



Birch, Elizabeth (b. 1956)

by Linda Rapp

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Elizabeth Birch served with distinction as the executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, the largest glbtq political organization in the United States. She has been a visible and effective spokesperson on a wide array of issues of concern to the glbtq community.

The daughter of a Canadian Air Force officer and his Irish war bride, Birch grew up on military bases throughout Canada. She was born, however, at the U. S. Wright-Patterson Base in Dayton, Ohio, where her father was studying aeronautical engineering in 1956.

Birch knew by the age of twelve that she was a lesbian. When she was seventeen she attended a performance by the song-and-dance troupe Up With People and realized that some of the members were gay. Feeling a need to connect with other people like herself, she joined the group and completed her senior year of high school while performing and traveling through ten countries in Europe and North Africa.

Upon returning to Canada, Birch came out to her parents, who were not immediately receptive to the news. Birch's mother, however, eventually came to accept the fact that both Elizabeth and her younger sister Jo-Ann Birch are lesbians.

After studying for a year at the University of Toronto, Birch went with a girlfriend to the University of Hawaii, where she earned a degree in oceanography and political science in 1980. She financed her education by working as an oceanographer on research ships.

She next enrolled at the Santa Clara (California) School of Law, from which she graduated with honors. While in law school she clerked for state Supreme Court Justice Stanley Mosk.

Upon graduation Birch spent four years as a commercial litigator at a prestigious San Francisco law firm before becoming the chief litigator for the Apple Computer company in 1989. At Apple she championed a successful effort to secure domestic-partner benefits for gay and lesbian employees.

Birch became the executive director of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) in January 1995. It was a challenging time for the HRC and Birch since conservative Republicans, led by Georgia congressman Newt Gingrich, had recently taken control of the United States Congress and were attempting to advance the agenda of the radical right.

Birch used skills that she had developed in the corporate world to make the HRC more effective. She studied and emulated the strategies of the most successful lobbying groups, including the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the Christian Coalition, to make the HRC the strongest possible advocate for glbtq rights.

Aware of the impact of the widely recognized Apple logo, she changed the symbol of the HRC from a torch to a yellow equal sign on a blue background.

Birch made a splash in the media when she invited Candace Gingrich, the lesbian half-sister of House Speaker Gingrich, to join the team at the HRC. Candace Gingrich quickly became an effective spokesperson, addressing audiences around the country and urging glbtq Americans to make their voices heard in the political process.

Birch and the HRC again made news when President Bill Clinton accepted their invitation to address a fund-raising dinner in 1997, becoming the first president to speak publicly before a glbtq rights group. Recalling President Harry Truman's remarks at an NAACP meeting in 1947, Clinton declared, "all Americans still means all Americans." Director Andrea Sheldon of the homophobic Traditional Values Coalition decried Clinton's appearance as "an American president kissing up to the wealthiest extremists of the amoral left."

Birch's leadership occasionally caused controversy within the glbtq community. Some considered her too "mainstream." In addition, one HRC board member (and many grassroots activists) resigned in protest when the organization voted to endorse the 1998 re-election bid of Alfonse D'Amato of New York, a conservative Republican senator who had at best a spotty record on gay rights issues. The endorsement was especially resented by members of New York's glbtq community because D'Amato was opposed by Democrat Charles Schumer, whose record was unquestionably better than the incumbent's. Later, there was dissension over the organization of the 2000 Millennium March on Washington, of which the HRC was a sponsor.

Overall, Birch earned praise for her advocacy on such crucial subjects of concern as workplace discrimination, domestic partner issues, rights for glbtq families, gays in the military, AIDS research, and hate crimes. She was also hailed for her savvy use of the media to increase the visibility of glbtq people.

Birch has been very visible herself, appearing frequently on television news and political programs such as *Nightline*, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, and *Crossfire*. In 1996 she testified against the Defense of Marriage Act before the House Judiciary Subcommittee. In 2000 she addressed the Democratic National Convention.

Under Birch's direction the HRC Foundation launched two online educational programs, HRC WorkNet and HRC FamilyNet.

During Birch's tenure the size and budget of the HRC grew dramatically. Membership rose from 100,000 to 500,000, and the annual operating budget increased from six million to twenty-two million dollars. In addition, the HRC moved into a stylish new headquarters building in Washington, D. C. in 2003. Birch was also responsible for creating the HRC's two Action Center and Store retail outlets, one in Washington and the other in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

For her lifetime of work Birch was recognized with an award from the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, one of the most prestigious civil rights prizes in the country.

Birch stepped down from the directorship of the HRC in January 2004 at the same time that her then partner, Hilary Rosen, left her job as chief executive of the Recording Industry Association of America. Both cited the wish to spend more time with their children, twin brother and sister, whom they adopted in 1999.

The twins, born prematurely, both faced serious health crises early on but have thrived under their mothers' care. Birch and Rosen broke up in 2007, but continue to share the responsibilities of parenting.

In early 2004 Birch joined the campaign of presidential candidate Howard Dean as a senior advisor. Four years later, she served as a member of the LGBT Americans for Hillary Steering Committee to support the candidacy of Senator Hillary Clinton when she was seeking the presidency in 2008.

Birch has been praised for the strength of her commitment and for her skill as a negotiator. Her warm

personality and conciliatory rather than combative style of conflict resolution have contributed to her success. Longtime activist Frank Kameny has pointed out that her "pragmatic approach" has been effective in bringing about positive change in the political arena.

In 2005 Birch founded Birch & Company Consulting and serves as its president and CEO. The firm, based in Washington, D.C., provides management and marketing advice to companies and organizations.

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