
Interview: Benjamin Lambert III

Virginia's prison reform means genocide

Senator Lambert is a member of the Senate Finance Committee and of the Black Caucus of the Virginia General Assembly. He was active in opposing the passage of Proposal X. Marianna Wertz interviewed him from Richmond on Oct. 6.

EIR: What is your view of what will happen as a result of the passage of Proposal X, and what should citizens of Virginia do about it?

Lambert: We passed Proposal X, but the funding is still up in the air. I don't think that the General Assembly will provide enough funds to adequately fund Proposal X. If they do, they're going to have to cut funds from social services, education, and many other projects, and particularly higher education. It's certainly a shame that we're going to have 60-80,000 of these students graduating from high school and we're going to be spending more money on sending people to jails and penitentiaries than we are going to be spending money on sending them to college. I think this is a wrong move.

In particular, I think that the General Assembly probably will not fully fund the package. It will probably also create a very dangerous situation within the prison system itself, because they're going to be double-bunking at 80%.

EIR: We already have very dangerous overcrowding.

Lambert: Yes, they have 7,000 overcrowded now (out of a population of 20,000) and with the new plans, if you don't put in an adequate program and adequate treatment and medical facilities, it's going to be a chaotic situation. So, I think whether the General Assembly funds it or not, we're going to have a lot of problems in the future.

EIR: During the hearings, the Black Caucus and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People denounced Proposal X as ethnic cleansing. Do you think that that's what's going on?

Lambert: Yes, that's what it seems like. Genocide, too.

EIR: Part of the proposal is to build private prisons. The history of private prisons in Virginia and elsewhere, after the Civil War, was genocidal, with a 10% death rate in the prisons.

Lambert: I don't expect it to be any different.

EIR: Do you think there will be a fight in January that may be able to put a stop to some of this?

Lambert: Yes. I think that the members of both the Finance Committee and the Appropriations Committee should get calls from the electorate alerting them to the dangers of funding Proposal X.

EIR: Is there anything more you'd like to say on that?

Lambert: We appreciate your efforts in getting the word out, because this is what's going to have to happen. All groups are going to have to notify the public on what's going on. I don't think people understand the funding mechanism of it. We need to really educate the public as to what's going on.

EIR: On the other side of this, what do you think needs to be done to prevent particularly young people from committing crime?

Lambert: First of all, the juvenile crime package did not receive any funding at all. To put money all on the adult side and not do anything with the juvenile side of crime really doesn't make good sense. You always go to the root of the problem. The root would be that you want to get the kids off to a good start, so that they won't be adult criminals. I think that's where you start, and you start with education, with helping people who are impoverished. That's the main cause of it.

EIR: What about the drugs?

Lambert: The drugs are the root of all evil. It's not the money; the drugs are the root of all evil in this case. If you were to stop the drugs from coming into the country, by the plane loads—and the young people who are selling the drugs, they aren't bringing it in. It's got to be really highly organized people who bring the drugs into America. The people who are getting caught and getting hurt by it are not the real big winners. We're going to have to stop it at the borders.

EIR: As you know, we have been publicizing the case of Iran-Contra drug running, which involved Republican Senate candidate Oliver North. If this is the case, as we've documented it to be, and you have drug running going on and condoned at the top levels of the U.S. government, what are we going to do about it?

Lambert: That would be a tremendous decay at the top, if this is true. To put someone in the Senate who is a known drug-runner is an awful mistake, and it's not American-like at all.

EIR: Do you think in January that a different approach to stopping crime will be part of the fight?

Lambert: I hope so. There are some people who are working on some alternative plans. I hope that we can present some that make an awful lot more sense than ones we're presenting now.