

viewpoint WAYNE BESEN



The spectacle of delegates tripping over one another to be most anti-gay is beyond pandering; it's persecution.

Virginia isn't for gay lovers

IN THEIR GRATUITOUS ZEAL TO undermine same-sex families, Virginia lawmakers are showing about as much wisdom as Prince Harry in a costume shop.

In the opening week of Virginia's General Assembly, four separate constitutional bans on the freedom to marry were introduced. This unyielding drive to marginalize and stigmatize gay families may gravely damage the reputation of Virginia and cause a gradual brain drain that will hurt business interests.

Virginia is not alone in its rush to attack same-sex couples. On Election Day, 11 states passed constitutional amendments banning marriage for same-sex families. But even in this conservative

environment, Virginia stands out for not just buoying discriminatory marriage laws, but bullying its gay citizens.

The state has been nothing short of aggressively anti-gay, making life increasingly intolerable for gay Virginians:

- In 1997, the Virginia Assembly passed a law forbidding marriage between gay people and voiding marriages of gay couples performed in other jurisdictions.

- In 2004, Del. Robert Marshall sponsored the so-called Marriage Affirmation Act, a draconian law that not only bans civil unions, but may also strip gay people of their basic right to enter into private contracts, such as wills and medical directives with their life partners.

- Virginia is the only state that forbids private companies from adding any household member, aside from a spouse and dependent children, to a group health plan.

- Even though the U.S. Supreme Court's *Lawrence vs. Texas* ruling overturned sodomy laws, Virginia has defiantly kept its "crimes against nature" law on the books in an effort to intimidate and harass its gay citizens.

OBVIOUSLY, THERE WAS ALREADY A glut of anti-gay legislation in Virginia. The spectacle of grandstanding delegates tripping over one another to add a superfluous constitutional amendment is beyond political pandering; it's persecution.

This heavy-handed overkill sends the message that gay people are not wanted — or even tolerated — in Virginia. As a result, many gay people are choosing to bring their talents and spend their tax dollars elsewhere.

After the Marriage Affirmation Act was passed, Virginia Tech biology professor Lynn Adler left the school to work at the University of Massachusetts. In her resignation, Adler said she was "sad and sorry" to be going, but the laws of Virginia made it too difficult to live in the state.

Another example is of Fredericksburg-area couple Barbara and Tibby: Barbara, a therapist, and Tibby, a retired schoolteacher, have been together for 40-years and lived in Virginia for more than three decades.

According to the *Free Lance Star*, in 2001, Barbara had a brain aneurysm. While she is still able to function, her

long-term future is uncertain.

Thanks to Delegate Marshall's Marriage Affirmation Act, the couple can't be sure that the legal contracts they once drew up will sufficiently protect Tibby if Barbara passes away. Although they would much rather stay in Virginia, they are moving to Maryland.

"The whole thing has been a nightmare," Barbara, told the *Star*. "The law has already accomplished what it set out to do: to squash us and to hurt us."

MEANWHILE, ON THE OTHER END OF I-95, Massachusetts anti-gay activist Laurie A. Letourneau is loading up her truck to move to Virginia. She simply could no longer live in a state that allowed gay people the freedom to marry.

"This place is a cesspool. It's pathetic," she told the *Worcester Telegram*, discussing her home state, which has the third lowest divorce-rate in the nation. "We have an ineffective church and a bunch of wimps in the legislature."

Well, she won't have to worry about girly-men in the Virginia Legislature. Richmond is chockfull of moral macho men like Delegate Marshall who chase senior citizens with aneurysms to Maryland in the name of family values.

@ Wayne Besen is author of "Anything But Straight: Unmasking the Scandals & Lies Behind the 'Ex-Gay' Myth" (Haworth Press); he can be reached at wbesen@aol.com.