

Tolerating Brendan Eich

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It's often said that in a tolerance-obsessed culture, everything is tolerated—except intolerance. Actually, this gets said a lot more often than perhaps it should, because being intolerant is not the same sort of thing as being black or female or gay or Muslim. Tolerating *people* is more fundamental than tolerating their ideas.

Yet tolerating ideas matters, too. And there are times when even a liberal like me is startled by the degree of intolerance in our current climate of hair-trigger activism.

When Brendan Eich was named head of Mozilla—creator of Firefox and other software—a week and a half ago, controversy followed. Eich, an opponent of same-sex marriage, gave money to the Prop. 8 campaign in California, as well as to earlier political campaigns by conservative hardliners Pat Buchanan and Ron Paul. Lots of Mozilla staffers, supporters, and software users disagree strenuously with Eich on LGBTQ rights (as do I). Soon, some of them started [calling for him to step down](#).

Eich, an accomplished programmer, has been with Mozilla from the start. And some LGBTQ Mozilla staffers have defended his track record there. [This is from a post](#) by Christie Koehler, a Mozilla employee who's married to a woman:

I'm personally disappointed about Brendan's donation [to Prop. 8]. However, aside from how it affected me emotionally, I have nothing to indicate that it's materially hurt my work within the Mozilla community or as a Mozilla employee. Mozilla offers the best benefits I have ever had and goes out of its way to offer benefits to its employees in same-sex marriages or domestic partnerships on par with those in heterosexual marriages. Last year we finally got trans-inclusive healthcare. We didn't have an explicit code of conduct when I started, but adopted the [guidelines for participation](#) within my first year. Progress might be slow, but it's being made. And I don't see Brendan standing in the way of that.

[In an online statement](#), Eich confirmed that he has no intention of reversing such trends at Mozilla. But soon the Buchanan and Paul donations [came up as well](#), and by yesterday it was all apparently too much to weather. [Eich stepped down](#).

He wasn't accused of discrimination in the workplace, or even of making a lot of unpleasant noise about his views in the public square. Eich, in his capacity as a private citizen, gave money to campaigns unrelated to Mozilla's work but opposed by many of its people. Like [the World Vision fiasco last week](#), the reversal at Mozilla was brought about by people unwronged by the original decision, by a disagreement unrelated to the actual work the place does.

I find Eich's attitude about the separation between his political views and his professional duties pretty refreshing. It's a marked contrast to, say, [a business owner's belief that his own opposition to certain contraceptives gives him the right to refuse to include them in employee insurance coverage](#). It would have been very interesting to follow his work as a conservative at the head of such a progressive company. Now we'll never know.

It looks like same-sex marriage is here to stay. That's a wonderful, life-affirming development in our culture. But people who are opposed to same-sex marriage are here to stay too, and they may even keep giving to political campaigns that represent their views. It's not helpful to shout them down when they're doing something entirely unrelated.