A conversation with Rep. Tracy Maxwell Heard, Minority Whip, Ohio House of Representatives, representing District 26

By IKE MGBATOGU

Contributing Writer

Ike Mgbatogu – Good evening Rep. Heard. My name is Ike Mgbatogu and I am a reporter for the Ohio Call & Post Newspaper, the largest Black newspaper in the state.

It's a pleasure to meet you.

Rep. Heard – Good to be with you.

Mgbatogu – Let me start by asking you to introduce yourself to our readers – your hometown, your background, the district you represent, and, of course, whatever else you would like to say about yourself.

Heard – Hmm, I am a native of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Raised in Akron, Ohio. Got my degree in Communications and moved to television news. I was a TV anchor with an ABC [news] affiliate in Northeast Ohio. From that point, I got into politics, working for the Clinton-Gore [campaign] in 1996. That brought me down to Columbus, where I was an aide to my state senator. And, from there, started working on various other campaigns. I started the Millennium Solutions and was consulting, doing public relations work, and that's how I really got into that community. And this spawned, for a while, into non-profit. That's when I learned the best lessons and the reasons I have interest in running for office myself versus working behind the scene, getting other people elected. That's where I really learned what the needs of the community that I lived in were and made the connections about how to be impactful and bring solutions to the community for the challenges that we face.

Mgbatogu – I read that your philosophy in life is, "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his*

righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you."
And that's from the book of Matthew, Chapter 6, and verse 33. As a politician, and more specifically, as a legislator who is involved in making decisions that impact the lives of many Ohioans, how would you characterize or frame your political philosophy in terms of what drives your thinking about how you vote on issues?

Heard – Sure, I am by definition of my title a representative. I am elected and sent forward by my community to represent and cast votes on their behalf. So, my personal perspective is driven by my faith. My personal philosophy is driven by my faith. It is the perspective from which I operate personally and professionally. It is what I believe makes me accountable to my constituents. On an even deeper level, it is not just that I am accountable and responsible to them in terms of being elected by them but in terms of being a citizen of the community. I have an obligation to my brother and his issues and his needs whether I am elected or not. So, as an elected official, specifically in the legislature, my faith impacts how I think. Whatever your personal code is impacts the job that we do here. I view the budget as a moral document. That budget says, these are the things that, as a community, we say are important. Or, I should say, that we have identified as important for the community because it is a small segment of the community that establishes those priorities. Now, in an ideal situation, that information is being driven from the bottom up, you know, the community is telling their representatives what they want them to focus on. That's what they bring to the table within their caucus. That's what they bring to the floor in terms of legislation that they craft. It should be responsive to the people in the community that they represent, directly in terms of your district, and universally in terms of the state of Ohio.

Mgbatogu – Gov. Strickland lost the last election to Republican John Kasich by 2 percentage points. Strickland being incumbent, that's rare. What happened? What went wrong? Why did the governor lose?

Heard – Part of what happened is we are still making strides to come out of this recession. The economists said the recession ended in June or July of 2009. That may or may not be true. I am not an economist. I don't know exactly how or what the measurement is for determining when the recession ended. However, one thing I am certain of, whether that's true or not, we certainly have not gotten to the point where the average citizen is feeling the relief from the end of the recession. Unemployment is going down but not fast enough for the average workers to start getting back in mass numbers into the work force. African-Americans and minority communities and women are always the last in. We always have the highest unemployment numbers. So, when you are dealing with the challenges, and I'm talking of extreme challenges, I mean, we were a breath away from the biggest depression ever. So, I mean, things were kind of rocky. Things were really, really bad – collapse of the financial market, housing crisis, foreclosure, all of these things, these are the things that were impacting the masses. And, the bailout that

happened didn't happen for the people. They happened for the people who ran them over. So, that's problematic in terms of turning the economy around because the people who need to have income to a level where they have disposable income and are feeding that into the economy to rebuild the economy, they weren't rescued. There was no relief for them. So, the infrastructure was saved, bolstered up, and there was some attempt to create some trickle down effect to the people in terms of dollars that's going to the banks. Well, they never put that money out on the street but they didn't send it back either. You know, they decided it wasn't a product that was profitable enough for them to invest at the time to market.

