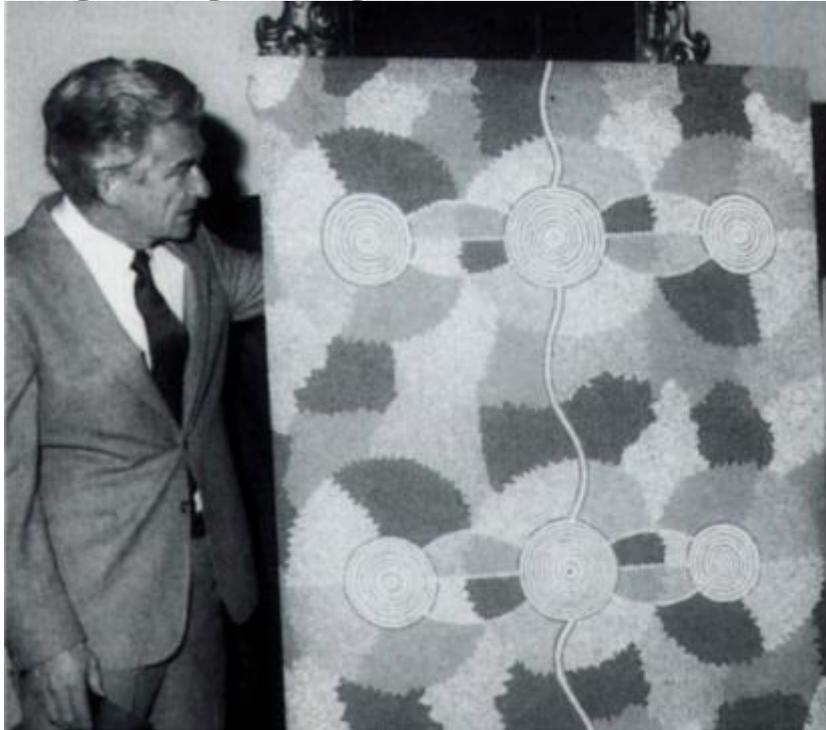


## Cabinet papers 1990-91: lingering indigenous remorse for Hawke



Bob Hawke  
reveals  
one of his  
greatest  
regrets

By Sid Maher

One of Bob Hawke's greatest regrets of his prime ministership was his inability to improve the lot of indigenous Australians "as much as I would like".

He declared "there is still so much to be done" for indigenous Australians "and I wished I could have done more".

Documents show that in 1991 cabinet agreed to establish a council for Aboriginal reconciliation, anticipated the final report into the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and moved to close the gap in health outcomes between the indigenous and white communities.

However, discussions fell short on land rights or treaties floated in previous years.

Mr Hawke said he was moved by tributes he had received from Aboriginal representatives when he left office and by the Barunga Statement in 1988 that called for Aboriginal self-determination, recognition of indigenous rights, compensation for lost lands, control over sacred sites and the return of ancestors for burial.

In echoes of later debates, cabinet in 1990 agreed to embark on a joint federal-state strategy to lift indigenous health standards to those of the wider community.

Among the recommendations were the establishment of a council for Aboriginal health and actions by states and territories to create forums to improve health

procedures and increase participation by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the health system.

The government called for increased specialist services in communities, more funding to combat substance abuse, improvements in mental health services and increased hospital liaison. The moves were prompted by figures showing the life expectancy of indigenous Australians was 15 to 20 years below that of other Australians.

The cabinet submission said Aboriginal health was still a national "shame" with only 4 per cent of the indigenous population aged over 60, compared with 15 per cent of the total population.

"These statistics compare with those of some Third World countries," the submission said.

Abuse of alcohol and other substances was contributing to diseases, and there was a high level of accidents and violence in indigenous communities.