

Race To Represent 2018 : An Interview with State Assembly District 70
Incumbent Inez E. Dickens

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Moderator: Dr. Christina Greer

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Speaker 1: Manhattan Neighborhood Network in partnership with The League of Woman Voters of New York State presents Race to Represent, an MNN Election Initiative.

Christina Greer: Hello, I'm Dr. Christina Greer, and this is Race to Represent. Today we're going to bring you an interview with New York State Assembly member Inez Dickens. The New York State Assembly is the lower house of the New York State Legislature. Alongside the New York State Senate, it forms the legislative branch of the New York State Government and works with the governor of New York to create laws and establish a state budget.

Christina Greer: Legislative authority and responsibilities of the New York State Assembly include passing bills on public policy matters, setting levels for state spending, raising and lowering taxes, and voting to uphold or override gubernatorial vetoes. There are 150 seats in the Assembly, all of them are up for election this year.

Christina Greer: Inez Dickens is the Assembly member for the 70th district of the New York State Assembly. She is a democrat. The district includes portions of [inaudible 00:01:08], Hamilton Heights, Harlem, Morningside Heights, the Upper West Side, and Washington Heights in Manhattan. She is running unopposed.

Christina Greer: She formerly served on the New York City Council from 2006 to 2016. She was sworn in to her first term in the Assembly on January 1st 2017. Today, she joins us to discuss her first year in the New York State Assembly, and her vision for her next term. Welcome. Thank you so much for being here, assemblywoman. I know everyone in the district just calls you Inez.

Inez Dickens: Yes, that's exactly what they call me.

Christina Greer: I've been given permission. You've had a long career of public service, and now you're in Albany. New York State has a budget of 168 billion dollars. Is your district getting a fair share of the resources?

Inez Dickens: I'm always going to say no. I don't care how much I'm getting, I'm going to say no, but in the state it's a lot different for budgeting, in that you're doing it for the entire state. You're not doing it for your district, you're doing it for the

entire state, so you have to fight to get certain things for your district, you have to negotiate to get certain things for your district.

Inez Dickens: It's not like a pot of money is guaranteed like it is in the Council, where you know you're gonna get X amount of dollars for your district, and then you fight for extra. Here, in Albany, it's a lot different in that there's no guaranteed. It's just you've got to negotiate to get a piece of an initiative.

Christina Greer: You served in the New York City Council before you made your way to Albany.

Inez Dickens: Exactly.

Christina Greer: There's some overlap in the two districts, from when you were a City Council member and now. What are you hearing from your constituents? I know that you just said it's not guaranteed money, so you've got to go up there and fight and negotiate. Do you have a constituent's office? If so, where is it, so you can tell our viewers? What are the main concerns of your constituents right now in your new role as assemblywoman?

Inez Dickens: Well, my district office has always been in the Powell State Office building. It was on the seventh floor when I was in the Council, and the ninth floor now that I'm in the State Assembly.

Christina Greer: That's on the corner of 125th?

Inez Dickens: 25th and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. And we're open five days a week, seven if we have to. We're in the district, but the issues are virtually the same. The lack of affordable housing is a critical component, education, the funding for CFE.

Christina Greer: What's CFE?

Inez Dickens: The campaign, the fiscal equity for education. The gardens, the community gardens, which are city owned parcels that the community took over and started planting fresh vegetables frequently, and some use it as a sitting garden with flowers, but most of them raise some kind of vegetables. They gave them away, they didn't really sell them for the most part, they just used them, themselves, and gave them to friends and people in the community.

Inez Dickens: They had onions and greens, tomatoes and I availed myself of them, I must admit. That's a concern. The education, housing and immigration has become a very important, because of what the national, federal government is doing against immigrants. Right now it seems to be focused on Hispanic countries, but the same thing can be said if we're talking about Haiti, if we're talking about African nations.

Inez Dickens: It's just that they haven't got to that yet. Some instances they have individually and I don't think that as many are coming in from Haiti and Africa as from Hispanic countries, but I feel that at some point they're going to be focused on that just as they're doing to Hispanics now. It's a civil rights issue, to be truthful. This president has made it okay to raise the ugly snake head of racism again.