The people at the top were getting fatter by the day. The money that was being made up there was just obscene. So, when you have that kind of extreme imbalance, certainly when the fallout comes, it's going to be devastating. Should we have bailed them out? I don't think we had a choice if we didn't want our society to collapse. However, I think we should have done better on the foresight side in terms of how we were going to enforce or force the benefit of that down the pipeline to the citizens, to the small businesses, so they could stay afloat, so that banks who were just bailed out didn't have the option to sever credit lines for people who in no way had been bad customers. People were losing credit lines that had never been in default. They never had any kind of negative relationship with their bank. They just decided they didn't want to carry that much paper out there anymore. So, all of this trickles down to impact us on the state level and our ability to balance our budget, to create safety-net for people who are struggling through this because Ohio was in a unique situation because, not only were we the victims of the same recession that was happening around the state, we were also the victim of 16 years of Republican administration that was horribly mismanaged. They always want to say we are all about spending, spending, spending. Well, it's all about relief for the masses, the greatest majority of the people of the state. The criticism that they are leveling at us, for the four years we had control over it, are the very same criticism that we leveled at them. The problem is that we didn't have sufficient time. They had 16 years to fix it. We had four. And you can't turn 16 years around in four years. The public was impatient. And, when you add impatience on top of lies that are being told about what the current state of affairs really are, you know, there's just a great deal of mistrust. And, you know, people kind of didn't know which way to turn and I think that's indicated by the fact that there was no mandate in the governor's election. And, it was so close. Unfortunately, it wasn't close enough on our side.

Mgbatogu – Gov. Strickland was in office for 4 years. What would you say were some of his greatest accomplishments, if any, particularly for the African American community?

Heard – One of the greatest was what he did with education reform. There was some mockery going on, on the other side of the aisle. They wanted a place holder for House Bill 1 because the governor ran on education reform. So, they are holding this… Well, give us your plan. We have been chastised by the Supreme Court. That's a lot of problem and it's a lot of problem that

you can't solve overnight, certainly not when you are in the midst of a recession and have challenges at the state level as well. And so, he took his time, more than a year to look at this and had interested party meetings with people all around the state of Ohio and all round the country. Actually, he was looking at models everywhere there were successes and how those successes could be overlaid onto the product, if you will, that we were trying to deliver the students in the state of Ohio. He was committed to an equal education for all students regardless of wealth of your community, which is by definition what public education is about. It's about quality education for everyone wherever you live. And, he was trying to return us back to that kind of model. Also, trying to get away from the cookie cutter, he eliminated test and the teaching to the test, and reducing class sizes, and giving support to teachers so they had the tools and the professional development they need as well, creating mentoring situations between teachers that were demonstrated as leaders and great educators to the new teachers who were coming in and trying a learning environment that was ideal for the student. There was a lot of creative and innovative, a lot in the language that we talked about, because all children don't learn the same. He tried to create an environment where a teacher can teach to the student instead of to the test, based on what their strengths and abilities are and how they engage in learning. So, there is a greater success for more students, not just those that can fit into the model that has been created. Beyond that, there was a homestead exemption, giving property relief to seniors. There was the tuition cap on higher education so that, not only were you restoring equity and quality to the K – 12 segment of the education pipeline, but that once they successfully matriculated from that, that there would be access based on affordability to higher education. I think he did an outstanding job with that. In terms of employment, one of the things I worked most closely with him was inclusion. Three executive orders he put forward to make sure that 584 were enforced. I mean, we had laws on the books for 40 years, saying we had one of the few remaining set aside laws in the country here that mandated we create access and opportunity for minority businesses and women and disadvantaged businesses. But it takes more than having the law on the books. It takes political will to enforce that.

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Heard – One of the greatest was what he did with education reform. He was committed to an equal education for all students regardless of wealth of your community, which is by definition what public education is about… He eliminated test and the teaching to the test, and reducing class sizes, and giving support to teachers so they had the tools and the professional development they need. I think he did an outstanding job with that.

Mgbatogu – It's been quite an interesting 100 days for Governor Kasich. During the campaign, he did say he would do some of these things and yet folks voted for him, including some that are now angry at him. Certainly, the governor did not get a huge mandate but he won. What's

your reaction to that and what message do you have for the people of Ohio in the next election?

Heard – All of the focus right now is on SB 5 and repealing that. But, I believe the message is to pay attention. When he [Kasich] was running for governor, because as you said, there really are no surprises here, he was very forthcoming with what his plan was and what he was going to do. The surprise for me is that anybody is surprised. He said here is what I am going to do. Here is my agenda. Here is my focus. Usually, politicians are accused of not keeping their campaign promises. He is keeping every single one of his… There are people who did support him, who are being negatively impacted by the decisions he is making now, and they are very upset and feeling very betrayed. But, again, I am not sure why? Because why would you support someone who has told you what their agenda is and, if there's part of that agenda that you don't support, why would you support that person? So, now that he is delivering on his words, that's your guy. If he was not representing what your issues and concerns were, why did you vote for him?

Mgbatogu – Senate Bill 5, this is one of those instances where the governor offered hints about where he stood with organized labor when he talked about breaking the back of the unions. You voted against the bill. Why?

