

# Bullish on Business

**An Interview with The Honorable  
Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., Governor, Maryland**

**EDITORS' NOTE** *In November 2002 native Marylander Bob Ehrlich was elected his state's 60th governor, the first Republican to hold the office in 36 years. A graduate of Princeton University and Wake Forest University Law School, he previously served as a member of Maryland's House of Delegates (1987 to 1995) and the United States Congress (1995 to 2003).*



*The Hon. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.*

**You were elected governor during difficult economic times. What made you feel that this was the right role for you?**

I'd always promised my wife a bigger house, and I really couldn't afford one on a congressman's salary.

Seriously, it was a very difficult decision for many reasons. I had a safe seat in Congress, I served on committees I really enjoyed, I was the deputy whip and close to the speaker [of the House], and I had many friends on Capitol Hill. But Maryland had significant budgetary problems, and while they were caused to some extent by outside factors, lack of spending discipline was also the cause in many cases. So, we knew we'd inherit a difficult budgetary situation, but, quite frankly, this was one of the baseline factors that prompted us to run in the first place. We thought it would be a major issue in the campaign, and we thought we could manage it – in fact, not only manage it, but also use it as an opportunity to reform state government.

**Once you assumed office, was it difficult to change the preexisting culture?**

This culture grew up over four decades – Spiro Agnew was the last Republican governor – and as a result, it's not going to change overnight. It's relatively easy to select a cabinet, your senior staff, senior advisers, and for life to go on, but real cultural change is not just a matter of new personnel. There must be a change of mindset, change in thought processes, change in philosophical orientation. Particularly over the previous eight

years, we had a fairly left-wing government in Maryland. Now we have a right-of-center, pro-business administration, which brings a very different political culture. Some people in state government have welcomed and even benefited from the changes, but others have been resistant.

**In what ways is your administration particularly "pro-business"?**

We had a bit of the Patty Hearst syndrome in this state before my election. Over the decades the previous party didn't necessarily have the best interests of businesspeople at heart, and the business community was fairly beaten down. Businesspeople began to think: "We're going to start identifying with our captors. We're not going to do any better – this is as good as it's going to get in this state – so we might as well take our crumbs of bread and be happy." I rejected that model, and I challenged the business community very early on in the campaign to have the fortitude to stand up for a pro-business candidate who had demonstrated his ability to lead and to work with businesses. My promise was to change the existing culture; to bring a more entrepreneurial spirit to state government; to attract talented people from the private sector to government; and literally to change the existing mind-set. This is exactly what we're doing.

**What additional key issues have you been focusing on?**

Just about every freshman governor inherits a difficult budgetary situation. In addition, we've pledged support to people who just cannot help themselves or are temporarily down on their luck and need short-term governmental assistance. Other very strong planks of our administration are drug treatment, mental health, education, and certain environmental initiatives. Some may consider these concerns highly unusual for a Republican, but they're not if you know me and know how I view the world.

**Homeland security is a big issue everywhere. Are you satisfied with Maryland's initiatives in this area?**

We looked at the structure we inherited, and we decided it needed reorganization. We needed to bring in someone new to run the operation, reporting directly to me. And that's precisely what we've done under the leadership of [Homeland Security Director] Dennis Schrader, who was very clearly tested during the Hurricane Isabel episode. So yes, we're satisfied with the reorganization and with the level of cooperation across agencies.

**Since becoming governor, has the office been what you expected?**

Well, we had a historic snowstorm – 48 inches in some parts of our state; we inherited a record budget deficit; so I suppose locusts are next! We knew this wouldn't be an easy job, but among the reasons I was so attracted to the campaign were that I like a challenge and that I thought we could change the way the state government delivers goods and services.

Early in my tenure the incredible attention shown by the press took even me by surprise, and I've been around for a while. Some of the attention was just the natural curiosity concomitant with a new party, a new administration, and a new approach to issues. Some people were astounded that we won and wanted to find out more about us. And frankly, some of the press weren't happy we won. Some people will be unhappy for eight years, but that's tough.

On the personal side, as a member of Congress, you still maintain your freedom. In this job, however, your privacy and even your independence to drive are taken away the very instant you become governor-elect – although the Maryland roads are safer since I left them.

**You jokingly mentioned a bigger house. Is an even bigger house – perhaps a white one in Washington, DC – a future possibility?**

That's an insane question right now. We just found out where the men's room is here! ●