

science and technology, Clinton defers to his Vice President. During an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Clinton was asked about the pending merger between Bell Atlantic Corporation and Tele-Communications

Inc. Clinton ducked the question and observed in part: "A lot of this is stuff that I normally rely on the Vice President to help me work through and give me advice on."

—IRWIN GOODWIN

AT LAST, A RESEARCH PHYSICIST, ACTIVE IN APS, ELECTED TO HOUSE

When the 103rd Congress reconvenes on 25 January, a nuclear physicist who worked at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory in the 1960s and then taught physics at Calvin College, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for 16 years will occupy a seat in the House. The election of Vernon J. Ehlers on 7 December to represent the 3rd Congressional District of Michigan makes him almost certainly the first research physicist in Congress. Ehlers won with a surprisingly high 67% of the vote in a special election for the seat left vacant upon the death of Representative Paul Henry and thereby became the most recent addition to the House, 435th in seniority.

A Republican, Ehlers held an increasingly impressive succession of elected offices in Michigan before running for Congress. He entered politics as a Kent County commissioner in 1975 and served four terms, becoming chairman of the board during his last three years. He was a state representative for one term in 1983–85 and then was elected to the state senate, where he served from 1985 on, most recently as senate president *pro tempore*. Not surprisingly, Ehlers was the best known candidate in the hotly contested Republican primary on 2 November and in the special election. In an interview after his election, Ehlers told us that neither economic nor social issues seemed important in his election. He won, he said, on the issues of "trust, experience and competence."

Occupation and career records of House members going back to the 1st Congress fail to indicate any physicists. It happens that George Brown Jr, the California Democrat who heads the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, earned a BS in physics before becoming a lawyer. Brown disowns being a physicist by any stretch of imagination. To be sure, lawyers have predominated in Congress from the start. For the next 100 years or so, only two other careers were prominent—farmers and clergymen. In this century businessmen and bankers appear in the record more frequently than farmers and ministers, but lawyers still

lead the rest by far. Engineers and scientists are rarities in the House. Mike McCormack, a chemical engineer at the Hanford plutonium separation plant, came to Congress as a Democrat from Washington in the early 1970s and served five terms. Don Ritter, who earned his DSc in materials research from MIT, was a Pennsylvania Republican but lost in the 1992 election after seven terms. That same year voters in Maryland's 6th District elected Republican Roscoe Bartlett, who got a PhD in physiology from the University of Maryland in 1952, taught physiology and biochemistry at Loma Linda University School of Medicine in California and at the University of Maryland, and then worked as a researcher at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory and at IBM in space medicine.

Ehlers now joins the select few. Born in Pipestone, Minnesota, and the youngest of four children, Ehlers, ill with chronic asthma, was educated at home by his mother and father, an evangelical Christian minister, until he was ready for college. Ehlers attended Calvin College in the early 1950s, but he earned his bachelor's and doctorate degrees in physics

at the University of California at Berkeley, where he served as a teaching assistant, research assistant and lecturer while he was a grad student and postdoc. Ehlers's PhD thesis in 1960 was on the nuclear spins and moments of radioactive gallium. He is author or co-author of 16 scientific papers, most appearing in *Physical Review*. His adviser, William Nierenberg, became a lifelong friend.

Soon after Nierenberg left Berkeley to become director of the Scripps Oceanographic Institution in 1965, Ehlers decided to return to Calvin College as a physics professor. "I had turned Calvin down twice before," he says, "and when I was asked again by a good friend to develop a first-rate physics department I accepted."

Upon learning of Ehlers's election, Nierenberg was exuberant: "That's wonderful. Vern has a great appreciation for science and he will do much to strengthen the support of basic research in Congress. I predict that people will be very impressed with him in the House. We need him there. Vern has a strong sense of duty and ethics."

Ehlers has been active on American Physical Society committees. He served on APS's first selection committee for its Congressional fellowship program in 1973, and he was a member of the Panel on Public Affairs in the late 1970s. It was at the 1972 APS meeting in San Francisco that Ehlers had his appetite whetted for politics. He heard Congressman McCormack urge physicists to get involved in the local and national political scenes. Ehlers wrote to his Congressman, Gerald R. Ford, proposing to form a committee of five scientists to advise him on questions with science and technology components. By telephone a few days later, Ford accepted the offer. Ehlers's group met with Ford every three months and almost always won any dispute. The group lost a big one, however, when it opposed building the Supersonic Transport. Ford, as House majority leader at the time, followed President Nixon's lead in advocating the SST. "Working with Ford opened my eyes to the importance of science in public policy decisions," says Ehlers.

After his election last month, Ehlers called on Bob Michel, the House minority leader, who agreed to support his membership on two committees—science, for obvious reasons, and public works, because Ehlers wants to have a say in renewing the Clean Water Act, which comes up in this session.

—IRWIN GOODWIN ■



Ehlers: First physicist in Congress.