



ROSS MAKES BID TO TAKE GOVERNORSHIP FROM HOGAN

04 Jan 2018 | Written by Andrew Feinberg | Published in State | Read 494 times | font size | Print | Email |

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Alec Ross. FILE PHOTO

When deciding who should be their standard-bearer against Governor Larry Hogan (R), Maryland Democrats who are weary after a year of resistance to President Trump might be wary of another newcomer to politics who has never held elected office.

But 46-year-old Alec Ross – a bestselling author, entrepreneur, and former advisor to then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton – says he’s not *that* kind of newcomer.

“I’ve been in government, but I’m not a creature of government,” Ross said during an interview with the Sentinel last month.

A native of West Virginia coal country, Ross first came to Maryland in 1994 when Teach for America placed him in a Baltimore City middle school. He stayed for two years before entering the non-profit world at the Columbia-based Enterprise Foundation an assistant to its president, philanthropist James Rouse. But it was his work at One Economy, a non-profit he founded to bring the power of technology to lower-income areas, which brought him to the attention of then-Senator Barack Obama’s nascent campaign.

Over the course of the 2008 campaign, Ross convened a group of more than 500 advisors from across the media, technology, and telecommunications sectors, who helped develop what came to be known as the Obama “Innovation Agenda.” After Obama became President in 2009, however, Ross was handed off to the President’s one-time rival, Hillary Clinton, who’d joined the administration as Secretary of State. Ross joined the Department of State, where he’d stay for four years while serving as Clinton’s Senior Advisor for Innovation.

“[Ross] has become my right hand for all we’re doing for Internet freedom,” Clinton later said of him.

Given that one of Ross's seven opponents – former NAACP President and venture capitalist Ben Jealous – was a high-profile supporter of Senator Bernie Sanders during the 2016 election, some observers might call a choice between Ross and Jealous a proxy rematch of the Clinton versus Sanders fight.

But while Ross built what he called a “great partnership” with Mrs. Clinton, who he considers a friend, over his four years at State, he calls the idea that he's in any way her proxy “factually inaccurate.”

“I was considered the Obama guy at Hillary Clinton's state department,” he said.

But he sought to dismiss any suggestion that this year's gubernatorial election should be about anything but the candidates and their experience.

“Bernie isn't on the ballot, Barack Obama isn't on the ballot, Hillary isn't on the ballot. But Alec Ross is on the ballot, Ben Jealous is on the ballot, and other candidates as well.”

And one of those candidates will vie to replace Republican Larry Hogan, whose effect on Montgomery County – if you ask Ross – has been decidedly negative.

“Larry Hogan has demonstrated over the last years that he allocates resources, whether education resources, public transportation resources, or economic development resources, he puts money where his political support is and he's no friend to Montgomery County.

Hogan, Ross said, is a Republican cut from the same cloth as embattled New Jersey Governor Chris Christie.

“He's playing the part of the good ol' boy Republican governor who you wouldn't mind having a beer with, but if you really dig into his policies they're really quite right-wing.”

After winning re-election with bipartisan support despite drawing fire from fellow Republicans for his hug with President Obama on the eve of the 2012 election, Christie celebrated not having to run for office again by shifting from the moderate course he'd pursued in his first term and becoming a far-right, Trump-endorsing red-hat-wearing Trumpublican. Ross warned that Hogan will drop the affable façade if he's freed from the constraints of having to face voters.

“If [Hogan] is re-elected and will never have to run for office in Maryland again, as Chris Christie stopped pretending, Larry Hogan will stop pretending.”

Montgomery County, Ross noted, is often thought of by Annapolis as the state's own personal piggy bank. That's why Montgomery County's schools have suffered so much under Hogan, said Ross, whose feels a deep connection to public education as a former public school teacher, the husband of a current public school teacher, and the father of three public school students.

"The way that we fund education in the state right now, Montgomery County gets screwed. If Larry Hogan gets re-elected it's only going to get worse."

For example, Ross noted that Montgomery County residents pay 19 percent of the state's school construction dollars, but only get 11 percent back. This is in line with the way Hogan has run the state for the past three years, Ross said.

"To the extent that there's any discretion in how education dollars are awarded, they're going to counties that have politically favored Hogan."

"He's systematically extracted resources from Montgomery County, Prince George's County, and Baltimore City, and redirected them to those regions of the state that give him the highest vote totals."

This would change in a Ross administration, he said, as school funding "is really about equity."

"I would re-focus that on the areas of severest need, many of which are in Montgomery County," he said.

