

Berinson, Joseph Max (Joe): Chairman of Committees 1975

Bobbie Oliver

Joseph Max Berinson (1932–2018), pharmacist, government minister, and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 7 January 1932 at Highgate, Western Australia, youngest of three children of Shulem (Samuel) Berinson, master baker, and his wife, Rivka (Rebecca), née Finkelstein, both Jewish immigrants from Palestine. Joe was educated at Highgate Primary School before winning a scholarship to Perth Modern School. After matriculating in 1948, he studied at Perth Technical College (DPharm, 1953). During practical training at a pharmacy in central Perth, he saw (Sir) Robert Menzies and Ben Chifley deliver speeches in Forrest Place; this was a formative political experience.

In 1953 Berinson opened a business at Mt Lawley in suburban Perth. That same year, he joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP), serving as secretary of the Mount Lawley branch and subsequently on the ALP State Executive. He married Jeanette Bekhor at the Perth Synagogue on 9 September 1958. They were to have three daughters, Jill, Linda, and Ruth, and one son, David. He built a high profile within the Jewish community, including by co-editing the local Jewish newspaper, *The Maccabean*. At the 1962 state election, he stood unsuccessfully for the Legislative Assembly seat of Mt Lawley, and for the federal seat of Swan in 1963. Reasoning that a law degree would suit his interest in politics, he commenced studies at the University of Western Australia in 1967. At the 1969 federal election, he defeated the sitting member for Perth, Fred Chaney senior. He was seen as being on the right of the ALP, to the extent that the Democratic Labor Party had considered directing preferences to him.

The demands of parliamentary life did not deter Berinson from continuing his studies, and he was to be seen studying in the Parliamentary Library late at night and during long flights between Perth and Canberra. He graduated LLB (Hons) in 1970, winning both the H. C. F. Keall Prize for best fourth-year law student and the J. A. Wood Prize for best student in the humanities. The energy that lay behind these outstanding results soon became evident in parliament. Gough Whitlam was to praise Berinson as ‘one of the most brilliant debaters in public life’ (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1975, 893) as he

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Figure 10: Joe Berinson.

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6135, K19/3/75/48.

assailed conservative governments for rising costs and inequitable taxation, and called for the orderly transfer from the states to the Commonwealth of responsibility for transport, education, health, and housing. He also strongly supported establishing a standing committee system in the House of Representatives, similar to that adopted by the Senate.

In March 1972, Berinson joined party colleagues in speaking out against the ‘offensive connotations’ (H.R. Deb. 23.3.1972, 1100) of an alleged antisemitic reference by Peter Sim, a Liberal senator for Western Australia. He later challenged his own government over its position on the Palestine Liberation Organisation, asking Prime Minister Whitlam in question time why Australia had abstained from, rather than opposed, United Nations motions supporting the PLO given its stance on ‘the elimination of Israel as a sovereign independent state’ (H.R. Deb. 25.11.1974, 3940).

Berinson was elected Deputy Chairman of Committees in March 1973 and, in February 1975, was also appointed inaugural chair of the Australian Population and Immigration Council. On 27 February 1975, the sudden resignation of James Cope as Speaker and his replacement by Gordon Scholes led to Berinson being elected to fill the now vacant position of Chairman of Committees. Tellingly, the leaders of the opposition Liberal and Country parties welcomed him as ‘a man of great capacity and of outstanding quality’ (H.R. Deb. 27.2.1975, 893). He had enjoyed serving as Deputy Chairman but found his new position far more challenging, with the frequent need to deputise for the Speaker and to ‘take most of the running in the chairing of the committee stages’ of bills (Berinson 1993–94). He nonetheless considered the role interesting and ‘enjoyed acting as Speaker from time to time’ (Berinson 1993–94). The vote on the Family Law Bill was so close that at one stage it appeared he might need to deliver a casting vote, ‘but as it happened there was a majority of one for the government ... So I was deprived of that extra little contribution to *Who’s Who*’ (Berinson 1993–94).

The factionally unaligned Berinson finally secured a ministerial position on his fifth attempt, when he was appointed minister for the environment following the resignation of Jim Cairns. He submitted his resignation as Chairman of Committees on 14 July 1975, but found that he had to continue in the position until 19 August because parliament was not sitting and so could not elect a new Chairman; as the Speaker was overseas, he was briefly simultaneously a minister and a presiding officer. Berinson admitted that he knew little about the environment portfolio, having previously been more engaged with social issues. His appointment was praised by the press, given his ‘concise, analytical mind’ and consequent ability to ‘reason logically and unemotionally on most issues—except the Middle East’ (Savva 1975). But his federal ministerial career was to be short-lived; he was controversially dismissed along with the rest of the Whitlam government on 11 November 1975, and at the ensuing

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election lost his seat in a strong national swing against Labor. He failed to gain ALP endorsement for the federal seat of Swan at the 1977 election. In December 1977, he was admitted to practise in the Western Australian Supreme Court.

Berinson finally returned to public life in February 1980 by winning the state Legislative Council seat of North East Metropolitan Province, later representing North Central Metropolitan Province (1983–89) and North Metropolitan Region (1989–93). Ever outspoken and principled, he commented at the time of his election that the Legislative Council 'is a bad part of the system' but if abolition was not practical then it 'should be found a more useful role than repeating the debate that took place in the Legislative Assembly' (*West Australian* 1980, 21).

In the Legislative Council, Berinson served as deputy leader of the opposition (1980–83), deputy leader of the government (1983–87), and leader of the government (1987–93). He was attorney-general (1983–93) in the Burke, Dowding, and Lawrence governments and at various times held other ministries—notably, resources, corrective services, and budget management. After Sir John Forrest, Berinson was only the second Western Australian to have held both a state and a federal portfolio. In 1987 he was appointed Queen's Counsel. The 1992 royal commission into 'WA Inc.' did not find any notable fault in Berinson's actions as attorney-general. He retired from politics in February 1993.

In retirement, he remained publicly prominent, serving as president of the Jewish Community Council of Western Australia (2001–05), and continuing as a board member of Carmel School, which he had co-founded. He also served on the federal government's Superannuation Complaints Tribunal. Berinson died on 2 June 2018 and was buried at Karrakatta cemetery in Perth. Slim and sharp-featured, his dedication, policy rigour, and debating skills had led to high expectations for his political career, but which in practice was constrained by his untimely defeat in 1975 and his steadfast independence of mind. He was survived by his wife and children, fifteen grandchildren, and one great grandchild.

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