



At the October 1, 1979, opening of the Kwun Tong line are, from left, then-governor Murray MacLehose, Norman Thompson and Lady MacLehose.

MTR QUALITY HAS DEEP ROOTS

When there is a railway failure, the blame is commonly attributed to aging.

That is mostly inaccurate.

Railway machinery is rejuvenated through periodic replacement of worn-out parts.

Mechanical devices have a life span of around 20 years, electrical components 15 years and electronics 10 years.

A good maintenance regime will ensure they are replaced well within these periods.

Aging occurs when parts cannot be replaced.

A person ages because his or her metabolism slows with time, but railway systems are designed for decades of use.

MTR coaches, called electric multiple units, are designed for 50 years of service.

Like a well-maintained building, they get attended to well before the end of that period.

Hong Kong EMUs get a mid-life renovation around the 25-year mark.

That ends with the coach body and all visible parts completely replaced and looking contemporary.

The driving system and components of the EMU are continuously updated.

The wheels are remachined or replaced to fit the rail profile probably every quarter year, the traction motors every decade, and other electrical or electronic devices much more frequently to ensure reliable operation.

What has not been replaced are the main structures.

They are the two huge aluminum girders that act as backbones and are robust enough to carry a high load.

They do not wear out and faithfully bear the weight of the 300-plus passengers and onboard equipment, absorbing the knocks and vibrations.

Just like the columns and beams of a building structure, they are built to last.

So, the 40-year EMU fleet still functions as new, incorporating up-to-date technologies and materials, and providing sterling service to commuters.

This is the old-fashioned quality that we can totally depend on.



Nuts and bolts

Edmund Leung

Let me share a lesser-known story of the inception of the MTR coaches.

It was in the British colonial days when most major infrastructure systems were bought from Britain.

Metro-Cammell (now defunct, so I can safely talk about it without fear of unwarranted publicity) was selected as the preferred contractor, beating out Japanese and German manufacturers on price and quality. They were then invited to meet the then chairman and managing director of MTR Corp, Norman Thompson, for final negotiations.

Thompson suggested to Tony Sansome, then MD of Metro-Cammell, that the HK\$500 million tender price for the trains was slightly over budget, but if Sansome would be able to reduce the price, the contract could be awarded. The MTRC would be happy to accept a slight drop in quality, so long as it met tender specifications.

Someone vividly heard this gem of a verbal exchange in the board room.

"Oh, please don't ask me to drop quality," Sansome said. "I would not know how to ask my shop floor because they are trained only to build trains to top British quality standards.

"They simply do not know how to drop quality. However, I can consider cutting profits and let you have a small discount."

The contract was awarded based on that superb classic marketing statement.

The motto in that statement is that: quality should never be compromised.

With MTR trains having served people reliably daily for the past four decades, we should thank our forerunners for not yielding to commercial pressures and for maintaining a high quality of service for the benefit of commuters.

Veteran engineer Edmund Leung Kwong-ho casts an expert eye over Hong Kong's iconic infrastructure