

An Odd Couple build up a \$600 million head of steam on a train that never was

By ARCHIE BAYVEL

It's a railway that never was and about an odd couple of blokes who would like to change that at a cost to the taxpayer of, depending on whom you believe, anything from \$150 million to \$600 million and a profit to the same taxpayers, depending on whom you believe, of zilch (government estimate) and money back in two years and profits increasing indefinitely (the Odd Couple).

The railway in question is a phantom track planned by NSW's Wran government in the early 1980s to take a 35-kilometre short cut down the Illawarra escarpment from Maldon, a god-forsaken hamlet on the great southern Sydney to Melbourne line, to Dombarton which is a nondescript settlement conveniently close to the rapidly emerging wharves of Port Kembla.

Such a shortcut makes sense. It would reduce the freight time from the coal, timber, and grain-rich upper Illawarra to Port Kembla from 24 hours to only four hours. And it would save almost as much time in delivering the cars, containers and general cargo which are pouring out of the once sleepy and now booming Port Kembla to their market in Sydney and beyond.

Commercial support for its completion comes from at least 50 professional and business bodies including SAL, Port Kembla, and a host of others

The only trouble is that the railway doesn't exist and until now all governments have been extremely leery of giving it their support.

Building was stopped by the Greiner government a few years and many millions of dollars after and in 1988 its first few kilometers of rail were ripped up. Legend is – and there's a lot of legend around this ghost train – that it cost more to terminate the various construction contracts than to have completed line been.

So there is no Maldon-Dombarton railway.

But there are astonishing monuments to it in the form of cuttings, part-dug tunnels and the mighty approach spans of a large bridge to cross the Nepean River. They tower almost 100 metres high, taller even than the historic Roman ruins in the north African desert. Amid the rolling farmlands around Wilton they stand out, as one local put it, like dog's balls. A multi-million-dollar dog, never mind the extras!

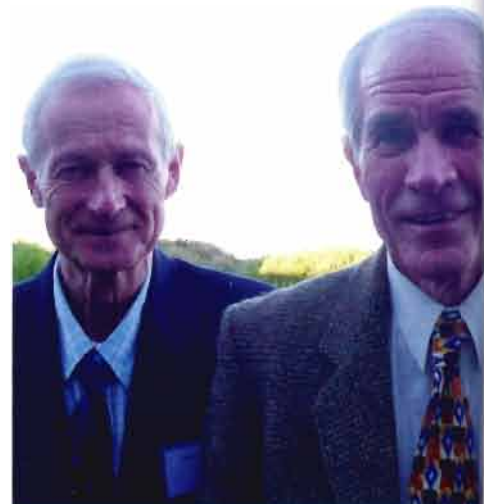
The spans on both sides of the river lead nowhere and come from nowhere but they've been the focus of many attempts, promises even, to revitalise the project and complete the railway. The business case is that the 2006 Parliamentary Inquiry recommended that the line be resurrected; The federal and state governments remain to be convinced; Infrastructure Australia also needs to be convinced.

As a result, Anthony Albanese's Department of Infrastructure and Transport is in the midst of a \$3 million study to help decide whether the project is now economically viable in the light of southern New

South Wales' growth, the dramatic growth of Port Kembla's port AND the increasing traffic congestion of all roads and rail between the massive Port Botany, 100 kilometres north, and the Wollongong – Port Kembla urban complex.

Which brings us to the Odd Couple ... Messrs Michael Cronin and John MacRea, a couple of old codgers who have devoted a significant part of their recent lives - Cronin is 70, MacRea 74 - to get work started again on the Maldon-Dombarton line.

To listen to them the \$3 million is just money down the drain; as indeed it probably is when one considers that at \$300 an hour (and how many of us earn that?) it would represent 10,000 hours to list what has to be done and add up its cost. No need to re-work the benefits 'cos they are already in the public domain.



Michael Cronin and John MacRea

Cronin puts their views in a nutshell when he says: Our original point was with the NSW Government, especially the Minister for Transport! His department should have looked at it and said: 'Hey, Boss, this is a no-brainer – we must do a feasibility study and, prove the point and get on with it.' But they/he did not do that."

It's clear as day to the Odd Couple that the job must be completed ASAP and it must be done by the NSW Government and not farmed out in any public:private partnership (as has been proposed) that will see the "private" snatch all the profit while the "public" foots the bill.