Despite its reputation, Ross said that there's a misconception about Montgomery County in the eyes of those in Annapolis. "The myth and the reality of Montgomery County are two very different things."

Montgomery County has more than 50,000 students receiving free and reduced-priced meals – an amount, Ross notes, that is equal to the number of students in Baltimore City receiving free and reduced-price meals. Thirty percent of those students speak English as a second language, he said, and deserve sufficient resources.

"The perception of Montgomery County is often that the roads are paved with gold and it's all mansions in Bethesda and Potomac, but the reality of Montgomery County is that it's far more diverse...and there are significant strains on resources," he said. "I think the attitude that Montgomery County should just be a source of check-writing for the state is wrong and misguided."

Those strains on resources are also evident in Montgomery County's traffic problems, which are another area Ross blames on Hogan's "massively extractive" policies.

If there's a subject besides education Ross is passionate about, it is transportation, particularly mass transit, which is why Ross' "first principle" is a multi-year commitment to funding the Metro system to allow better planning and maintenance, even of that necessitates a dedicated funding stream for the Metro system from Annapolis.

"When your financial commitments to Metro are made on a year-by-year basis it's very difficult to make the kind of systemic changes that are necessary, and I think we need to make a five-to-10-year

commitment to Metro," he said. "If that takes a dedicated funding line, I'm in favor of it."

Ross justifies this by noting that the entire state benefits from the kind of "robust, well-functioning mass transit" that can make Montgomery County into a "regional economic hub."

"There's an enormous amount of commercialization that's taking place in Montgomery County right now...and I think we need to think of Montgomery County less as a commuter county and more as a center of very meaningful economic development and growth in and of itself," Ross said. "Having a very strong regional mass transit system, I think, enables that."

The Purple Line light rail project is part of that, Ross said, and despite Governor Hogan's decision to finally give it the green light, Ross is skeptical that the Republican – who once vehemently opposed light rail – has seen the light.

"It took us forever to bring those 16.2 miles of rail on line and the only reason Larry Hogan got behind it is because he was getting hammered by the Washington Post editorial board," Ross said. "After he's re-elected nobody should think for a second that there's going to be an additional uncommitted nickel that goes to mass transit."

Under a Ross administration, the 16.2 miles of the Purple Line would be the beginning, he said, not the end, of a transportation policy that is a full 180 degrees from anything Hogan has proposed. He expressed particular scorn for Hogan's proposals for Interstate 270, Interstate 495 and the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, which Ross said were "nothing more than a PR stunt."

"When I read Governor Hogan's proposals, they read to me like they'd been written that morning by the interns," Ross said. "And when I dug further into it I said 'obviously they don't do drug testing in the office of the Governor Hogan.'"

He pointed out that some of what Hogan proposed would be physically impossible without tearing down people's homes, shopping malls, and other extant buildings. But what really bothers Ross about Hogan's plans for Montgomery County is that came into being with no consultation with County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) or transportation engineers with the appropriate expertise, and that they appeared to be a "cynical exercise" in creating headlines and giving himself political cover to avoid talking about traffic issues during the election.

"He could just say 'I have a plan,' even if the plan is bullshit," Ross lamented.

The problem with transportation policy, Ross explained, is that politicians often come up with bad transportation solutions because they aren't transportation engineers.

"I think we ought to have transportation engineers identify the very best solutions, and then it's our job to invest in them," Ross said.

For example, Ross said that congestion around the American Legion Bridge needs to be looked at solely as a traffic problem.

"I do think we need to look at congestion at and around the American Legion Bridge, and rather than coming up with a political response to transportation problems between Maryland and Virginia, what I'd actually do is task the problem of how to relieve congestion to the transportation experts," he said.

"If their answer is a second bridge I'd be open to that, if their answer is something else, I'd be open to that."

That kind of technocratic approach to governance would be typical of a Ross administration, he said. No longer would solutions arise from cutting a good deal with a favored politically-connected developer or putting a project in the district of a key delegate or state senator. Nor would it mean investing in less wealthy parts of the state to give the appearance of equity or to entice or reward voters, as Hogan has often done. A Ross administration would not practice the art of the deal as much as it would perfect the art of good data.

"I believe in data – I would not take a good ol' boy approach to governing," Ross explained. "I would want to take a highly technocratic, highly efficient data-driven approach."

"From my standpoint, it's not about where is rich and where is poor," Ross said. "It's about where the problem is."

