

# Johnson, Leslie Royston (Les): Chairman of Committees 1983

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Leslie Royston Johnson (1924–2015), trade unionist and Chairman of Committees of the House of Representatives, was born on 22 November 1924 at Enfield, Sydney, fourth of five children of William Johnson, jack of all trades and delivery man, and his wife Maude Harriet, née English, both English born. When Les was six his father died from the effects of shrapnel injuries sustained in World War I. Johnson attended schools at Enfield and Croydon Park but left at fourteen to support his family.

Johnson's first job was as a boilermaker's mate. Later he became an apprentice fitter and turner, attending Sydney Technical College by night. While still in his teens he became involved in the trade union movement, chairing the New South Wales youth committee of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and later becoming an organiser with the Federated Clerks' Union. At fifteen he joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP). As an organiser with the Red Cross he met Gladys (Peggy) Jones, a nurse, whom he married on 20 March 1948 at GyMEA Bay, Sydney. They settled at GyMEA, where they built their own house and Johnson ran a general store and newsagency with a business partner.

The gregarious Johnson was active in the local community, becoming chair of the GyMEA Progress Association. He was also campaign manager for a politically ambitious barrister, Edward Gough Whitlam, who won the federal electorate of Werriwa at a by-election in 1952. Johnson served on Sutherland Shire Council (1952–56), during which he beat ten other candidates to secure preselection for the new federal seat of Hughes that stretched south from Sydney into the Illawarra region. He won the seat at the 1955 election, becoming the youngest Labor member of the House of Representatives.

All but three of Johnson's following twenty-five years in parliament were spent in opposition. He was an active local member who was never challenged for preselection and became patron of some sixty community organisations. A strident opponent of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, he was defeated at the 1966

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**Figure 36: Les Johnson.**

Source: Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6135, K25/7/74/115.

election. Out of parliament, he worked for Senator Lionel Murphy and in 1967 helped to found the Kirinari Hostel for Aboriginal students in GyMEA. A favourable redistribution helped him regain Hughes in 1969. In the chamber, Johnson's speeches were 'reasonable and emphatic without being impassioned' (Whittington 1964, 143). Foreshadowing his future ministerial responsibilities, he chaired his party's caucus housing and Aboriginal affairs committees. He was one of the 'Tuesday club' of ALP members, mostly drawn from the party's left faction but notably also including a young Paul Keating, who was impressed by Johnson as someone 'who knew a lot' (O'Brien 2015, 57).

When federal Labor won office in December 1972, Johnson was placed second on the club's ticket for the caucus ballot for ministerial positions and duly became minister for housing, his own preference of portfolio. In October 1973 he also acquired the works portfolio, and the following month the two were combined to make him minister for housing and construction. As a minister he was a 'good organiser, efficient and resourceful, though with an autocratic streak' (Stephens 2015, 30). He introduced legislation to create the Australian Housing Corporation as a lending institution but clashed with Tom Uren, whose urban and regional development portfolio overlapped with his own.

In June 1975 Johnson was shifted to the Aboriginal affairs portfolio and two months later participated in the celebrated land rights ceremony at Wave Hill, Northern Territory, where Whitlam symbolically poured soil into the hands of the Gurindji man Vincent Lingiari. Looking back on the Whitlam government, Johnson recalled 'great achievements' but regretted its being 'a government of impetuosity' (Bramston 2015, 404). After the government's defeat at the 1975 election, he stood for deputy Labor leader in an unsuccessful attempt to block Uren. This cost Johnson the backing of the left, and so he declined to also stand for the shadow ministry at this time; he did so when a vacancy arose in March 1976, without success. In 1976–77 he was parliamentary representative on the council of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, and also a member of the Joint Select Committee on Aboriginal Land Rights in the Northern Territory.

Johnson became opposition whip in March 1977 and held the position for six years. The long-serving ALP member Clyde Cameron described him as 'easily the best Whip I have served under', as his 'methodical' approach 'succeeded in maintaining a very tight discipline' (Cameron 1990, 749). Johnson disliked, however, the English term 'whip', derived from fox-hunting, and unsuccessfully proposed instead 'jackaroo' or 'boundary rider'. During 1982–83, he supported Bob Hawke's successful efforts to supplant Bill Hayden as party leader, with the result that, following the ALP's return to government in March 1983, Hayden organised against Johnson in the caucus

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ballot for the Speakership. Johnson was initially disappointed at missing out by one vote on being the Labor nominee, instead becoming Chairman of Committees on 21 April 1983.

Some colleagues told Johnson that he might still attain the Speaker's position as the incumbent, Harry Jenkins senior, was not well. However, after experience of presiding in the chamber, Johnson found that 'it didn't appeal to me terribly much—sitting up there in the high chair in parliament' (Johnson 1990–92). As Chairman of Committees he was 'forever sitting around waiting to be called in ... to take over the Chair'; when finally called upon, it seemed to him that 'you aren't sparking on all fours—you're not making speeches yourself, you're just in that presiding officer's role' (Johnson 1990–92). During 1983 he was offered jobs outside parliament, including private sector positions in public and government relations. Hayden, now minister for foreign affairs, did not support a diplomatic posting for Johnson: Hawke nonetheless offered him the position of high commissioner to New Zealand, with the result that Johnson resigned from parliament on 19 December 1983.

Although Johnson enjoyed his responsibilities in Wellington, he returned to Australia in 1987 due to the serious illness of his daughter, Sally, who died the following year. Johnson was elected the first national vice-president of the Association of Former Members of the Parliament of Australia in 1988, edited the association's newsletter, *Federal Gallery*, and subsequently served as its national president (1991–1993). He chaired the Australia New Zealand Foundation and was appointed AM in 1990 for service to the Australian parliament and the Aboriginal community. In 2001 he received a Centenary Medal.

Peggy Johnson died in 2002, and on 4 July 2003 Johnson married Marion Carol Sharkey, a grazier. Blind by his ninetieth year, he died on 26 May 2015 at Sutherland, survived by his wife, and the surviving children of his first marriage, Grant and Jenny. Johnson was of 'middle height, thick-set with a ruddy face and black hair' (Whittington 1964, 143). He was remembered as being resolute, and a 'natural talker and very personable' (Solomon 2015, 45). Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, and Gough Whitlam's son Tony all paid tribute to Johnson at his state funeral ceremony at the Sutherland Entertainment Centre.

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