Get the ghost train running and Port Botany's already choking rail and road system will be freed-up from the growing avalanche of imports and exports generated at Port Kembla. Such is the Odd Couple's eloquence that one wonders what luck their railway would have in curing cancer, the clap, and the king's bad leg.

Unfortunately, like many well intentioned enthusiasts, their eloquence and energy sometimes leads them astray and their seeming lack of gravitas, indeed their vigorous irreverence can reduce the persuasiveness of their advocacy.

It can also play havoc with their credibility; the epistemology of many of their claims is woeful and after one has been spooked a few times by glaring and often basic errors, their ghost train runs slower and slower.

Over the years there would hardly have been a newspaper, or news program that wouldn't have featured the Cronin MacRea Railroadmen with their song and dance act. Almost single-handedly they have kept the Maldon-Dombarton Railway (which doesn't exist,

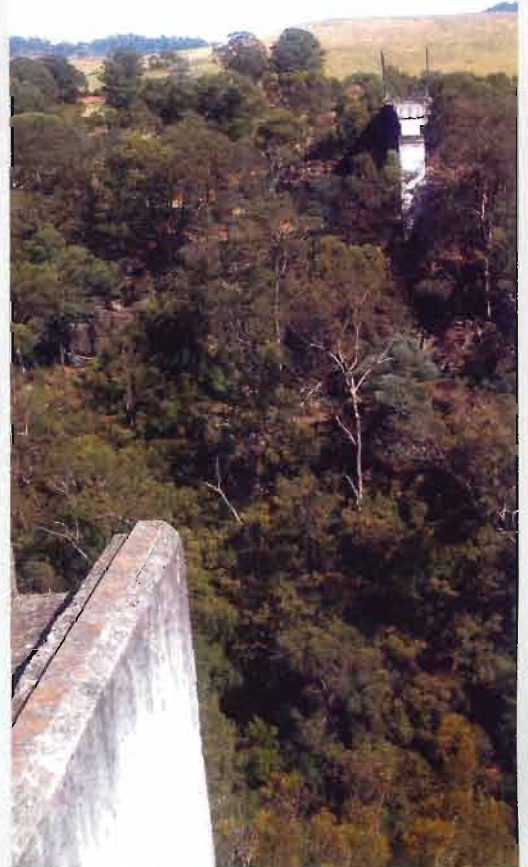
remember) alive, in the news, and almost constantly on the NSW Government's hammer.

In conversation their arguments are illustrated by terrifying inaccuracies. eg:

- Port Kembla's thousands of imported cars are trucked to Sydney and stored on the Glebe island site from which they were expelled four years ago. [Fact: This happened for a few weeks only when the Port Kembla car imports were first settling in.]
- The planned billion-dollar developments of Port Botany and Port Kembla cannot take place unless the ghost train and its rail are built [Fact: They are already under construction].
- Newcastle's coal terminals are clogged to capacity and its coal could be sent to Port Kembla if only that railway were built. [Fact: Newcastle's terminal operators have the capacity to double throughput of what is already the world's biggest coal port.]
- The railway is already almost complete and needs only a bridge and rails for its trains to run. [Fact: It needs several bridges, a tunnel, rails and some hundreds of millions of dollars to complete. It has no trains.]

One could go on with such criticism and end up dismissing them as just an odd couple ... Like Dame Edna and Madge where one makes outrageous statements and the other by remaining silent endorses them. But that would be a great shame because as well as spearheading the Build The Railway lobby they are also the authors of a surprisingly persuasive and mostly reasoned submission supporting the railway. It's a submission whose opinions are now enthusiastically supported by a groundswell of industrial and business opinion. It's most recent iteration is addressed to Anthony Albanese, as Federal Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, dated 15 December 2010, titled Maldon to Dombarton Rail link Feasibility and signed by both Cronin and MacRea

The \$300 million gap



Expedition to Nowhere ...

Visiting the Bridge to Nowhere begins at Wilton airfield, an area infested by men in jump suits and an old woman in parachute harness who has just jumped or is about to. Her face is blank, eyes staring, wizened body tightly bound in the paraphernalia of her folly. The sky is full of parachutes battling down against the thermals of a 40-degree country day. The track gate is locked so Mike Cronin does a neat vault over it, MacRea holds the barbed-wire fence apart and steps through. I follow accompanied by a ripping sound and the appearance of a metre of fine wool thread from mid-weave of my trousers and something warm trickling down my left calf and into my loafers which turn out not the best footwear in the circus. Onwards, onwards, ever onwards. And then we come to them: Monoliths of the bush, the huge pillars supporting the bridge's approach to the River Nepean. "It's the Bargo River," Macrae announces. We marvel and head back, back, ever backwards; MacRea limping just a little due, he says, to "lifts" in his boots. Then that fence. MacRea ducks through; Cronin does his nifty little vault and I try that too. Something goes wrong and one leg and one arm end up on one side of the gate, the other leg and arm on the other side. I fall on my back to the dust on the wrong side of the gate. The Odd Couple watch without, just this once in our morning together, saying a word.

