, a Parliament Special carrying 44 MPs and their guests left Wellington on August 6 and arrived in Auckland the following day. Their purpose was to welcome the American Great White Fleet, a fleet of warships that toured Pacific ports to demonstrate American naval power at a time when Britain and Germany were engaged in their own arms race.

The Special negotiated the short stretch of yet-to-be-completed line on temporary tracks laid by the Public Works Department. In November, Sir Joseph Ward was back in the Central North Island to drive the last spike and declare the line officially open. That ceremony will be re-enacted on 8 November of this year.

The completion of the Trunk accelerated the opening up of the central North Island and the growth of industries such as forestry. Towns sprang up or grew along the railway route. Some of them – Taihape and Taumarunui became synonymous with the railway.

As the century wore on, the Trunk became increasingly busy – although there were clouds on the horizon from an early date. At a meeting of the Automobile Association, an official predicted darkly that one day road would supersede rail.

And so it came to pass. Through the 1960s and 1970s, road transport nipped at the heels of railway freight business. The motorcar and the aeroplane became preferred means of travel for people moving up and down the Island. Restrictions on the distance truck drivers could travel in competition with rail were lifted in the 1980s, reducing the competitiveness of freight services.

The only up-side through this period was the Government's response to the two oil shocks of the '70s and early '80s. Electrification of the Trunk from Palmerston North to Te Rapa added a new dimension and depending on how high oil prices rise as we approach "Peak Oil" may have been a forerunner of what to expect in the future.

We're moving into the period that many remember. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, railways were used for social policy purposes – in other words as a means of mopping up unemployment. Then came corporatisation and the trimming of staff to around 5,000 - a far cry from the 20,000 or more who had worked for railways in the 1970s. This had a significant effect on railway towns and railway communities along the route of the Trunk.

In 1993, The Government sold New Zealand Railways Corporation to a business consortium led by railway company Wisconsin Central and New Zealand merchant bank, Fay Richwhite. By 2000, the company was struggling and working with the Government on future options.

The Government bought the Auckland network in 2001 and then the rail infrastructure in 2004 as part of a deal with Toll NZ which involved that company buying Tranz Rail. The wheel came full circle on July 1 of this year when the Government purchased Toll NZ Limited's rail and ferry businesses under the banner of KiwiRail.

From our current vantage point, it's easy to under-estimate the importance of the Trunk. Developments in roading and air travel have diminished its significance. But early in the 20th century, it played a fundamental role in the opening up of the North Island to settlement and economic development.

The engineering skills and expertise developed in the Trunk's construction were enormously important to a young country struggling to build infrastructure. The engineering feats achieved in the building of the Trunk earned international recognition and still attract interest and admiration today.

Finally, if you took a poll of transport infrastructure with the greatest sense of romance, the North Island Main Trunk would be either at the top or very close to it. The Desert Road might be a contender but it arguably doesn't encompass the towns, communities and inter-relationship of large numbers of people that singles out the Trunk.

We can only speculate on what the future may hold for the Trunk. But after some years of being shaded by other forms of transport, rail is making an international come-back. Its fuel efficiency is a tremendous asset in a world contemplating Peak Oil. We can only conclude that a great institution that looked to have an uncertain future, now has a new lease on life.

The centenary of the North Island Main Trunk will be celebrated at a number of functions over coming months. ONTRACK's principal involvement will be in the re-enactment of the Parliament Special from 6 to 8 August and a re-enactment of the Last Spike ceremony on 8 November.