



Michael D. Brown: The Senator Who Never Was

By Olivia Nuzzi, nsfwcorp, August 22, 2013

WASHINGTON – “I got my start working for Jimmy Carter,” Senator Michael D. Brown tells me. “I worked on his reelection campaign... I didn’t do a very good job.”

It is very early in the day and District of Columbia Shadow Senator Brown and I are outside of the African American Civil War Museum, where he is scheduled to attend a press conference. We sit at a table, beneath a large umbrella that does almost nothing to shield us from the sun. Brown is relentlessly friendly. Every so often, while he speaks, he reaches out to the umbrella that stands in the middle of the table and grasps its shaft, flashing a ring he wears which features a silver etching of a hoofed mammal. We have been talking for nearly half an hour and I still don’t really understand what a Shadow Senator does.

“My brother doesn’t really know what I do,” Brown laughs.

Does he get to vote? No.

Does he get to hold hearings? No.

Does he get to debate bills? No.

Does he get to approve Secretaries of State? No.

Does he get to reject anything and everything the House has done? No.

Does he have a staff? No.

Does he get paid? No.

“So what do you do?”

“Unfortunately, I do whatever I can do.”

“Are you like the Queen of England?”

“I don’t have the really nice jewelry and the really nice house, but yes.”

The District of Columbia elects two Shadow Senators “every six years, like all other US Senators,” Brown explains. The position was created as part of DC’s efforts to gain full admittance to the Union as a State. “You can’t have a make-believe government unless you do it right.” Sure enough, DC elects Shadow Representatives too: every two years.

So, what does a Shadow Senator do each day?

“I go talk to school children, I lobby on Capitol Hill, I handle constituent problems, people come to me with stuff and we do the best we can to work it out. But the problem is that everything is extended to me is a courtesy, and Democrats on the Hill sometimes extend courtesies to me on the basis that I’m an elected official. I call myself the Blanche Dubois of politics, ’cause I get along on the kindness of strangers.”

Shadow Senator Brown was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1953. He moved to Montgomery County, Maryland with his parents who passed away when he was fifteen. He was subsequently raised by an older sister. After studying political science at the University of Maryland and getting his start in politics on the aforementioned Carter campaign, Brown went to the 1980 Democratic Convention. That, he told me, “led to a job at the DNC,” where he stayed for roughly four years. After leaving the DNC, Brown ran a public interest group “which was not me,” and then he began consulting, which he continued to do at this own company for twenty-five years. “My wife used to say I was looking for a job for twenty-five years,” he says, amused.

Brown’s transition from man in the shadows to man in the elected shadows was, as he tells it, somewhat casual. “One day I said to myself, here I’ve been in the periphery of politics for all these years,” he begins. “I always volunteered to do stuff. For example, I’ve had some role at the last ten Democratic National Conventions: I’ve been a super delegate, I’ve been the guy that allowed access to the podium, I’ve been somebody that did credentials - I’ve done all these different things. So I was always involved in one way or another, even though I ran a direct mail firm, I did a lot of campaign work. And one day I decided, you know, I had a relative that fought in the Revolutionary War, and isn’t this stupid that we don’t have rights in the District of Columbia? I found out about this office and I looked in to see when the guy who had the office’s term was up so that I might run, and I found out there were two senators! I never knew there were two senators! I’m like, holy crap! There’s two senators - and one of them’s up! So I ran against her.”

To prove he was serious about his campaign, Brown purchased the domain ShadowSenator.com. Life soon imitated domain and Brown won all 132 precincts. I suggest to him that perhaps Hillary Clinton should follow his lead and purchase UnitedStatesPresident.com while she’s running for office.

He thinks for a second. “Maybe I should call her.”

Shadow Senator Brown loves to tell of how his title often confuses people or places him in unique situations. “Outside the District of Columbia, it’s amazing the way I’m treated,” he says,

laughing. “Because people don’t understand that the people of the nation’s capital don’t have the same rights that everybody does... I go to things and they say, ‘we’re not sure if we announce you first of the governor first - do you know what the protocol is?’ and I go, he adopts a tone of mock deference, ‘oh, let the governor go first...’”

