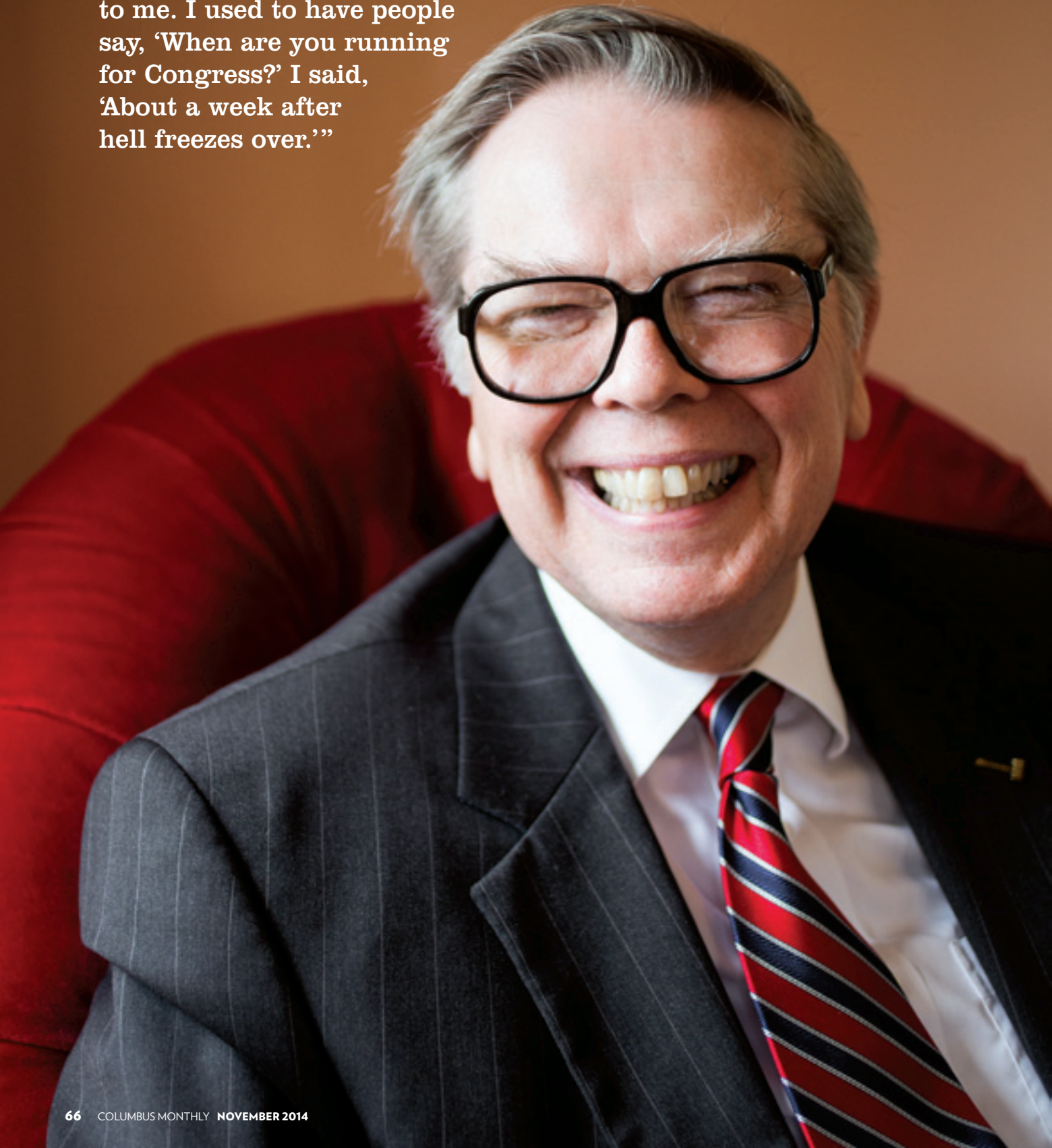


“You’d be surprised how many people are here because they think they’re going somewhere else. Never occurred to me. I used to have people say, ‘When are you running for Congress?’ I said, ‘About a week after hell freezes over.’”



Mr. SPEAKER

William Batchelder, a fixture in the Statehouse on and off for 40 years, is heading for term-limited retirement (again) next month, and he says this truly is his exit from politics. We chatted with 71-year-old Batchelder, of quirky humor and tall stature and outsize personality, about the legislature, Democrats, John Kasich’s political future and his own legacy.

STORY BY ANTHONY DOMINIC
PHOTOS BY TESSA BERG

I understand you started your political career as an aide to Gov. John W. Brown?

