

## **A Vision of One America for All**

By Joseph Hanania. Special to the Los Angeles Times

Elizabeth Birch wants to sell America on a new vision of itself: a nation that has searched its soul and granted an oppressed minority equal protection under the law, reaping both moral and economic benefits.

This is the vision that Birch, new executive director of the country's foremost gay lobbying group will set forth at a fund-raising dinner Saturday at the Hollywood Palladium. Mayor Richard Riordan and Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles) are the scheduled speakers.

But like leaders of other civil rights movements, Birch knows that it is one thing to have a dream and quite another to make it a reality. And it's here, perhaps, that Birch's vision most sharply departs from her predecessors.

To attain equal rights, she said, the gay community must quit primarily looking to mainstream Americans to do the right thing. Instead, it must learn to "teach our own and train our own.... There will be no President who arrives on the scene to save us by the stroke of a pen. We must look to do it for ourselves."

Above all, Birch believes that the gay community must re-examine its political ideology, get out the vote and pioneer tactics. And if all this sounds more like a strategy laid out by a top Fortune 500 executive than an impassioned sound bite from a civil rights activist is.

Before assuming leadership of the Human Rights Campaign Fund two weeks ago, Birch, 38, had been director of litigation and human resources at Apple Computer—one of the highest-ranked openly gay corporate officers in the country.

The daughter of a Canadian air force officer, Birch spent her last year of high school traveling around Europe in a travel-study program. Following the University of Hawaii, she graduated from Santa Clara University School of Law in 1985 to join the San Francisco firm of McCutchen, Doyle, Brown & Enersen.

Recalls Jim Kleinberg, a partner and Birch's former boss, "She had a particular gift to get lawyers on the other side to give her accommodations—about which they would think afterward, 'Why did I do that?' She established this level of trust which was incredible."

Four years later, Birch moved to Apple, where she helped keep legal costs level even as the computer company doubled in size to become an \$8-billion firm.

One way she held down costs was to step away from traditional legal confrontations, sometimes making available company records that others might have fought over. According to the American Lawyer magazine, this "upfrontness" often disarmed her opponents—in one case resolving in a single day a conflict that might otherwise have dragged on for years.

Not surprisingly, her superiors at Apple took notice-including then-Chief Executive Officer John Sculley.

Although Sculley declined to be interviewed for this article, Torie Osborne, at the time head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, recalled attending a meeting between Sculley and Birch.

Birch "had already come out to him as a lesbian, which had moved him personally" and helped push Apple to be a pioneer in establishing domestic-partner benefits. Osborne said. On this occasion, however, Birch knew that Sculley would soon be meeting with recently elected President Clinton, and she wanted Sculley to press the President to meet with gay activists.

Largely as a result of Birch's efforts, such a meeting was arranged.

Soon after, Apple wanted to establish a facility in Williamson County, Tex., only to have the county commissioners withhold tax incentives unless the corporation changed its domestic-partnership policy.

The dispute made national headlines, and Birch insists that the final resolution was due more to the stance of Apple's upper management than to anything she did. Nevertheless, Birch conceded that she helped to bring "enormous pressure to bear on local officials. Local citizens were alerted to what their elected officials were doing and how much it would cost them."

As a result, in December 1993, the commissioners reversed themselves, granting Apple incentives very close to the ones they had originally denied.

Last year, Birch applied for the position of executive director for the \$7-million-a-year, 80,000 member Human Rights Campaign Fund. She took office Jan. 6 - two days after the Republican-led 104th Congress came into power.

Not all that surprisingly, her perspective on gay rights is largely pragmatic.

"Gays and lesbians are as politically sophisticated as the public at large," she said in a phone interview from her Washington home. "But we need to go beyond that. We need to take the talent already there and build it into a cohesive political infrastructure. "

When the gays in the military issue came up, we had both the funding and the lobbying talent already in place. But they were not nearly enough. What we need is a field operation that will influence opinion at the top."

Currently, she said, the gay political movement consists of largely local efforts, lacking in national coordination. Birch wants to establish "a grass-roots organization consisting of locally based affiliates and not just happenstance."

"We need to do our own work in the field, building brick by brick, district by district," she said. "We need to put into place a political machine that will not have

us guessing about the results, but which will be built on our expertise. We will be the decision-makers."

To do this, Birch said, gays also must "think strategically, and move into both political parties. We need to go where the results are to occur."

Nor does she buy the conventional analysis that the Republican sweep was a popular repudiation of gays in the military.

"It would be one thing if the ban had actually been listed on the ballot. It wasn't. Instead, the issue was dragged out. Clinton waffled all over the place, and the country was frustrated with his paralysis."

Where the issues were clear-cut, such as initiatives in Oregon and Idaho seeking to restrict gay rights, those initiatives were voted down.

The gay movement, Birch said, is poised to benefit from two major trends.

First is the explosion in the number of closeted gays who have come out. Through 1988, the average coming-out age was 26 years old for men and 28 for women, she said. Since then, the average age has dropped to 16 for men and 18 for women, giving the gay movement a dramatically larger base and "three generations to build on."

The second trend is corporate America's response to the gay movement. A year ago, just 250 of the Fortune 1,000 companies had non-discrimination policies; that number has since doubled.

Corporate leaders have discovered that such policies help the bottom line, she said. They have realized that non-discrimination policies are "a great recruiting tool which doesn't artificially narrow the pool from which they're recruiting. It also generates loyalty and commitment to the company. And the cost of doing this is minimal."

Birch believes that one of the gay movement's biggest liabilities has been its allowing the radical right to frame the issues for them. Thus, she said, many Americans are receptive to the right's argument that gay rights legislation aims to provide special treatment, not merely equality. The public remains largely unaware that civil rights legislation, especially at the federal level, largely excludes gays. When asked, however, whether gays should be discriminated against because of their orientation, seven of every 10 Americans say "no."

Above all, she said, gays need to re-examine their political priorities. Nationally, she said, gays spent \$173 million for the March on Washington—and only \$30 million for all their political organizations.

"Events such as the march are essential to build up our body and soul," she said. But if the gay community "invested the same amount in its national political organizations as we did in blue jeans per year, we'd be way ahead of the game.... If I

were running [the Human Rights Campaign Fund] like I would a software company, I would say that we don't yet have enough capital investment to organize four states, let alone 50."

So, can Birch sell her vision to both the gay community and to America?

Melinda Paras, executive director for National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, told of a dinner she had with Birch before Birch got her job. If she didn't get the job, "Elizabeth joked about opening a Ben & Jerry's in Santa Cruz."

"She knows she's just playing a role right now, that this (job) is not the be-all and end-all in her life," Paras said. "And that independence, that lack of fear, gives the vision and the strength to do what she does very, very well. "I wouldn't bet against her."