“Oh!” he inhales sharply, “this is one of my favorite stories...”

“My kids, they hate what I do and the fact that I stand up and give speeches spontaneously. We’re in New York on vacation... and we decide to take the kids to see the Lion King. So I buy these tickets and I go up to the box office, I say Michael Brown, and the guy says ‘do you have some ID?’ so slip my ID under the thing and he says ‘where did you buy these tickets!’ -- only New Yorkers would do this -- and I go ‘online,’ and he goes ‘oh, Jesus Christ.’ and he just walks away and he comes back and he slips a card under the thing and says, ‘look, we have seventeen theaters on Broadway, if you need a ticket, you call this guy, you don’t do it on the Internet, you got it?’ and I go ‘okay,’ and he goes, ‘I don’t know what the hell you expect me to do for you now, because the show starts in an hour, but go away, come back and I’ll see what can do for you,’ so I come back and he says ‘ok, we put your three kids in the front row, but you and your wife are still in the back with the orchestra, there was nothing we could do for you.’ I have stuff like that happen, and it’s nice. I don’t ever try to abuse it, but people are very kind to me. It’s been an interesting experience...”

He slips seamlessly into his next story.

“I get a call one day and they say ‘Senator Clinton would like to have breakfast with you, are you available?’ – ‘cause I’m a Super Delegate, so I go ‘yeah, I think I can squeeze her in,’ and I go to this thing and there is a podium and I’m up there talking to somebody and she walks in the room, so I go and I sit on a love seat behind the podium and she walks in and realizes as she’s walking to the podium that somebody is going to announce her, so she comes and she sits on the love seat next to me, so I put my arm around her and I say, you know, I whisper in her ear, ‘Senator Clinton, I’m the senator from the District of Columbia and I’m a personal friend of Maggie Williams’ - who’s just been hired to be her campaign manager - and she turned around and said ‘oh, Maggie! Of course!’ and so we’re talking about Maggie and having this real animated conversation. So, my sister-in-law says that night the news comes on and goes [he puts on a fake news caster voice], ‘and today, Hillary Clinton was out schmoozing with the delegates,’ and my sister-in-law goes, ‘there you are, rocking back and forth on the couch with Hillary Clinton like the two of you dated in high school.’ And my brother goes, ‘Oh my God that’s Michael!’... My brother thinks we’re old friends, whenever he calls, it’s ‘how’s Hillary?’... Of course, I supported Obama, so I don’t think she likes me anymore.”

Lion King tickets and Clinton schmoozing aside, the bulk of a Shadow Senator’s life is spent trying to secure statehood for the District of Columbia. Brown’s campaign slogan was “THE LAST SHADOW SENATOR YOU’LL EVER NEED.” Opponents of statehood, he tells me, “say such silly-ass things. Like, ‘Washington’s too small to be a state!’ and I’ll say, ‘well, we’re bigger than Wyoming,’ and they’ll say, ‘no, you’re not bigger than Wyoming,’ and I go ‘look, it’s not a

geographical thing, this is why California doesn't have 100 senators and Rhode Island only has one,"

He pauses.

"Or! They say 'this is the way the Founding Fathers wanted it.' Yeah, the Founding Fathers didn't want women to vote, they didn't want Native Americans to vote, they didn't want African Americans to vote, they didn't want people that didn't own property to vote. They were not a very inclusive lot. So, who gives a damn what the Founding Fathers wanted, you know?" He continues, "I mean, we've enfranchised women, African Americans, Native Americans, people under the ages of 21 - the only group that's still out there in the cold is people who live in the District of Columbia."

But, fear not, Shadow Senator Brown has a plan to further the cause of statehood for DC. "We're looking at clothing and food products." "Food products?" I ask. "Yeah, Freedom Franks - 'take a bite out of injustice.'"

<https://www.tumpik.com/olivianuzzi>

