

Howard Shaped the Liberal Party's Gender Divide

August 25, 2025

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A new academic study has examined how policy and cultural changes under former prime minister John Howard reshaped the Liberal Party of Australia's relationship with women, with long-term consequences for voter support and party identity.

The research, led by Dr. Blair Williams of Monash University, traces the evolution of the party's approach to women in politics from its early years under founder Robert Menzies to

the Howard era and beyond.

When Menzies established the party in 1944, he stressed that women and men would stand “side by side” in shaping its direction. Women were central to its early growth, contributing to policy development and organizational strength. The Liberal Party was at times viewed as more inclusive than Labor, with milestones such as Enid Lyons becoming the first woman in cabinet in 1949 and legislative changes including divorce law reform in 1959 and the Child Care Act of 1972.

However, Williams argues that this trajectory shifted during Howard’s leadership. From the mid-1980s onwards, the party increasingly emphasized free-market economics and traditional family roles, creating financial disincentives for dual-income households. Policy decisions such as higher tax burdens on secondary earners, reduced workforce participation incentives for women.

Howard, who became Liberal leader in 1985 and prime minister in 1996, positioned himself against what he described as “special interest groups,” which included women’s rights advocates. His government rolled back or restructured several programs that had previously advanced gender equality.

The study suggests that these shifts helped redefine the party’s image and contributed to a gradual decline in female voter support. This has been described in recent years as the party’s “women problem.”

Today, senior figures within the party, including Deputy Leader Sussan Ley, have acknowledged the need to modernize and broaden the party’s appeal to address gender representation concerns. Despite these calls, Williams concludes that the challenges facing the Liberal Party are not simply recent developments but rather the product of decades of policy direction and cultural positioning.

The analysis highlights a paradox in Liberal Party history: once at the forefront of including women in politics, it has since struggled to maintain that reputation. Addressing the issue, according to Williams, may require more than public commitments, demanding structural and policy reforms to rebuild confidence among female voters.