A conversation with State Senator Edna Brown, Ohio Senate, representing District 11

Senator Edna Brown is from Toledo, Ohio, representing the 11th Senatorial district. She is starting her 10th year in the legislature. Prior to that, she served 8 years on the Toledo City Council. Prior to that, of course, she was a municipal employee for the city of Toledo and served 32 years with the city of Toledo.

Mgbatogu – The governor recently signed the $55.8 billion bi-annual budget, cutting funding to education, local government, school districts, and others. What's your general take on the governor's budget?

Sen. Brown – Well, the governor's first budget, I must say really was intense, demanding a lot of attention on my behalf and others. In my opinion, the budget itself, there were a number of things in that budget. I believe, in spite of what the governor says, that the budget is a job killer, actually. I think that it rewards the wealthy. It's going to cause the local government to increase taxes because of the reduction in funding to counties, cities and townships. I really think that much of what is in that budget will not create jobs as it has been portrayed.

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?

Sen. Brown – I feel confident that SB 5 will be struck down. The public is very much in support of public employees. That was shown through their response to the rallies here in Columbus as well as in the number of people who are not public employees who circulated the petitions. The number of signatures gathered shows that people are very, very much opposed to this law. I believe that enthusiasm will carry forward to November and people will strike that [law] down.

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

Sen. Brown – Well, I can tell you this, if I knew the answer to that, I would never have to work

another day in my life. Honestly, I do not know what happened there. There was a lot of negative campaigning. And, I was as shocked as anyone when not only the governor but other Democratic statewide office holders lost their positions. So no, I do not have any idea, except that he did not get the necessary votes to win.

Mgbatogu – It's been quite an interesting 100 days for Governor Kasich. During the campaign, he did say he would pursue some of the policies he is pursuing today and yet folks voted for him, including some who are now angry about his policies. 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?

Sen. Brown – My advice would be to take to heart whatever the person who is campaigning for the office (now I assume it is going to be Governor Kasich or whomever) says in the campaign. I believe, even though Governor Kasich stated that he planned to bring some of these issues forward, people thought it was just political rhetoric and did not heed that. But, of course, we see that is not so. That he is in fact putting forth the radical changes that he spoke of during his campaign. He, as a matter of fact, came in and started to make policy changes immediately. His programs are on the fast track. I believe that it is because we have so many new legislators, new Republican legislators that he wants to get things done before they really learn their way and before they have had an opportunity to really get their own agendas. Naturally, they would follow their leader, anyway, but now, I don't think he is getting as much push back as he would if they were more experienced.

Mgbatogu – Ohio law requires the state to set aside 15 percent of its contracts for minority businesses. Recently, Kasich hinted he is thinking about raising that number. 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?

Sen. Brown – When it comes to set aside, that's a difficult pill for some providers, contractors and service providers to swallow. What we need is a better monitoring of the procedure being used. I believe that something along the lines of before contracts are awarded, as a matter of fact in the bidding process, I believe that the prime contractors or prime bidders should be required to actually list within their bid who their subs would be and show how they would meet the set aside. I believe if that's done upfront and monitored (because I can see where someone would come to Joe Smith and put him on as a sub and then, later after the contract is awarded, not use his services. So, I believe that's what needs to happen. It needs to happen in the bidding process and then monitored later.

Mgbatogu – Governor Kasich appointed the first 23 members of his cabinet before naming one African American. That didn't sit well with you and the other Black lawmakers. But since then, he has named two African Americans to the cabinet, Michael Colbert in 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 question of inclusion and diversity?

Sen. Brown – I cannot read the governor's mind. I did not know the governor prior to him being governor. So, I have no basis other than his current actions to base my opinions on. The governor, when he met with the OLBC, said to us that he wanted the best. That he wanted people, who were, I am using my own words, loyal to him. And that he had offered positions to several African Americans who had not accepted the positions. He called a couple of names but I won't repeat them. That's up to the governor to repeat it to the press if he would like to but he did, when he met with us, called a couple of names of persons, either offered positions to or talked about positions and they had refused. It did happen. I was sitting there. And I remember one name in particular. I can only take him at his words and hope that he would look deeper and farther for qualified individuals and there are many out there to put into positions. I understand what he is saying, the radical changes he is making, naturally, he wants people who would support him and his agenda.

Mgbatogu – Do you think that a Black person can win a U.S. Senate seat in Ohio?

Sen. Brown – I do believe a Black person can. This is the right time for that to happen – a well qualified person, a person with necessary financial wherewithal, I believe can win a U.S. Senate seat. We look at this senate seat which I currently hold. I am the first African American from North West Ohio to ever serve in the Ohio Senate. And so, if I can do it, then someone else can become a U.S. Senator as well. There was a time when there are those who would say that we would not have an African American president at this time in history, but here we are.

Mgbatogu – Growing up, did you aspire to be a politician or did you consider going into a different career?

Sen. Brown – No, I did not. It's interesting that I ended up in politics. When I was growing up, my ambition was to be able to get an education so that I would be in a position to have a professional job, to have an occupation. Actually, once I started to think about my career, I

wanted to be an educator. I wanted to be a business education teacher. After retiring, at the urging of some other people, I ran for Toledo City Council and was elected on my first try. So, that's kind of how I got into politics.

Mgbatogu – Outside of folks in your family, who would you consider your hero(s), living or deceased?

Sen. Brown – I will tell you who has had the most influence on me, one person, since I have been in political office, and that's former State Representative and former mayor of Toledo Jack Ford. I believe he influenced my political career more than anyone else.

Mgbatogu – Have you been to Africa?

Sen. Brown – I have been to South Africa.

Mgbatogu – If you get a chance to go again, what country would you like to visit?

Sen. Brown – I'm really not sure.

Mgbatogu – Should Blacks do more to acknowledge and salute the life and work of Minister Malcolm X?

Sen. Brown – That's a question that I don't have an answer for. It would depend on the individual, what their mindset is, and how much they would want to salute his life and career. Because he was a religious leader, and so, it would depend, particularly because some denominations do not align closely with Islam and so that's why I said it would be more or less individual type of thing rather than a huge overall endeavor.

Mgbatogu – Kind of a curious question. If Governor John Kasich decides to offer you a lofty position in his administration, will you accept it?

Sen. Brown – No, I would not. For this reason and this reason only. I really enjoy what I do. I enjoy being as much of a free spirit as the position would allow me to be. I had a regular 8 – 5 and 40 for 32 years and, although this position utilizes and takes up a lot of my time, I am more or less in control of my time. That is my reason and my only reason and has nothing to do with Governor Kasich personally.

Mgbatogu – After this gig, what's next for you as a politician? Are you eyeing any higher office? What's in the future for you?

Sen. Brown – I do not aspire for a higher office. I plan to run for reelection for this position, which would mean I have seven more years that I could serve in public office. By then, I hope to have mentored and encouraged someone else to run for this position and then it would be time for me to go home and perhaps enjoy the grandchildren and great grand children.