Heard – Because, it was unnecessary. There was no reason to eliminate collective bargaining. It is a mechanism, not a mandate. Anything that was desired to be accomplished, anything that they wanted, to ask additional sacrifices of these employees could have been asked and negotiated and accomplished through collective bargaining.

Mgbatogu – Opponents of SB 5 will try to overturn the law in the November Ballot. How would you assess the chances of SB 5 being struck down by Ohio voters?

Heard – I am very optimistic. But it is quite an undertaking to keep focus and maintain the momentum and passion attached to an issue for six months. If you first look at how regular election process plays out, it's those final two weeks to 2 months when people tune in and really start to pay attention. What's out there? What am I going to vote on? That kind of thing. The first part of this is we have to get enough signatures to get it on the ballot [231,000 signatures required]. There's an election before the election. Because, the first return is going to determine whether or not we even get on the ballot. If we don't get that far, it's already over because SB 5 has passed and will take effect. We are trying to repeal a law that was passed. The first step is to get the signatures, and that's why it's important that we make people understand that this is

not a Democratic issue, and this is not a Republican issue.

Mgbatogu – Gov. Kasich appointed the first 23 members of his cabinet before naming one African American. You and other Black lawmakers unleashed your anger about it. But, since then, the governor has named two African Americans to the cabinet, Michael Colbert to the Department of Job and Family Services, and Harvey Reed to run the Department of Youth Services. How would you assess the governor's mindset when it comes to the question of inclusion and diversity?

Heard – He has no value in it. When you say to a state senator, I don't need your people, in a public forum, that's a pretty aggressive statement. I believe it speaks to his philosophy in general. I don't think he sees the value in diversity. To make such an aggressive and insulting statement like that, I think it speaks to his maturity. There's a part of his personality that is immature and prone to tantrums, he is thin-skinned and that's not a good trait for a leader.

Mgbatogu – Ohio law requires the state set aside 15 percent of the state's contracts for minority businesses. Recently, Governor Kasich hinted he is thinking about raising that number. He has instructed his agency directors to review their agency operations and advise him on that. One thing is very clear. The goal of 15 percent is not currently being met. What should the administration do to meet that goal which, by the way, wasn't met in the Strickland administration, either?

Heard – First, let me speak to the Governor Strickland part. Two things Governor Strickland did in effort to hit that number was, first of all, acknowledge that it wasn't being met. Second of all, establish a score card which reviewed internal departments, not just external relationships with contractors but every single state agency and department was accountable to that number, as well. And establish executive orders to say, basically, I am serious about meeting this.

Unfortunately, he didn't have significant time to really move the needle that far. Currently, [under Kasich] I think it is incredibly disingenuous, insulting… why would I have any care or see any validity in you saying that you are going to review increasing the percentage of inclusion when you have done nothing to get to the current number. So, instead of them recognizing the fact that I have made no commitment, I have not giving any directions to my current directors and administrators that they are to continue the score cards, that I have a commitment to moving that number and making sure that we hit it. Instead, he is trying to get the focus off the fact that he has done none of that and doesn't intend to do any of that by saying I am going to increase

the number. Let me get them all excited about the fact that I am going to increase the number so that, hopefully, they won't notice that I am not doing anything about trying to hit the number that we have now. So, I am not impressed by that at all.

Mgbatogu – You sponsored House Bill 86, the prison reform bill. Why is prison reform important to you?

Heard – It's usually important, not just from a fiscal standpoint, although that's important, but the more important part to me is the human capital that we are trying to save versus the actual monetary capital. [We need to divert] people into treatment… versus incarceration. If you are an addict, it does nothing to resolve the situation. All you do is turn that addict into a better criminal. It is disingenuous to say that we want to reduce crime, we want to reduce the recidivism rate, and we want to reduce the cost, when you are not doing anything to rehabilitate the offender. What you are doing is making them a better criminal. You are not giving them any support at reentry towards housing, towards employment. As a matter of fact, we throw all kinds of obstacles towards employment.

Mgbatogu – Your Democratic caucus is totally outnumbered, 51 – 40. There are only 40 of you in the House of Representatives. What has been the impact of that in terms of participation in governing the state of Ohio and being a part of the debate over ideas?

Heard – It's an absolute shutout. Absolute. It's shameful. There's nothing. There's no communication. There's no interest. It is an absolute shutout.

Mgbatogu – Have you personally met with the governor? How did that go?

Heard – I have met with the governor. I have to say, in fairness to him, it was unexpected in terms of the way the meeting went. His comments were inclusive. However, to date, I have not heard from him about anything that we discussed. So, it was a surprising and interesting and amusing conversation. However, to no yield. I expected it to be a bit more confrontational than it was. So, it was welcomed that it was not. We actually had a real dialogue. But again, it was for naught. It was just lots of pretty conversation that went nowhere.