

A Conciliatory Negotiator Who Gets What She Wants

By Denise Cowie. Philadelphia Inquirer Staff Writer.

For the gay community today, says Elizabeth Birch, there exists what she calls “a grand paradox.”

On the one hand, Pat Buchanan is lobbing emotional grenades to ignite a hateful spirit,” says the leader of the Human Rights Campaign, “but on the other hand most Americans have gone through an enormous education process” because of the explosion in recent years in the numbers of gays who have come out. Many thousands of families have had to grapple with the reality of their sons’ and daughters’ homosexuality. “It has been painful and difficult, but mostly parents come out the other end and embrace their child.”

As a result of that education process, homophobia has gone down in the last three years, she said, quoting a Times Mirror poll. But legislation doesn’t necessarily reflect that.

It’s not fair that people can be fired in most states just for being gay or lesbian. We are heading toward the 21st century.... I think there is enough good will that Congress can finally catch up and pass some basic protections.”

Citing the yet-to-be-passed Employee Nondiscrimination Act, which would ensure that people could not be fired solely for being gay, lesbian or bisexual, Birch added that Congress is way behind the rest of the country on such civil rights: “About half of the Fortune 1,000 companies have non-discrimination policies.”

Last week, Congress and Birch were in tune on one issue: Lawmakers agreed to repeal a law requiring the military to discharge service members with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Birch, whose organization had lobbied hard against the law, was jubilant. But the fight may not be over.

A panel chaired by ultra-conservative Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R. Calif.) quickly tacked a similar discharge measure onto next year’s defense budget, and added a bid to ban gays from the military.

Such battles are among the reasons that politics and the future of the gay civil rights movement are central to PrideFest, Philadelphia’s first National Gay and Lesbian Leaders Symposium on Saturday.

The seminar will be taped at the Old City studios of cosponsor WHYF-FM, and will be broadcast later on National Public Radio.

Birch will be in town to take part, along with Rep. Barney Frank (D., Mass.); Melinda Paras, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force; and Robert Kabel, national chairman of the Log Cabin Republican Clubs.

"Our goal is to have PrideFest as the major national annual symposium on the discussion of gay and lesbian issues," said Malcolm Lazin, founder of the three-day political, educational, cultural and social festival that starts tomorrow. About 25,000 people are expected to take part in dozens of events, from political strategy and financial planning to concerts and a swim meet.

Elizabeth Birch, with her background as chief litigator for Apple Computers Inc. has a reputation as a negotiator with a conciliatory style who nevertheless seems to get what she wants.

But nobody could accuse her of shrinking from an in-your-face challenge.

In January of last year, a wave of conservative newcomers swept into Washington and gave Republicans control of Congress for the first time in decades.

Within days, Birch took the helm of an organization that could expect to find few friends among those newcomers. As executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, she became leader of largest gay and lesbian rights group in the country.

Birch took the HRC on the offensive, using skills she'd honed during her years as one of the highest ranked openly gay corporate officers in the country.

She and her staff chalked up speaking tours, intensive lobbying, and grassroots get-out-the-vote campaigns. They got House Speaker Newt Gingrich's lesbian half-sister, Candace, to speak out for AIDS funding and gay rights. Nurtured gay and lesbian employee groups in the workplace. Earmarked \$1 million in nonpartisan PAC money. Come August, they'll launch a political convention in Chicago. For the first time, the organization will stage OutVote '96, to rally support and train members to work to influence national, state and local political campaigns this fall.

Birch points out that HRC's membership has doubled in a year – up from 80,000 to 150,000 and climbing – and that this year's budget is \$10 million, compared to last year's \$6 million.

"In November of '94, which represented the most profound conservative sweep in 40 years, the Republicans were handed an opportunity, and in many ways I think they blew it," she said. "I think the American people are fearful ... their perception is that the Republicans have become too extreme, and this has given the Democrats the opportunity to rise to the occasion."

HRC, which is nonpartisan, has endorsed President Clinton in the presidential election, believing that after a disappointing start, he has done more for gays than any leader in history.

Birch didn't earn her reputation as a bridge-builder for nothing, however.

"I think all new solutions for this country are going to have to take the best of the left *and* the right," she said.

In its efforts to reach out to both political parties, the HRC hasn't always pleased other gay activists. A \$5,000 contribution to the National Republican Campaign Committee, intended to cultivate support among moderate Republicans, angered those who said it would help antigay extremists.

Other nontraditional approaches have been better received.

When the Christian Coalition held a major conference last year in Washington, Birch asked its executive director, Ralph Reed, if she could address the group. Turned down, she set up next door at the Washington Hilton, and issued a lengthy and explanatory open letter to members of the Christian Coalition.

A surprising number of those members stopped by or read the letter, she said. "We've gotten lots of letters from parents of gay children saying 'thank you.'"

Just a few weeks ago, she spoke at the University of Notre Dame in support of gay students and faculty. "A lot of faculty had to sign on to get me on campus, but once I was there I think the leaders were disarmed," she said.

"If people can't hear you, there's no use in speaking," she adds. "If we can't find ways to talk to Middle America and traditional institutions, there's no point in taking the podium. Because that's where change occurs – at the Rotary Club and the Jaycees and the Junior League. That's where change occurs."

Born in the United States 39 years ago, Birch grew up in Canada as one of five children of a Canadian Air Force officer and an Irish war bride.

"By the time I was 12 I could clearly articulate that I was a lesbian," she said. She was always a leader, president of her high school, organizing rock concerts for Bangladesh.

One day a North American group of Up With People arrived in town to perform, and Birch was convinced some of them were gay. "So I left town with them, and finished my final (school) year in Europe," enrolled in a program that took her to many countries and 60 different host families. "And in this circuitous way I escaped a teenagehood that would have crushed my spirit."

After a year back at the University of Toronto, she took off again – this time to Hawaii with her girlfriend. "I have to tell you I drove my parents crazy, because I was always so happy I was a lesbian and I was always taking off."

She put herself through the University of Hawaii as an oceanographer, spending months at a time on research ships with crews that were mostly male. Back on the mainland, she studied at Santa Clara (Calif.) Law School, joined a 125-year-old law firm after graduation and eventually found her way to Apple.

"And in every single setting I was an out lesbian," she said. "I thought it was a gift from God."