



Boosting productivity must be a national priority

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Last year, Australia exported over \$650 billion worth of goods and services - income that funds our way of life and underpins our national prosperity. Our major exports are iron ore, coal, gas and agriculture, with gold rapidly climbing the ranks.

I take every opportunity to remind people of one of the great unsung achievements of the Coalition while we were in government. Between 2013 and 2022, we lifted the percentage of Australia's goods and services exports covered by a Free Trade Agreement from around 25 per cent to 80 per cent - opening new markets and opportunities for our exporters.

As a regional Member of Parliament and Shadow Minister for Trade, Investment and Tourism, I make a simple point to ask: where do these exports come from? Well, they come from our regions. Around two-thirds or \$400 billion is generated in regional Australia.

And how do we get these goods and services to our trading partners? Through our shipping and ports sector, which handles 99 per cent of our trade by volume. Every day, ships carry the goods, fuel and resources that sustain our economy, and our ports connect Australian producers and consumers to the world.

We often focus on the size of our exports - where they come from and where they go, what they mean to Australia. But I want to go to the people behind it all: the stevedores who load and unload cargo from ships; the container crane operators moving boxes on and off vessels; the ship masters commanding the vessel, its safety and navigation; the marine engineers running and maintaining the engines and mechanical systems; the terminal planners designing loading plans so ships are stable and

efficient; cargo surveyors checking cargo condition, quantity and stowage; the logistics coordinators scheduling trucks, rail and deliveries to match ship times; and the ship chandlers supplying food, equipment and spares to visiting ships.

Without these jobs that facilitate the movement of our goods, Australia could not be the exporting powerhouse that it is. So, I want to say thank you - to everyone involved in Australia's shipping industry. Without you our prosperity would not be.

Our ports alone handle around 1.6 billion tonnes of trade each year and support nearly 700,000 jobs. These figures remind us that every container moved, every vessel serviced, and every crew member trained strengthens Australia's economic resilience.

As global trade becomes more complex and competitive, maintaining a strong, safe and efficient maritime sector is vital. The challenge is not just to keep the industry operational, but to ensure it remains world-class; productive and prepared for the future.

The past few years have underscored how vulnerable global supply chains can be. The pandemic, geopolitical tensions and natural disasters exposed bottlenecks in the system and tested Australia's ability to move goods efficiently. These disruptions have reinforced one lesson - resilience and reliability must be built into our trade systems.

We must also tackle the red tape hindering the efficiency of our ports and shipping networks domestically. The message is clear: reform is overdue. World Bank's The Container Port Performance Index 2023 placed all major Australian container ports outside the top 300 globally, highlighting persistent

performance challenges that add cost and reduce reliability.

That reform must be practical and bipartisan. Investment in infrastructure is crucial, but so is improving data transparency, regulatory consistency and investment certainty. Too often, overlapping responsibilities between government agencies delay decision-making and deter private investment.

Boosting productivity on the waterfront and across the broader supply chain must be a national priority. It means streamlining customs and border processes, improving technology systems, and enabling greater end-to-end visibility of cargo movement. It also means ensuring our regulatory systems encourage competition and performance, not duplication and delay.

Productivity growth is not an abstract concept - it's what lifts wages, reduces costs and sustains living standards. Almost every long-term rise in Australian incomes has been driven by productivity improvements. As the World Bank highlights, ports that operate inefficiently not only raise the cost of trade but also erode national competitiveness - a risk Australia cannot afford in an increasingly contested trading environment.

A critical reform initiative that can deliver real results is the Simplified Trade System (STS) - a once-in-a-generation opportunity to modernise how goods move across our borders. Today, Australian exporters and importers face a complex system spanning more than 30 Australian Government agencies, 145 ICT systems and over 200 regulations, costing up to \$4.3 billion in red tape.

The STS aims to cut through this complexity by replacing dozens of separate systems and forms with a single, coordinated digital platform.