Dombarton railway

and you can read extracts from their argument on Pages 17 and 18.

So how could a couple of such old blethers have such well-thought and well-presented arguments at their core? Partly it's because in conversation they tend to get carried away and talk too enthusiastically to stay reliably on song; writing it down seems to have crystallised their entire case for going ahead with what has until now been only a ghost railway.

But mostly it is because behind the Odd Couple façade stand two intelligent and public spirited men. Mike Cronin is a retired quantity surveyor whose career included consulting work on the Sydney Opera House and the coal industry. Father of five children he says he's always been too busy to consider much else outside his family. He describes the pair of them as: "Just two blokes who don't like people telling us lies." MacRea, by far the more flamboyant and loquacious of the two, says it all when he says: "I have experience, knowledge and speak to people."

Trained as a motor mechanic and fitter he went into business for himself buying and selling horses which he subsequently trains for their owners. He is divorced with one child, a daughter who shares his interest in horses. When I take the Odd Couple for lunch at the Wilton café both accept only a bottle of soft drink each; while I negotiate a meat pie for myself it is the affable MacRea with whom the prettiest woman in the shop engages in cheerful conversation.

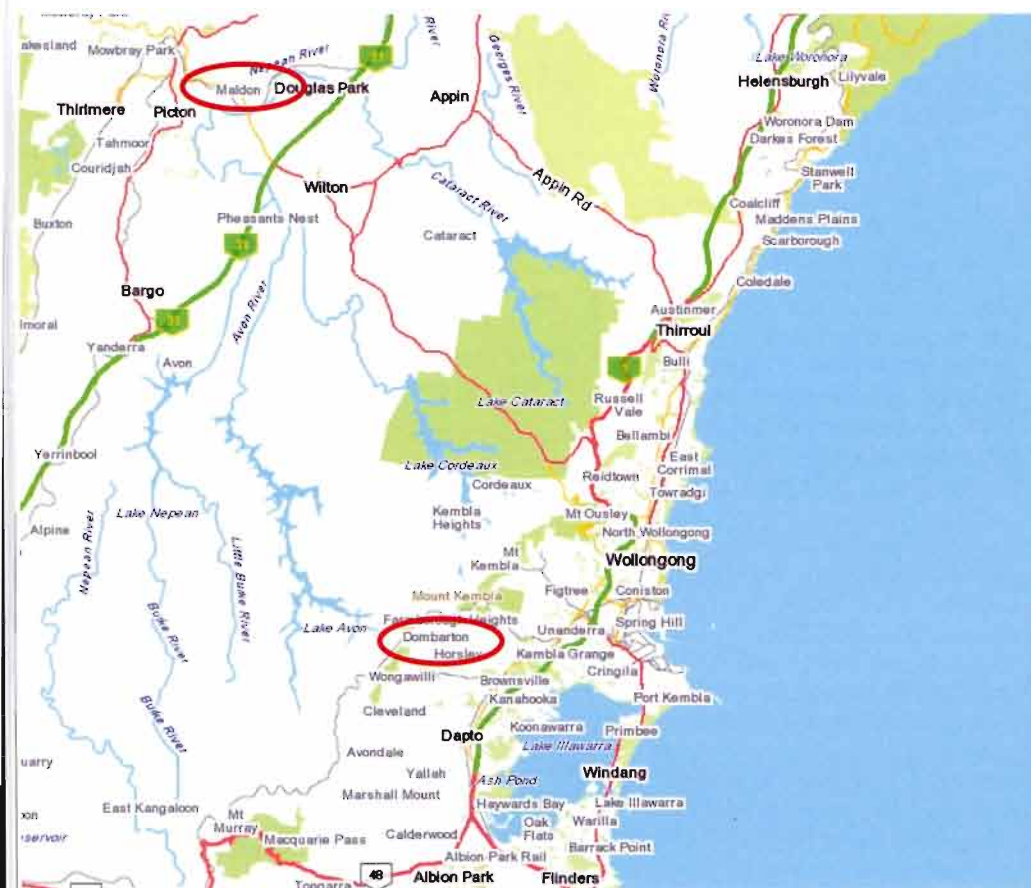
Just what the outcome of all this will be is still anyone's guess but mine would be that trains will run on the Maldon-Dombarton line and that for the sake of traffic circulation in the Sydney-Wollongong basin that they run sooner than later.