Yes. John William Brown.

Also from your hometown?

Medina. He was mayor.

Was he a mentor of sorts?

Oh, yeah. He and John Ashbrook. Of course, I have almost a spiritual affinity for Robert A. Taft. He was always a hero to me from the time I was a young man. He was fearless politically; he was very, very bright. He had almost no ego. He was fascinating that way.

In those days, did you dream of having a career like this?

[laughs] Not one like this. That’s a long time to be here.

Where did you see yourself?

I wanted to go home with my dad, who was a prosecutor. He went to the University of Cincinnati, graduated from law school in 1939 and was elected to the [Medina County] prosecutor’s job in ’40. But it had occurred to me I might be able to serve here some period of time. Some people want to be chair of the finance committee; I wanted to be chair of the judiciary. Never got to be chairman of the judiciary. I did chair the insurance committee, and that was an important thing to me because the states control the insurance industry.

Your dad—is he the reason you were drawn to law and politics?

Oh, yes, no question. He was the first member of our family to go to college. His father was probably smarter

than that. He was a master toolmaker. That was William George senior. He was an amazing man. [My dad] was a great trial lawyer. I would have never been as good a trial lawyer as he was.

What’s the best piece of advice he ever gave you?

Well, he used to tell me to get out of politics. [laughs]

Advice you didn’t take.

No, I did not. [laughs] I think the most important advice he ever gave was, “Billy, it’s about the family.”

Didn’t I read that you once called the House a fraternity?

Yes, that’s right! Exactly right. And it is—if people treat it properly. Because you look out for each other. I recall some things the public wouldn’t understand, I think. We had a member of the Senate who had lung cancer. He’d never smoked; he wasn’t in the Army. How he got that, I don’t know. He was a Quaker! But he got this cancer, and he had to go out to the James hospital every night, and they did some transfusions. Then he would come to the committee meeting the next day—this was a committee that had been assigned by both houses, so it had senators and representatives of equal number—he would get there in the morning, sit in his chair there for a while, then go over and lie on the floor. He couldn’t sit up that long with his lung thing. Every so often, there’d be a question from the floor—literally. I mean, that’s a fraternity. That’s people that are really respecting and working together. One of the things that I wanted to come back to do was to have the House in a position where people did have that reflexive feeling about each other and also would have the ability to help each other.



Left: Batchelder adjourns the opening-day ceremonies for the Ohio House of Representatives in 2013. Right: Batchelder in 1990 in his official House photograph

In 1968, when you first found out you were elected, you were still in the Army?

I was at home on leave, not in my uniform. My colonel told me, when I got a leave, he said, "I don't wanna see any pictures of you in your Army uniform campaigning politically!"

You ran a law practice; you were an adjunct professor; you served on courts. What is it about your personality and interests that has kept you multitasking all these years?

A lot of my friends would say I'm crazy. My father, when I was a little boy, he was in the service. But he resigned as prosecutor, signed up for the draft back in World War II. He didn't have to do that. When he came home, of course, he went back to being prosecutor. He was gone three, four nights a week working with the township trustees, school boards. I suppose to some degree, probably to a great degree, that had a great impact on me. My dad continued to try lawsuits with the courthouse until he was 93.

He was always on the move?

Always. Only time that he wasn't was when he was doing things with the family or when he was reading history.

And your wife, Alice—

Yeah, she's busy. *[laughs]*

What is that like, you being speaker and she being a federal judge? Do you learn a lot from one another?

She tells a funny story. I went to Ohio Wesleyan, as did she. So I'm riding down the street on my English bicycle with a plaid hat on and a raincoat. And as I shoot past, she turns to her roommate and says, "I wonder who will get stuck with that one." *[laughs]* God bless her. But she's always been very hard-working and very driven. She was very fortunate that President Reagan was looking for some conservative women to put on the bench. And then, of course, Bush the elder appointed her to the [sixth] circuit court. So she's been there a long time.

And she had a lot to do with raising the kids because I was here a minimum of three days a week. She's an amazing woman.

What brought you back to the House in 2007 after having chosen not to seek re-election nearly a decade prior? What, after all those years, made you hungry again?

I love this House. Speaker [Jo Ann] Davidson—I had been her speaker pro tempore—had worked to open up the [political] process. I believe very, very strongly in that. If we don't have a very open system in the House, then the people back home—home being all of Ohio—don't really know what's going on. I wanted to come back because I felt that I could pass [that] on to people who are serving under term limits—which is a terrible destruction of the meaning of this House. We had people when I came here who were in their 24th year or something, and we had an awful lot more people who had just hit the floor running. We have to get rid of this craziness with term limits.