Inez Dickens: Not that it went away, you know, but people controlled it for the most part. They kept it down. I was in Howard in the late 60's, the 70's primarily, and they had killed some students on Penn State, and subsequently on Jackson State, in Mississippi. Black colleges and universities were having meetings all over the country about what to do. I forewarned them. Right now, you've got the help of everyone. Look at their hair. Their hairstyle will tell you what the thinking of America is, unfortunately.

Inez Dickens: It's come to pass, when people wearing long hair and ponytails, their thinking is more liberal. Crew cuts or cut off, they're not quite so liberal. This person had made it okay to say, "I don't like Hispanics." He's made it okay to be borders. That was all right. Look at the statement he made when he talked about, it seems like it's all right if you're European to come over.

Christina Greer: We'll get to him on another episode. I really want to shift gears and bring it back to your district. In a lot of neighborhoods in Manhattan, you can't help but see all these empty storefronts, businesses that have closed and gone out of business. How do you in your particular district, plan to attract and help keep some of these local businesses?

Inez Dickens: Christina, if you look in all the communities, we have closed up stores in neighborhoods, not like on the major 34th streets or 32nd streets, but in neighborhoods there's closed up stores. It's not just Harlem. It seems like it's Harlem to me, because that's my community. That's what I'm concerned about, but when I drive around the city, or when I walk around in different neighborhoods, I see that they've got a lot of stores all on Broadway and the Upper West Side. They've got a lot of small stores that have closed up.

Inez Dickens: The issue is that these are not small businesses that we've lost, these are micro businesses. When the government, whether we're talking about the city, the state, when they're talking about investing in small businesses, they're talking about those that earn five million or more. Our businesses are micro businesses, of which I am the chair of micro businesses in Albany.

Inez Dickens: I'm focused on that because that's what I come from. A micro business. We have not really focused on those businesses, to raise the capacity so that they can become a small business. Right now the governor has raised the capsule. 30% is to come from all of the state agencies, must take contracts from a small business. Again, a small businesses, that's MWBE. I'm talking about MBE's, minority businesses.

Inez Dickens: They are the ones that are the micro, and we don't have anybody giving any caps and helping the micro businesses. I could talk about the small businesses as well, but I'm the chair of the micro businesses. That's the concern, because that's what's in my community and that's what most of the neighborhood stores are, the micro businesses that are not earning five million dollars a year.

Christina Greer: How do you propose to assist them so that they don't go out of business?

Inez Dickens: First of all, we need to start concentrating on how do we raise so that they can be enabled to qualify. The other thing is, we need to divide the contracts so the contracts are smaller, so the contracts are not ten million dollars, but small contracts like HPD had done in the city at one point, where they had small contracts for 10 thousand dollars, that you could work with, and still survive. It takes a long time for the government to pay. You've got to do the work and then you've got to wait a long time to get your money.

Inez Dickens: In fact, I know of several businesses that have waited so long, they went out of business. We're talking about micro business again, we're not talking about small business. I propose that we need to look at how do we invest in a small micro business. Not just the small, but the really small.

Christina Greer: Right, the really small. That segues in to something you brought up earlier, which is affordable housing. The concerns that a lot of the people in your district have, what are you doing in Albany to address some of those concerns and issues?

Inez Dickens: There's a lot of issues with affordability. In the City Council you have more to do with the actual percentage of the AMI, the area median income, and with the percentage of how many units will be affordable. That's a negotiating tool that you have in the City Council.

Inez Dickens: In the state, the state does more investment in to the development, like A. Phillip Randolph at 114th Street. That was done between the city, the state, and the feds, in order to rebuild, because I don't know if whether you're familiar or you recall 114th Street, but there was a [inaudible 00:11:51], the four story [inaudible 00:11:55] on 114th Street, on both sides. What had happened, 30 years ago, 25 years ago, they stopped investing in that.

Inez Dickens: One side, the south side was totally unoccupied, and the north side was occupied but in very poor condition. People are free to change. It took me about five or seven years to work with the tenent association to get them to understand that I'm fighting to get this redone. I got the feds to come in, I got the state to come in, and the city, to put in, with West Harlem Group assistance, which is a blank not for profit, to reconstruct one side, and move the people back in.

Inez Dickens: They would not lose their apartments. They were afraid they were going to lose them.

