Robert James Lee Hawke

Prime Minister of Australia 1983–91

Robert James Lee (Bob) Hawke was born in Bordertown, South Australia on 9 December 1929, the son of a minister of religion and a former teacher. The family moved to Perth, Western Australia, where Hawke completed his schooling. He studied at the University of Western Australia, and then Oxford University as Western Australia's Rhodes Scholar for 1953. On returning to Australia he started doctoral studies at the Australian National University, Canberra, but did not complete them. Hawke joined the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) as a research officer in 1958, and an advocate before his elevation to ACTU President from 1969 to 1980. He unsuccessfully contested the Victorian seat of Corio for the ALP at the 1963 federal election. He continued to build a presence in the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and was a member of the National Executive from 1971, and served as National President from 1973 to 1980.

As an ACTU leader Hawke had become a household name and his transfer from the industrial relations field to national politics was predicted (and expected) by many. He entered federal parliament by winning the Melbourne seat of Wills at the 1980 general election and was immediately promoted to the opposition front bench as spokesman for industrial relations, employment and youth affairs.

On the same day in February 1983 that Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser sought, and was granted, a double dissolution election, the ALP announced that parliamentary leader Bill Hayden would step aside. Hawke was confirmed as leader five days later, on 8 February. The ALP won a clear majority at the March election, and formed government for the first time since 1975. Under Hawke's leadership the party also won elections in 1984, 1987 and 1990.

As prime minister, Hawke's success relied on his considerable skills as a negotiator supported by his affable and gregarious nature. His government had an early focus on building relationships between the employee and business sectors (eg the 1983 Economic Summit and the prices and incomes accord). On the world stage Hawke sought to position Australia as a middle power in a global trading world, while also focusing on other issues such as public health (with the introduction of Medicare), school and tertiary education, and the environment.

Bob Hawke lost the ALP leadership, and the prime ministership, in a party room challenge by former Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer Paul Keating on 19 December 1991. He resigned as prime minister the next day and from Parliament on 20 February 1992.

Bob Hawke died at home in Sydney on 16 May 2019.

National Archives holdings relating to Bob Hawke

The National Archives holds a collection of records created by Bob Hawke in his years as a member of parliament and prime minister. Official Commonwealth records about Hawke, which include his dealings with the government as an ACTU official, as well as records of the Hawke Cabinet, are also held. Selected records are listed below.

Selected personal records of Bob Hawke

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
Speeches, briefs, talking points and notes	1971–91	M3851
Folders and papers maintained as shadow minister and leader of the opposition	1972–83	M3857
Subject files	1980–91	M3855
Electorate correspondence	1980–92	M3843
Royal Commissions	1983–86	M3842
Foreign Affairs and Defence papers	1983–91	M3571
Files, diaries, contact numbers and media guides from Hawke's Senior Private Secretary	1983–91	M3594

Selected Commonwealth records relating to Bob Hawke

Cabinet records

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
Hawke ministries – Cabinet files	1982–91	A11116
First Hawke ministry – Cabinet submissions	1983–84	A13977
First Hawke ministry – Cabinet memoranda	1983–84	A13978
First to fourth Hawke ministries – Cabinet decisions	1983–91	A13979

Government agency records

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Representations to the Minister by Mr R J Hawke (President ACTU) re tribal land rights	1971	A1734, NT1971/977
Visit abroad by notable Australians – Hawke, Robert James Lee	1971–72	A1838, 1516/6/324 part 1
Overseas visits by notable Australians – R J Hawke, President ACTU	1974	A1838, 1516/6/374
Economic Summit 1983 – technical committee working papers	1983	A1209, 1983/384 part 1
Economic Summit 1983 – technical committee working papers	1983	A1209, 1983/384 part 2
Economic Summit 1983 – technical committee working papers	1983	A1209, 1983/384 part 3
Economic Summit – technical committee – administration, drafting and policy	1983	A1209, 1983/665 part 1

Economic Summit – technical committee – administration, drafting and policy	1983	A1209, 1983/665 part 2
Economic Summit – technical committee – administration, drafting and policy	1983	A1209, 1983/665 part 3

Photographs

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Bob Hawke at lunchtime rally supporting protests against dismissal of the Whitlam government, Canberra	1975	A6135, K14/11/75/46
Bob Hawke – head and shoulders portrait	1976	A6180, 16/11/76/12
Bob Hawke with author Morris West	1983	A6180, 15/12/83/25
Bob Hawke campaigning in Sydney	1980	A6180, 1/10/80/8
Bob Hawke with Lebanese delegation	1983	A6180, 20/9/83/2
Bob Hawke campaigning in Hobart with Tasmanian Opposition leader, Ken Wriedt	1983	A6180, 21/2/83/17

Further information

The Australia's Prime Ministers website contains further information on the public and political life of Bob Hawke, and the location of archival and other research resources on him and his career.

A collection of Hawke's personal papers is held by the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library, University of South Australia.

See also *Fact sheet 36 - Cabinet records*.