

# Congress Clears the Decks

by our Washington Correspondent

ONCE again, Congress has provided its usual pre-election spectacular. Last week it passed more legislation than it would normally get through in a month—complex bills, conference reports and resolutions were often agreed to without debate and both houses even took the drastic step of meeting on Columbus Day and a Saturday. The reason, of course, is that the elected representatives of the American public were anxious to get home to campaign for re-election. Unless the bills had been cleared before Congress adjourned, the legislation would have been wiped off the slate. Among the measures which squeezed by last week were several items which involve science and technology. They include the following:

## National Institute on Aging

Congress sent to President Nixon a bill designed to set up within the National Institutes of Health an institute for research on ageing. The fruit of recommendations made by the recent White House Conference on Aging, the institute will be concerned with behavioural research as well as biomedical research on the ageing process. No budget has been suggested for the new institute, which will start work in earnest in the fiscal year which begins next July, but it seems clear that it will take over some of the budget and the work of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Part of NICHD's brief is to conduct research on the ageing process.

The Director of NIH is empowered to decide which activities now being carried out by other institutes will be transferred to the National Institute on Aging—a formidable task since gerontological research could be defined to include a whole variety of activities. The idea is, however, that the new institute will not be concerned with research into chronic diseases which afflict the elderly, but that it will concentrate on the ageing process itself.

According to Senator Tom Eagleton, chief sponsor of the bill in the Senate, the reasons for setting up the institute are that little attention is now being paid to research on the ageing process; what research is taking place is fragmented and there is no single agency in the federal government for tying together all aspects of gerontological research. He also pointed out that the problems of the elderly are increasing, if only because the numbers of elderly Americans are increasing rapidly—

during this century, for example, the number of Americans more than 65 years old has increased seven-fold, and by the year 2000 it is estimated that there will be some 45 million in this age group, compared with the present figure of just over 20 million.

## Ocean Dumping

Disagreements between the House of Representatives and the Senate over a bill to control the dumping of waste material into oceans and tidal estuaries have been resolved, and the measure was finally approved by Congress last week. Designed chiefly to prevent unregulated dumping of wastes into the oceans, the bill sets up a system of permits to be issued by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers and provides for stiff penalties for violation. Also contained in the bill is an authorization for \$6 million to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to carry out research into the effects of ocean dumping and for global monitoring of ocean pollutants and other ocean problems. The House of Representatives had originally asked for \$2 million for this purpose, but the Senate requested \$12 million.

One of the chief bones of contention in the bill is a provision for setting up marine sanctuaries in oceans around the United States. The House bill contained the provision, which was strongly resisted by the Administration because the funding for the sanctuaries was open ended and because sensitive issues of international law are involved, but it was dropped from the Senate version. The conference committee reinstated the section, with a few modifications to get around the legal implications.

## Marine Mammal Protection

A highly charged and emotional issue, which has occupied much of the time of the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and the Senate Commerce Committee during the 92nd Congress, was finally resolved last week. The issue is the protection of marine mammals, and Congress has decided to place a permanent moratorium on the taking of marine mammals and the import into the United States of products manufactured from them. There are, however, several specific exemptions from the moratorium and the Secretary of Commerce is given the power to waive it in some cases—a provision which some environmentalists consider seriously weakens the act.

In short, the bill provides that no marine mammal can be taken by US citizens or by others in US waters, and that no marine mammal products can be imported into the United States unless a specific permit has been issued by the Secretary of Interior or the Secretary of Commerce. Permits will be given to allow mammals to be taken for scientific research and display, by Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts who depend on them for a living and by tuna fishermen provided that every step is taken to try to prevent mammals from being caught along with the tuna. The most controversial part of the bill, however, is that which would allow marine mammals to be caught and their products imported on a regular basis, provided that such action would not harm the species or the stocks.

But before such permits are issued, a three-member Marine Mammals Commission, which is also set up by the act, must give its approval, and there must be provision for public hearings. The permits could also be revoked at any time.

## Nixon on the Spot

Congress has sent President Nixon a political hot potato by again passing the Appropriations Bill for the Departments of Labor and Health, Education and Welfare, which he vetoed in August (see *Nature* 238, 428; 1972), with a rider which allows him to reduce the funding for any individual programme by 13 per cent. If Nixon agrees to sign the Bill he will therefore be forced to take the politically unpalatable decisions over which programmes to cut back and, as Mr Robert Michel said when the Bill was passed by the House of Representatives, "There could be so much backfire that the Administration would be hard put to make each and every reduction".

The Bill which Nixon vetoed would have entailed expenditures of more than \$1,800 million in excess of what he had requested, and he therefore refused to sign it because he considered it fiscally irresponsible. The Bill passed last week, however, allows him to reduce the expenditure to about \$500 million more than he had requested and Congress is hoping that he will find such a measure more palatable. The research institutes of the National Institutes of Health will be bound to receive more money than President Nixon had requested; even if Nixon applies the knife to the fullest extent that Congress has allowed, they will still end up with at least a 3 per cent increase over the budget request.