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*Liberalism, Conservatism and the Federal Ideal: The Howard government and Commonwealth-state relations*

Abstract:

Historically, the Liberal Party of Australia and its non-Labor antecedents have been considered key figures in the defence of Australia’s federal structures. Although their support has sometimes been tentative and ambiguous, the Liberal Party’s broad support for states’ rights and comparative reluctance to expand the powers of the Commonwealth has been a vital constraint on the Australian federation’s propensity for centralization. In stark contrast, the Howard government, particularly towards the end of its tenure, was explicitly and deliberately centralist in its rhetoric and policy. Whilst there had been sporadic instances of centralization under other non-Labor governments, the extent to which the Howard government took a markedly anti-federalist position was unprecedented. The broader literature on this era of government broadly attributes the centralist shift to circumstance and pragmatism. However, a largely overlooked factor crucial is a shift in the Liberal Party’s broader philosophy and approach to governance. Without ignoring other significant factors at play, this thesis argues that the particular brand of conservative and liberal ideology of the Liberal Party played a crucial role in the party’s divergence away from federalism. Specifically, the Howard government was part of a substantial global trend amongst Western conservative parties away from their Burkean traditions towards a more active and assertive view of government’s role. Complimenting this new brand of conservatism is a civic nationalism emphasizing a distinctly conservative liberal interpretation of Australia’s political and social identity. Together, these developing strands of political thought have affected the popular perception of federalism as a mode of government at present and in turn undermined its support.