A conversation with State Senator Eric Kearney, Ohio Senate, representing District 9

State Senator Eric Kearney is a State Senator from Cincinnati, Ohio. He grew up in Hollydale, an African-American community in the Cincinnati area. He attended Dartmouth College and went to law school at the University of Cincinnati. He practiced law for a number of years for two different firms. Additionally, he bought and worked for the Cincinnati Herald, a Black weekly newspaper in Cincinnati.

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. Kearney – Well, I think the governor's budget took drastic and radical steps that are not in the best long term interest of Ohioans. For example, I think cuts to education were harmful and detrimental. So, I think that many aspects of the budget we would see that in the long run. It was not in the best interest for the state.

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. Kearney – I would say that the probability is quite high. Please recall that they gathered over one million signatures in opposition to SB 5. So, I think that bodes well for its prospects. Additionally, I would add that they gathered signatures from all 88 counties in Ohio. So, I think there's a high probability that SB 5 will be overturned and then the legislature will likely come up with another bill to address the issue of public sector unions.

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. Kearney – Well, I think that there were some strategic mistakes at a very high level that were made by people associated with Governor Strickland's campaign. But I don't think that these were fatal or detrimental. Rather, I think that the key thing that happened was the economy.

The economy did not improve and Ohioans held Governor Strickland responsible for the state of the economy and the downturn of the economy. So, I would say that was the reason Governor Strickland lost.

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. Kearney – Well, a couple of things. I would disagree with the premise of the question. I think that the Ohio Republican Party received a big mandate. They won two seats in the Ohio Senate, 16 percent gain. They won one of the historic Black Senate seats, one of the crown jewels of the African-American community. They also took back the Ohio House, winning over 17 seats there and then they won all the executive branch. So, I think they have a mandate and what they have chosen to do with that [mandate] is some of the policies that people are seeing right now. With respect to the African-American community, I think that we need to wake up and work harder and get out and vote. We have to be engaged in the political process if we are going to have a government that's fair and represents all people.

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. Kearney – Well, I think you have to follow the law. The prior administration didn't meet the law and I sat on the Finance Committee and I would raise that very issue during the finance committee [meetings], and people would try and tap-dance around the answer.
But, you know, we have this law that the state, in buying goods and services, is supposed to utilize minority vendors. We should enforce the law. I mean, it's pretty straightforward. And our state-run universities and colleges need to do the same thing. They are under the same obligation. I think only two in the state have been able to meet that criteria, one of them is Central State University, which is probably not a surprise to anyone.

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. Kearney – Well, I think he has a ways to go in terms of understanding the importance of diversity, both in terms of ethnicity and race and gender. I have to tip my cap to Senator Nina Turner and Senator Shirley Smith and Senator Charleta Tavares for raising the issue and for making some bold announcements about it. So, I think they have done a good job of exposing some of the inconsistencies there. I would also say that, if the governor were to take a broader approach in including people in leadership positions, he would see that the result would be better. I think that many of the great organizations in our country realize that diversity is an asset and that's one thing that's currently lacking in the governor's cabinet.

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

Sen. Kearney – Yes. How do I put it? I was intimately involved in now President Obama's campaign when he ran for senate. And have known him since before he was a state senator. And, the thing that I would say is that circumstances have to be right. The planets have to be aligned, to use that analogy. Ohio is a state where it can happen. We would certainly need to work together. I am not going to put a date or timeline on it. Frankly, I think if the right person had run last year, it could have happened [when Republican Rob Portman ran against former Lt. Governor Lee Fisher]. I think it can happen and I think it will happen once in our lifetime and I believe the same is true that we will have an African-American governor of our state.

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

Sen. Kearney – Growing up, I always wanted to be an architect. That didn't materialize. Then, I wanted to be a writer. Some may say that has materialized to a certain extent. And then, I practiced law and following practicing law, I started a company to acquire businesses and do turnarounds. And, then after bought a Black weekly newspaper, the Cincinnati Herald, then got into politics. So, I did not grow up thinking that I would ever hold a state senate seat and I am very thankful everyday that people elected me and I consider it a blessing and an honor to serve.

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

Sen. Kearney – Well, I would say that I have a lot of them. To a certain extent, I would say President Obama for some of the things that he has been able to do. Martin Luther King would be an obvious one, for his struggles in the Civil Rights Movement.

George Washington Carver is another one for his innovation and leadership in the areas of science. Richard Wright for his work. Kenneth Chenault who is the president of the American Express would be another person. Earl Graves in publishing.

Johnson, obviously, in publishing.

Mgbatogu – Have you been to Africa?

Sen. Kearney – No, I have never been to the continent of Africa.

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

Sen. Kearney – That's an interesting question. My senior year in college, my roommate was from Ghana. Right now, we go to church with a couple that we are quite close to and they are from Uganda. And Egypt being the cradle of civilization is attractive to me. But, to answer your question directly, I would think that I would like to go to Rwanda and the reason is, I have read so much and heard so much about the conflict that's gone on there between the Hutus and the Tutsis.

My wife and I were at one point thinking about adopting a child from that country. Despite the conflict, I hear that it is very beautiful there, that the people are wonderful people. And so, I would be interested in seeing that contrast up close. And, then, I just heard today on the radio about a cycling team from Rwanda that's supposed to be exceptional so, perhaps, that's why it sticks in my mind so much.

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

Sen. Kearney – Yes. It's been something that people talk about constantly. Yes, I think so. In my view, Malcolm X is certainly one of the pioneers. If we were to make a Mt. Rushmore for freedom in America, Civil Rights Movement, he would have to get a very strong consideration as one of the four faces on that wall.

But, I believe he gets a great amount of respect. I think that he is due a great deal of respect, certainly. This country would not be where we are without him.

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. Kearney – One. That would never happen. And two, no.

Mgbatogu – You know he is a maverick and you don't really know what he would do?

Sen. Kearney – That's true, you don't know what he would do. And that's one thing I do like about his personality, that he is kind of, 'hey, let's try it, let's do it.' That is one thing I do like about his personality. However, in his broad maverick behavior in the broadest most imaginative moment that he has, he would not pick someone like me.

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. Kearney – At this point, if the opportunity occurred, I would certainly look at it. Right now, President Obama called me a few months ago and asked me to raise money for him in the state of Ohio. And, that is what I am going to do. And, fulfill my responsibilities to the citizens of the 9th district in the state of Ohio. I have 3 and a half years in my term and, so, that's what I plan to do.