Supporters of term limits say they undermine special interests and keep races competitive.

Obviously, this is a two-year House. At the end of that two years, politics can switch. Members are defeated in campaigns. It's a very open place. And we have to keep it that way, and I will continue to work to see that that's done, so that we're in a position where the people here are experts. They may not be experts in everything that comes before the House. Very few people—not even Bob Netzey—are experts in all those areas. But they are experts in the sense of how you interact, work together, how you get things done. One of the funny things that happened to me is we had a collapse of savings and loans in Cincinnati. Home State Savings [Bank]. When that happened, Dick Celeste, the governor—

This is around the mid-'80s?

Yes. '86. He sent for me, and I went down and worked with him day and night to solve the thing. There were a number of states that never got reopened. Their building loans

just went to the devil. But Ohio not only got reopened, we also repaid all of the depositors. And Dick had served with me out on the floor—see, that's how it all comes around. [Speaker] Vern [Riffe] called me into this office and said, "I want you to go over there and remember the House." And by that he meant you look out for the kinds of things House members look out for. Gov. Celeste thanked me for that because it was totally nonpartisan. In fact, in his next State of the State speech, he thanked me in front of the whole House—which was not what I was headed for; I was headed to get the thing fixed.

Was it easier for you to reach across the aisle 30 years ago, or is it easier now?

I knew that there were times when we had to do things that were politically difficult—in other words, people back home might not like it—but we had to do them. Obviously, I'm a conservative but, at the same time, I worked with a number of the Democrats. It may have been easier—and maybe I romanticize it, but I don't think so—it may have been easier back when we had members who were anxious to accomplish things. So, in order to do that, we knew that we had to work back and forth. I think it's important that people who have expertise in certain areas work together because there may be ways to do something better. Obviously there are times when it's not possible to put packages together. That's understandable. People believe strongly. But, of course, it's never been like Washington here. And the other thing—we had a little bit of a problem in terms of Vern Riffe, the speaker. He was a 20- or 22-year speaker. And pretty soon people think that they are the most important person in the place. And that's not really true.

What about Gov. Kasich—

Ah!

The two of you go way back.

Since '74.

How important is that speaker-governor relationship?

It's one of the most important relationships in state government. I knew that going in. And I knew that there would be times that John and I would not agree.

And you, at times, haven't.

Just ask the oil industry. But I knew what John wanted to do. He and I talked often on the phone while he was running and before he ran. I knew he was going to run before he ran. I thought to myself, this is a shot at Ohio, where you have a governor as bright as he is and as dedicated. I knew that he and I would have differences of opinion on some social matters. We managed to overcome those, by and large. I also knew that I could help him, because he would have ideas that would be super important to Ohio's future. He's an idea man. And I could work with our caucus and get things done, whether it was Jobs Ohio or balancing the state budget—those kinds of things were so important because, at that point, we were upside down. The state was really in trouble. We had an \$8 billion deficit. We had unbelievably unpleasant things to deal with. And there's nothing worse than trying to pay down a deficit. Some of the things he's done that I haven't agreed with are things that, if I live to be 93 like my dad, I'll say, "Eh, John was smart." But obviously there are things we would never agree on. He's really remarkable. I heard [Gov.] Chris Christie last night—



Gov. John Kasich jokes during a 2011 press conference at the governor's mansion. He's flanked by Ohio House Speaker William Batchelder, left, and then-Ohio Senate President Tom Niehaus.



Top left: Batchelder in 1983, wearing a dog muzzle to protest the end of debate on a bill. Top right: Batchelder early in his legislative career. Bottom: Batchelder speaks before Gov. John Kasich signs his first bill into law in 2011.

Ohio Valley in terms of oil and gas production. This is a great state, and he gets it and he loves it, and he also understands the importance of the people here who have ethnic and racial backgrounds different than others.

What are some of the most immediate challenges the next speaker and governor will face?

We have, in the state today, very serious drug problems. Those will continue to corrupt young people until we're able to change the attitudes of young people toward their futures. I sent two freshmen out with some older members to hold hearings around the state on this subject. When they would come back and visit with me, it broke my heart. In Hardin County—19,000 people, something like that—a lady testified. She was a registered nurse. She testified that her older daughter, who was dead from heroin, had gotten her younger daughter into that. Just what does a registered nurse say to people like that? That is a huge problem. There are other countries that have those kinds of problems and have had them for generations, but this is something new that is destroying people, and whoever the next speaker is will have to face that. We've passed five bills of importance in the area, but we don't know at this point what those answers are going to be. We have a problem in terms of young people getting more education. And by that I mean two-year college, four-year college, and we want to make sure that another generation will benefit by that and they will carry that over to their children as my family did. We just have to get across to these younger people—and I know there are all kinds of distractions. But at the bottom line, if they don't understand that their futures, and Ohio's future and America's future, are dependent upon them, it's not going to be a happy couple generations here.

