

PE1396/O

Further to my earlier submission and having had the opportunity to read the latest response from the Department of Rural Affairs I would like to add the following points concerning the petition.

The respondent from the Animal Welfare Division, having appeared to concede the point that the breeding of dogs is not rocket science, now seems intent on shifting responsibility for this subject onto the shoulders of local government. There has been no attempt to address the fact that existing legislation is ineffective and would make little difference to the situation regardless of who is responsible for its implementation. That said, it is a matter of some puzzlement to our organisation that a department concerned with rural affairs which has logical and legitimate responsibility for cattle, sheep, horses and pigs, is being consulted on this matter in the first place. If the department has been given such responsibility it surely indicates a failure to realise that the ownership, breeding and well-being of dogs is largely an urban problem and should, perhaps, be remitted to a more appropriate area, e.g. local government.

In short, dogs are not being over bred and neglected on farms. This is happening in our towns and cities, is a matter of social and moral responsibility and should be treated as such.

In response to the first examination of the petition I commended the insight shown by members of the committee in recognising that the problems of over breeding, ill treatment and neglect were not confined to Staffordshire Bull Terriers but had affected other breeds in the past and was likely to involve still others in the future. Aside from drawing the Committee's attention to the fact that the SSPCA, one of the organisations represented at the meeting which Staffordshire Rescue Scotland hosted on 15 November 2011, is already experiencing an increase in numbers of American Bulldogs being turned over to them, I would like to introduce a new and frankly worrying development. The Daily Record, on Tuesday January 3 2012, carried a front-page story concerning the production of a litter of pups resulting from the mating of a Presa Canario and a Rottweiler.

The Record, as is its wont, used highly emotive language in describing these dogs, a practice of the tabloid press which I find utterly reprehensible, as well as photography at its horror story best. I fear that this tactic, far from discouraging such crosses, is just free advertising for the producers of such cross-breeds.

Historically, the Labrador Retriever and Poodle have been crossed in order to create a guide dog with a reduced tendency to shed hair. The fact that the end result of the cross is not predictable and may or may not shed hair does not detract from the honourable intentions of the breeders. The offspring of this cross are pretty well

guaranteed to retain the good-natured obedience capabilities of both parents. The same cannot be said of a cross such as the one publicised by the Record.

Despite the protestations of the producers of this “Presweiler” that they have done this to eliminate hereditary defects in both breeds and have created a child-friendly animal, they are talking nonsense born of a total ignorance of the genetics of the domestic dog. They have probably increased the liability of the occurrence of hereditary defects and cannot possibly predict the suitability of this animal as a domestic pet. There can be only one of two reasons for this cross, it is either the next escalation in the status breed fashion stakes or it is a weapon! It could even be both! What this does do is highlight the stupidity and irresponsibility of the humans involved. The dogs did not seek out each other, the owner of the Rottweiler bitch having to travel south of the border to find a Presa Canario owner who was sufficiently unscrupulous enough to become involved in this mating. Nobody can predict the behavioural characteristics these dogs might exhibit but I can predict that there will be a queue of antisocial individuals waiting to buy one, then attempt to reproduce it.

Northern Ireland has legislated for compulsory microchipping. There is no reason that the Scottish Parliament cannot do likewise and go further in improving the welfare of our animals and the safety of our streets by introducing measures to control properly and effectively the breeding of all dogs, particularly by people who inhabit areas where there is already social deprivation and are apparently incapable of predicting the temperament of the animals they produce, affording adequate veterinary care and nourishment or controlling the behaviour of their dogs. Imagine a dog like this getting loose in a block of flats. Sorry, it has already happened.

It is a popular saying among our members, “I am a single parent struggling to make ends meet, my children are socially deprived and I live on the sixth floor of a multi-storey block. What can I do to make things worse? I know, I will get a Staffie.” The last two sentences can be replaced with, “What can I do to make myself look like a hard-man and cause trouble? I know, I will get a Presweiler, or some similar bizarre cross.”

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Dog Licensing

In the past dog licensing in this country did nothing to control or regulate the breeding of dogs or the dog population. It was not, apparently, aimed at this but was merely a means whereby local authorities collected money and gave nothing in return. There was no qualification required, no background inquiry and no accurate record keeping. If you wanted a license, you went to the post office and bought one. Dog licensing was discontinued because it was ignored to the extent that it cost more to collect than it brought in.

Similarly, there was a time when, if you wanted to have a shotgun, you went to the post office, handed over the cash, and were entitled to purchase and use a firearm. Unregulated breeding of dogs today has led to the indiscriminate and exponential increase in the numbers of Staffordshire Bull Terriers. In the past it led to lesser, but still significant, increases in Dobermans, Rottweilers and German Shepherds. In the future it will probably have the same effect on Akitas and American Bulldogs. Just wait until the neds discover the Presa Canario!

It is also the case that crossbreeds are being deliberately produced with the intention of creating dogs which are only slightly less dangerous than shotguns, or perhaps more so, since the shotgun only works when you pull the trigger.

None of the above contributes to the welfare of dogs or the safety of the public. Equally, attempts in the past to legislate to control the breeding of dogs has been a waste of time. Only the already law-abiding with an interest in the welfare of dogs have even attempted to comply. Most of the over-breeding going on today is at the hands of people who do not know about the legislation, do not care about either it or animal welfare, or do not have the intelligence to realise what they are doing. There is no reason nowadays why licensing could not be made to work. Vehicle licensing depends on the ability of the authorities to identify the vehicle. To this end, a number plate system has been developed and modified and seems, in the main, to be working reasonably well.

If all dogs were compulsorily microchipped, they could then be identified and their ownership controlled in a similar way. There are slight difficulties, for instance, microchip records are held on several different data bases at a national level, but it should not be beyond the wits of the authorities to pool this data and create a one point access to it. This would enable the identification and registration of dogs to be implemented with the last person named on the data base being responsible for updating information, just as with cars.

It is not permissible nowadays to own a shotgun without having had a police check, or to drive a car without passing a driving test. There is no reason why aspects of both of these could not be applied to dog ownership, and to dog breeding, in order to

control numbers, regulate the type of person who can own and breed dogs and both improve the welfare of dogs and public safety.

It will be argued that a licensing system would penalise the poor and restrict their ability to enjoy ownership of man's oldest, only voluntary and favourite companion animal. This may be the case, but it is an argument for eliminating poverty, not continuing to treat dogs in the way we are doing at the moment.

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