Christina Greer: Right, because we've seen, unfortunately in the past, we've moved people out of the community and they are not welcome back in.

Inez Dickens: Before, when you built affordable housing, 10%, 20% you had to do affordable. What they did, they put it affordable someplace else. They built in Harlem, and maybe you had to move to Brooklyn, or the Bronx, or the East Side, or Washington Heights, but you did not have to put the affordable units in the community in which they were building. That is one component that has changed.

Inez Dickens: You now have to put affordable units in the community. If you're building in the community, then those apartments have to be in the building that you're building. For A. Phillip Randolph for instance, we got it done, so we reconstructed the north side and moved everybody back to the north side. They weren't in the same apartment, they were in the north side. The apartments are beautiful and they're very happy.

Inez Dickens: Now they have started construction on the north side. They moved to the south side, they're on the north side, and building those units now. They had been completely empty. Can you imagine an entire block where on one side, there are buildings but not can be occupied? They're in bad condition. This is [inaudible 00:14:25].

Christina Greer: I'm going to shift gears a bit just because you've mentioned affordable housing is an area of concern. You've also been very vocal about bail reform. What are some of the primary changes you want to see coming out of Albany surrounding bail reform?

Inez Dickens: There's a couple things that encompass bail reform. One of the things is, because New York State doesn't have expungement, and I had two town hall meetings. One in March and one about two weeks ago, dealing exclusively with the letters that they will give you. It's still difficult to get a job. If you went to jail unfairly or if you went because you did do something, you should be given a second chance.

Inez Dickens: The bail reform that we did in Albany will allow us, because it was up to the discretion of the judge. You could have been caught with marijuana and you got hit with a huge bill, that your family could not afford to do. Now, that has been changed, so that there's some parameters set on this. Not with marijuana because now we're getting ready to legalize, I believe, cannabis.

Inez Dickens: We had to reform the whole judicial system needs to be reformed, but you have to start with something. We started with bail, we started with raise the age, and the bail will allow us to get out of jail instead of serving a sentence for a year or

two years. Before we get to court and are either convicted or set free. Set free, you've served two years already, and if you have to go to jail, that doesn't count.

Christina Greer: Right. It's disproportionately targeted to-

Inez Dickens: Disproportionately, mass incarceration in communities of color.

Christina Greer: You also mentioned your support of community gardens. How have you been able to protect them as developers try and seek out these new properties in your district to build?

Inez Dickens: I don't have the same protection ability in the State that I did in the City Council, where I could work with the community gardens. What the problem is, do you build the affordable housing on the land, because we need it and you've got some people saying, take the garden, build affordable housing. The fear is, is it going to be affordable?

Christina Greer: Affordable for whom?

Inez Dickens: Exactly.

Christina Greer: It might be affordable for someone making six figures but not everyone else.

Inez Dickens: Or, shouldn't we have some greenery, even though this is an urban area, should not we have some greenery? Should not our kids be taught how do you raise different vegetables? They could be scientists that may develop a system at some point. It becomes a fight within the community. There are those who say let's keep some community gardens. There are those who say, "I want affordable housing". For the elected, it becomes, "Is it going to be affordable if it's built?"

Inez Dickens: I just happen to feel that we do need some community gardens, that they have to be maintained so that we have a place for the kids to go and play locally in their block. We raise vegetables, they're given out, they're not sold, and it's fun, and they have parties for kids. Many of the community gardens has a place other than just going to the New York City playgrounds, and it's convenient. I do support the community gardens.

Inez Dickens: I do support affordable housing, and sometimes I have had to make the choice when I was in the Council of taking it, particularly if it was small, and build a small building that I could assure was affordable for my community.

Christina Greer: I think this somewhat segues to, you talk about this idea of green spaces and really creating this multifaceted community, for children especially, which you've been really involved in for several years now. One of your other issues

that you've talked about is sanitation. It's a large issue for you. Why did they take the waste baskets from your district and what's been the result of that?

Inez Dickens: We had a meeting with sanitation. When I say we, it was community, and the community board ten. It seems to be Central Harlem. That was my district. We met with sanitation and we were told that we were abusing the trash cans on the corner. I wanted to know, "What do you mean abuse? Were we throwing them in the street? What were we doing?" The abuse is, that they said some people were putting house garbage in the trash bins, and that really that is for people walking down the street to put their trash in.

