



**Support**

**Same-S**

**Marriage**



As the row over Section 28 continues to blaze in Scotland, an American province is set to ignite a liberal beacon to the world. **Eamonn O'Neill** reports from Vermont, where gay marriages may soon have the full blessing of the law

Photograph: **Tina Fineberg/AP**

# State of the union



**“I** THINK that we're in a unique discussion in this State, which has never been had nationally and may never have been had globally.”

For a man who has come to embody one of the most contentious debates in US legal history, grey-haired Stan Baker, a 53-year-old psychotherapist from South Burlington, Vermont, USA, is remarkably serene. He is one of the group of six homosexuals at the centre of the decision by Vermont's Supreme Court on December 20, 1999 to change its laws to ensure “domestic partnerships” or same-sex “marriages”, are legally recognised. If the law is passed toward the end of this month, lesbians and gay men will enjoy the same benefits and protection that heterosexual married couples do.

All Baker wants is to marry his boyfriend. When his application to do so was declined, he decided to sue the state. It was this simple act that led to the landmark decision to change the law. While all around him an unholy row is building, Baker believes the situation is straightforward and uncontentious: “The [Vermont] Supreme Court is saying people of the same gender need to have the same rights, privileges and responsibilities as opposite gender

couples. And then they said to the legislature, ‘You figure out which way: either domestic partnership with full rights, privileges and responsibilities, or marriage.’”

This historic case is now referred to as Baker-v-Vermont. His co-plaintiffs include two lesbian couples: Nina Beck and Stacy Jolles, and Lois Farnham and Holly Puterbaugh. All live in and around the Burlington, Vermont area.

“If you think about the history of homosexuality,” says Baker sitting in his cosy living-room on a bone-numbingly cold February day, “it was not long ago that it was seen as an illness. And because it was seen as an illness, people who were homosexual or lesbian were not seen as being capable of having families, being parents or staying in relationships. [But] if we're allowed to get married – and we're fighting for that civil right – then we're no longer seen as ill, or second class or somehow incapable of human relationships.”

Baker is framed by an impressive portrait of his grandfather which hangs on the wall behind him, painted during his 12-year tenure as president of the University of Massachusetts. Next to the teapot on the table in front of him stands a small ▶

A rally in support of same-sex marriage in New York last month