Meanwhile the vast pillars of its bridge to and from nowhere stand on the savannah either with their usefulness still ahead of them or as monuments to an odd couple of gallant old men. We should get their names on plaques before the pillars do an Ozymandias and fall down.



It's only a matter of time, says Figliomeni

Dom Figliomeni, CEO of Port Kembla Port Corporation, says he is a strong advocate of completing the Maldon-Dombarton railway provided a supporting business case provides economic justification for it. "It's not a matter of 'if' but of 'when'", he says. "It's a timing issue that could integrate with our Outer Harbor development. I also support the argument that the line would seriously reduce freight time coming from Newcastle and from coal mines in the Hunter Valley and the Western Coalfields. For freight export Kembla it would provide good connections to distribution centres at Minto, Enfield, Moorebank and Eastern Creek."



The Maldon and Dombarton area

The Cronin: MacRea submission in response to the Department of Infrastructure invitation to persons interested in the future of the Maldon-to-Dombarton rail link is a substantial and critical document. It reads in part:



If a toll is put on the rail link (as we accept will be reasonable to recoup the costs) the profits will be enormous but not only from coal. There will be many more trains carrying grain, cars and motor vehicles, containers and general cargo than there will be of coal, specially when the current bubble of demand for minerals deflates.

Any contract for the completion of the rail link should be structured such that the contractor is paid by the owner, being the government, and future operation and maintenance is vested in the relevant operator of the government's rail tracks. Funding is a separate and straightforward issue. The government can issue 10-year bonds and the toll per tonne set at a level which ensures that the construction cost is recovered in that period while providing a **reasonable** return to the investors.

The government will be swamped by superannuation funds seeking such a guaranteed and nation- building investment.

The following are some of the deficiencies in the current rail network which make the need for the Rail link to be completed more compelling:

- (a) Currently all rail freight to/from Pt Kembla from/to the north, west and south has to travel through Sydney, via the Tempe Triangle, to access the Illawarra line. A curfew is imposed on freight on all lines used by Sydney commuters for four hours, morning and evening, Monday to Friday, that is 30 per cent of the time in each day!

Outside those hours, freight travels at the slow rate of 40km/hr, in between passenger

trains travelling at 100km/hr and maintenance of the network.

The effect of such delays to exports/imports can be seen in the number of ships anchored off Pt Kembla.

- (b) The **Illawarra line** has major age problems and also settlement occurs on much of the track down the escarpment to Wollongong. The track is so at risk of slippage that a permanent speed restriction of 40km/hr is imposed on freight trains (lowered to 10km/hr under light rain conditions) and, on a regular basis, during/after heavy rain periods, traffic is prevented altogether. Under those circumstances, freight stops and passengers are bussed.
- (c) The **Stanwell Park viaduct**, 70m high and of brick construction, is in its last stages of decay. It now has a concrete slab in lieu of ballast under the rails to spread the load over the columns. The columns have had tie-bolts passed through the bricks at the arched tops to minimise cracking and failure. A recent addition has been concrete buttressing between the columns to further delay total collapse. People who know the line refuse to travel on it.
- (d) The **Moss Vale line** is reportedly an alternative southerly route for access to/from Pt Kembla to the Main South Line at Moss Vale, which provides access back north to Liverpool/Sydney or south to Melbourne. This line is single track, with 3 short passing loops, traverses many farms with at least 37 level

crossings and also traverses the escarpment with the same, or worse, slippage problems as the Illawarra line.

Tahmoor mine was recently barred from sending its coal down this line (18-hour turn around per train) and must now send it via Sydney (24-hour turn around per train). The mine operators have assessed turn around time on the rail link will be about four hours.