Such a technocratic approach served Ross well at the 30,000-person State Department, which was once considered among the most innovation-averse of all federal departments. But after the first two years of his tenure, the Partnership for Public Service ranked State as the most innovation-friendly in the entire government.

"We were really able to transform that organization," Ross said. "We got a department that many people considered innovation-averse to really dance."

He thinks he can do something similar with Maryland's government and that the skills he learned at State make him the right man for the job.

"The relevant history for me is working in the executive branch of government in large, unwieldy, innovation-averse environments and then making them dance, demonstrating how you can produce substantial change in a difficult environment," he said. "I think the skills I developed at the State Department lend themselves really well to having a similar impact in Annapolis."

"I think the work I did for nonprofits in Maryland is equal to or greater than a lot of what people have done as elected officials," he said.

When it was noted that Ben Jealous – his highest-profile primary opponent – also ran a large non-profit, Ross said what differentiates him – other than his experience in government – is his long history as a Marylander. He contrasted this with Jealous, who grew up in California and is still employed as a partner at Kapor Capital, an Oakland-based venture capital firm.

"The difference is that I've lived in Maryland for the last 23 years," he said. Some of my opponents, I don't know what years he's lived in Maryland, but I've lived and voted in Maryland for the last quarter-century."

Asked about the possibility of "outsider-fatigue," Ross said that despite the negative experience of having Trump as President, there's still value in electing someone who isn't a career politician."

"My opponents have never done anything but work in government...and if you haven't executed against your vision for governance yet and you've been in government for 20 years, what makes you think you're going to do it as Governor?"

He also noted that both Donald Trump and Larry Hogan were elected on their watch, asking: "What did they do to stop them?"

But Ross understands that it's not enough to just run against Trump or Hogan. "We have to set forth our own affirmative vision for what the future will look like and have a really strong message behind it," he said.

As for why he chose to run for office now – and why he's starting with a run for governor instead of a local race or a seat in the legislature, Ross said that he was inspired by calls from President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and Senator Sanders for a new wave of young people to run for office.

"I'm part of that new wave," he said. "I do not think people are resisting just so we can bring people who have served in elected office for 20 or 30 years and have been marginally inspiring while in office, and elect them."

"Some of those people have been effective and some have been ineffective, but we need space for people like myself," Ross said. "I'm not waiting in the queue for somebody who's spent thirty years who says 'it's my turn' – I don't buy that, that's just a recipe to lose again."

However, Ross wouldn't say if those concerns apply specifically to long-serving members of the national Democratic leadership, such as high-profile Marylanders like House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) or House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), a Baltimore native whose father and brother

both served as mayor of that city. But he believes that Democrats need to follow the example of Republicans when it comes to grooming the next crop of talent.

"Democrats do a really crap job of promoting the next generation of leaders," he said.

As for the current generation of Republicans, Ross is not impressed by the way that for some of them, diversity has become a dirty word. He sees the impact of that way of thinking in the response to growth and when discussing issues like affordable housing in places like Montgomery County, where he said diversity is a strength. But while the anti-immigrant tone many Republican strike implies they view a place becoming browner or poorer as a sort of existential threat, Ross thinks it enhances the richness of life.

Ross knows, however, that not everyone feels the way he does about immigration and diversity, and such anti-immigrant sentiment drives many of those people out of Montgomery County into Frederick County and western Howard County.

He had harsh words for such people.

"I think people who are offended by diversity, who cringe when they see brown faces at their kids' schools, it's hard for me to respect those folks and it's hard for me to be sympathetic to them," he said.

"I view this re-assertion of white nationalism, even in its more apparently banal forms, I see the more banal forms of it as being malignant. You don't have to wear a hood to be a bigot, and I think that's a lot what we see in our communities – people who are hostile to diversity – it's not 'Mississippi Burning'-type bigotry, but it is in my view similarly malignant."

But while some commentators have suggested Democrats excuse a resurgent white nationalist movement as angst among "white working-class" voters, Ross said the way to win those voters back is to ensure opportunity for them and their children, which is why he's so passionate about vocational education, which he discussed in his book "The Industries of the Future."

"I'm obsessed with figuring out how we can get people from every zip code to compete and succeed in tomorrow's economy," Ross said, a passion that comes from his West Virginia coal country upbringing and humble roots. That's why you should believe him, he said, when he talks about opportunity for all.

"I put myself through college in part working as a midnight janitor and on a beer truck," he said. "So when I talk about the rise of the rest and creating opportunity from every zip code, I come from one of those zip codes."

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