Do you wish it were you who'd be facing these challenges? Or does this feel like a natural conclusion to your career?

Oh, I'd like to be back here, of course. I make some of my caucus members crazy, but they've got what it takes to fix these things. The Democrats have some people who could wade into these things, and I know that whoever's sitting in this chair then—first of all, they'll be younger. *[laughs]* They'll be different from me in a number of ways, but I think they'll start to understand. ... I want to make sure we talk about what our universities are doing. For example, when I went to college, if you graduated from high school you could go to Ohio State. That doesn't mean you had to have good grades or anything—you just had to be enthused! *[laughs]* Of course, today ...

Not the case.

Not that case. And in some ways, I feel bad about that, but in most ways I think, boy, just think of those young people who are coming to this state university. We have more good private schools at this state college level than most other states dream of. Ohio is very fortunate in the base of what we have. But we have to work harder. Some of these states, it's hard to fathom where they ended up where they are. We have a lot of those challenges. We also have a lot of young people who can meet them, and it's up to the speaker to get them involved. To send freshmen out to hold hearings, to

talk to people on the other side of the aisle about the kind of problems they're facing, particularly urban Democrats. And we have a lot to do yet. But thank God John will be here, and he'll come up with more ideas than you can shake a stick at, and Ohio will be well served.

Yet many Republicans and Democrats are speculating that he's gunning for the 2016 presidential ticket. Do you see that happening?

I think I know him very well—and I don't want to say anything about what he said to me—but I do think there will be national pressure on him to run. He ran once before. He was very young. He balanced the federal budget the only time since World War II. What he's done here in Ohio is remarkable. I'm confident a lot of people—particularly and interestingly in the East—will be looking for someone like him. He's a friend of a number of these governors. How that will impact his decision, I don't know. But John would do very similar things [nationally]. God bless him. Some of these guys are political, and he's a man of real courage.

And you? What are your plans for next year? Something tells me it's not a long vacation.

Uh, no. Though, in fact, my wife and I got to Scotland a year and a half ago. She had people who came from there, and I did also. That was great. But she won't let me drive in Scot-

land anymore for fear I'll run into somebody head-on with the width of the roads. *[laughs]* She obviously has a lifetime job, so her task No. 1 is to keep breathing. We always say that to federal judges. *[laughs]* I've had invitations to interview with a couple of universities, who obviously have a good sense of humor.

That's something you'd be open to?

Oh yes, I'd love to do that. I always kid my son about having one of these great opportunities. He is 41 now and teaching medieval history. I love history; I love literature. I don't think they're going to let me do either of those. But I did teach in law school at Akron. That's one of those old schools where, at night, the judge came over and taught law. *[laughs]* So I think some of my experiences would be of some value.

Forty years is a long time—a lot of legislation, a lot relationships. How do you hope you'll be remembered?

Well, if speakers are remembered at all *[laughs]*, I would hope that it would be that we have an open process. That people's bills come to the floor on the merits. And that, to be here, you should love this House. You'd be surprised how many people are here because they think they're going somewhere else. *[laughs]* Never occurred to me. I used to have people say, "When are you going to run for Congress?" I said, "About a week after hell freezes over."



Yes, they were up near Cleveland campaigning.

Yeah, they were together in Little Ukraine, up in Cuyahoga County. Parma. God, I love the Ukrainians. I've had four employees who were Ukrainians, and they work like I do. "Turn the crank, work, work." And of course they've been treated dreadfully for a couple of centuries. But anyway, Christie was up there last night and did a very good speech. He's more liberal than I am, of course, but that's probably true of most people. *[laughs]* The bottom line is that John and I met at least once a week. Most often the Senate president was there, too. We worked things out. He has shown a desire, a strong desire, to have Ohio back to what it was in the '60s and even the '50s. We had Cleveland cranking out steel—they put more steel out in Cleveland in the Cuyahoga Valley than the Germans did in the Ruhr valley. We do have the ability, however, always, to revive Ohio because of the nature of the citizens here. I'm still super proud of what happened in the



Batchelder in his Statehouse office

PHOTOS: TOP LEFT, MARY CIRCELLI BORDERS; TOP RIGHT, JACK KUSTRONAP; BOTTOM, JONATHAN QUILLER