- (f) **Demurrage fees**, payable by the NSW Government to the rail freight operators are some \$5000 per 15 minutes (\$480,000 per day) for unscheduled delays to each and every freight train so delayed. The annual demurrage fees would go a long way to pay the relatively small cost of completing the Rail link. We believe very few members of the public and probably few politicians would be aware of this cost to the State's taxpayers.
16. Currently, **road transport** is not favorable for Port Kembla or the residents of the Illawarra Region. There are only five roads up the escarpment of which only one is suitable for heavy trucks, namely, Mt Ousely.
- (a) The Mt Ousely road has a dangerously steep gradient with significant gear and speed limits on heavy vehicles and a very high police presence. At the top of Mt Ousely, traffic may go:
 - * north on Princes Highway/F6 Freeway to Sydney
 - * north on Princes Highway and Heathcote road to western Sydney

Dombarton railway

* north-west on Appin road and Campbelltown to western Sydney, or west on Picton road to the F5 Freeway and beyond.

All these roads are a mixture of near-saturation level or just dangerous. The Picton and Heathcote roads are constantly in the media as a result of road deaths. Mt Ousely is closed on a regular basis as the result of accidents and truck breakdowns.

- (b) The **Princes Highway/F6** is notorious for its high volume of traffic, multiple village centres and the two bridge crossings over the Georges River, which prevent the use of alternative routes in the event of the closure of that road.
 - (c) At the **Picton road/F5 Freeway junction** is a tangle of four slip roads on and off the freeway and four stop signs.
 - (d) **Intermodal depots** are proliferating along the F5 Freeway/M7 Motorway, and even at Moss Vale. The rail link will be an ideal mass transit conduit provided that both ends are designed for rapid loading and unloading.
 - (e) The usage of **B-Doubles** has become the norm for heavy freight but freight companies want even greater efficiencies. The B-Triple, after much developmental work, has been approved for use on public roads in Victoria. **B-Triples** will be the truck of choice for freight to and from Port Kembla if the rail link is not completed.
18. The **port system** in NSW is also far from perfect, with only Pt Kembla and Pt Botany being relevant to the "feasibility" of the Rail link. Also having an influence, is the continuing development of shipping technology and the mega ship concept.
- (a) **Pt Kembla** is the only deepwater port in NSW. It has been through a series of major expansion programmes for many

years and was given an extra stimulus by the closure of Sydney Harbour to cargo shipping in 2007. The cargo throughput of the port increased as follows:

Year 2003/04	Total throughput	22.1mt	Coal component	8.3mt
Year 2009/10	Total throughput	31 mt (up 40%)	Coal component	13.7mt (up 65%)

Port Kembla is developing plans for another major expansion, with land reclamation of a 42ha site in the Outer Harbour, for a bulk cargo berth and a container berth, with work starting in first quarter of 2011. In addition, the operators of the coal terminal are considering plans for expansion of that facility.

- (b) **Port Botany** has out-grown its previously ideal location. The only rail access is a single line spur with a 5km speed limit and it even has 3 level crossings on it! The whole surrounding road system is a suburban nightmare. Waiting trucks have to park in the roads or cruise until they can gain access to the port. The only "relief" is the M5 Motorway, with its long unventilated tunnel, which the trucks fill with life threatening fumes. During peak hour, the M5 has the slowest travel times of all of Sydney's "main" roads.
- Botany Bay has an existing shallow draft for shipping but this has been further compromised by the pipeline from the new desalination plant.
- (c) **Mega-ships** are changing the face of shipping. Effectively, this will double the number of trucks having to visit Port Kembla for each such ship, which will require more transport and dockside storage space.
 - (e) **Passenger services must be included on the rail link.** When a Government builds a freeway, to ease traffic congestion, what happens? Commuters recognise

the benefits and use it to its full potential. In the nation-building style of our forefathers, we must make provision within this facility for the use by passengers.

The only reason for excluding passengers is because Government has a preference for a PPP process and it expects knows that the developing consortium will not want to have passengers - because they have feelings and vote.

- 19. In our campaign with the NSW Government, commenced 5 years ago, we did not need to do estimates of cost for completion of the Rail link. Estimates were already available from 2 expert sources. The (then) State Rail Authority had made a preliminary estimate for the cost to complete the Rail link in the amount of \$140m to \$152m but noted that the "final" cost could be in the order of \$215m to \$227m.

Dr Philip Laird, of Wollongong University, had estimated that completion of the Rail link would cost in the order of \$100m to \$150m, in early 2006.

Both of these estimates included electrification of the rail link. Based on these estimates, one could safely say that the estimated cost for completion could have been in the order of \$200m at that time. That cost estimate would have increased through inflation over the intervening 4½ years, plus additional costs of more recent/stringent environmental and other factors and legislation. One might surmise at a current cost to completion of some \$300 million.

We call upon all Australians to apply pressure on the Federal Government to have a high priority applied to the completion of the rail link.