Inez Dickens: My first question is, you could be walking down the street and you could have gotten your mail and opened up your mail and thrown it in the garbage as you were passing by. It didn't necessarily mean that you were at home. You could have gone to the post office, gotten your mail out the post box, and thrown it right there. That didn't necessarily mean that it was house garbage, so how do you determine what's house garbage and what's not?

Inez Dickens: That's the first thing. The second thing is, particularly in the summer, we eat in the street. We eat hot dogs, we eat anything, chicken, we eat in the street, potato chips, and you throw that in the trash can. We're encouraging people. We say, "Use the trash can. You must use the trash can. Throw it in the trash can. Don't throw it in the street." Then, they take the cans away because they said they go through the garbage and the garbage has house garbage.

Inez Dickens: They used to go through it and give a ticket to the person whose name was on there, which could be unfair because it could be someone walking down the street. In any case, they've now said, because we're putting house garbage in the trash, they didn't say which trash cans. Was it a certain block that was abusing? They took away all the trash cans. You go down Adam Creek now, you go down Frederick Douglass Boulevard, you go down Malcolm X Boulevard, they're all gone.

Inez Dickens: What's happening, people are putting the garbage where they used to be. Now it's loose garbage that they're putting at those corners, and then sanitation comes through and gives a ticket to the building owner or to the store owner, the micro store owner, of \$150 that they have to go down and fight, that they're probably going to lose.

Christina Greer: You've given us a lot to think about. Before I go, what are some of the bills that you're most proud of, initiating this first term in Albany, and what's next for you after September 13th and moving forward?

Inez Dickens: The very last bill I did, really on the last day, I got through a bill for persons that are handicapped. I remember, 504, which is a political club whose members have various physical handicaps. I got through a bill, and had to find out where the funding could come from, that all public meetings, of course state, I couldn't

direct city, public meetings dealing with the state had to have a hearing apparatus. I found one that wasn't so costly, so that all people would be able to participate.

Inez Dickens: I put a 504 member on to community board 10 as a member. Her disability happened to be hearing and she was unable to participate in the meeting, even though she was a member. They didn't have any way to be able to allow to hear the discussions going on. I thought about that and it was a freight. It seems that nobody wanted to do it.

Inez Dickens: The republicans didn't want to do it. I asked the assembly member then, Morelli, would he allow me to talk to the republicans, myself, for me to do it. Let me talk to them. He said sure, and I went over there to talk to them. When it came to the floor, every republican except one voted for it. That republican came to me afterwards and said, had she truly understood that I had negotiated and found because the state says that they help pay for the cost of things, such as that, in that, they get contracts and buy it in bulk so it reduces the cost. She said that had she really understood that, she would have voted for it.

Christina Greer: Before I let you go, what's next then? That's a great accomplishment.

Inez Dickens: I'm going to start concentrating on the micro businesses. I intend to try to start having meetings in other cities. Not just in New York, but throughout the state. Like I said, we deal with the whole scene, and see what we can do about micro business, because whether we're talking about Syracuse or Buffalo, all have MBE's.

Inez Dickens: They are all adversely affected by the fact that there has been no concerted legislation that enhances or allows them to grow and get contracts. Their capacity is not growing.

Christina Greer: Thank you so much for taking some time.

Inez Dickens: Thank you for having me. I had such a good time.

Christina Greer: We could literally talk about everything, starting from Trump, all the way down.

Inez Dickens: We could.

Christina Greer: I just want to thank you and I know our viewers really appreciate you and your passion.

Inez Dickens: Thank you so much, and thank you for the public service that you personally do. The issues that you have raised throughout the years by yourself, and as a member of media, and the fact that you have served as a beacon of truth.

Christina Greer: Thank you. I appreciate it. Thank you. Come back soon, please.

Inez Dickens: Thank you.

Christina Greer: Thank you for watching. Please remember to vote. A closed primary election will be held on Thursday, September 13th. The general election will be held on Tuesday, November 6th. For more information on voting, locating your poll site, and all the candidates, you can visit our website, racetorepresent.com or the League of Women voters website LWVNY.org. Thank you for watching Race to Represent on Manhattan Neighborhood Network. Bye bye.