

ANIMALS (REGULATION OF SALE) BILL 2008

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Ms CLOVER MOORE (Sydney) [4.56 p.m.], in reply:

The Animals (Regulation of Sale) Bill 2009 is about responsible pet ownership. It would ban the sale of cats and dogs in pet shops and markets and limit dog and cat sale advertisements to rescuers, to shelters and to recognised breeders. This bill is about the humane treatment of animals. It stops pets being treated as commodities that can be bought and then discarded once the novelty wears off. With more than 60,000 cats and dogs being put down every year in New South Wales alone because homes cannot be found for them, pet shops should not be able to continue to promote the sale of pets in their shops.

That figure does not include the pets that are dumped in national parks or at tips. Puppies and kittens are displayed in the windows of pet shops in shopping centres and they evoke, as we would all expect, an emotional response. This point has been emphasised in its guide for pet shops by the Entrepreneur Business Centre, which gives the following advice to pet shop owners:

“The scenario is simple: Someone will walk by, fall in love with an animal and buy it. These sorts of impulse buys can add dramatically to your profits if your shop is accessible and your sales and service ability is convincing, it will not be long before you convert walk-in traffic into buying customers.”

Of course people fall in love with little puppies and kittens. They do it while they are doing their shopping or they buy one spontaneously as a Christmas present. I know the RSPCA is very concerned at this time of the year, as are other shelters and pounds, because this is when their numbers dramatically increase. But when that cute animal starts to grow, bark, scratch and shed hair, gets bored and needs to be walked, needs to be vaccinated and needs to be microchipped, needs love and attention and incurs large food and veterinary bills, the owners change their mind about keeping it and dump it.

I think it is vitally important that we discourage impulse buying of animals, that we promote responsible ownership and we ban displays of mammals, including rabbits and guinea pigs, in shop windows.

The City of Sydney's Companion Animals Policy promotes responsible pet ownership. We provide leash-free areas in parks. We educate non-pet owners and children about animal behaviour and the wider community about the benefits of pet ownership. We offer a \$40 cap for desexing and free microchipping for animals of residents on pensions and low incomes. We also offer discounted dog desexing on the first Tuesday of each month. We have gone into partnership with Sutherland Shire Council to provide a pound that has the lowest euthanasia rate in New South Wales, where 25 volunteers walk the dogs every day, sometimes three times a day, and where all the dogs are rehomed.

Responsible pet ownership should start from the moment that a pet is acquired. Potential owners need to be compelled to think about the responsibility they are taking on before they adopt a pet. In fact, nearly three years ago the then Minister for Local Government issued a press release stating:

“Poorly planned purchases from pet shops and newspaper ads often result in more unwanted animals turning up at the RSPCA and council shelters.”

The Minister urged people to buy desexed pets from the shelters. Rescuers and shelter staff work tirelessly, and many of them are in the gallery today. They work to find homes for animals and to interview potential owners.

Unlike pet shops, they are not driven by profit. They desex animals to prevent unwanted litters. Rescuers and shelter staff are distressed by the sheer number of loving, healthy animals being dumped.

This is a poor reflection on our values.

I was shocked when I first learnt about puppy farms and backyard breeders, who, unlike responsible breeders, breed pets purely for profit, in confined conditions with little or no social interaction. RSPCA inspectors in Queensland recently seized more than 160 dogs taken after raids on puppy farms.

One of these dogs had an ear infection and her fur was matted with faeces and urine. Others have ongoing urinary tract and ear infections, as well as stomach problems. In fact, the RSPCA shelters were so full that the organisation had to cancel another raid on a suspected puppy farm. On these puppy farms young female dogs start breeding at six months with back-to-back breeding until they can do it no longer—I find it very distressing—and then the dogs are destroyed. The cute little pets in the pet shop windows are the result of these practices.

Puppy farms and backyard breeders are supported by the pet industry. They sell to pet shops and markets and through classifieds. Pets are incredibly important in the lives of many people. They give us unconditional love and companionship. They teach us to care and nurture. They increase our sense of security and they encourage us to exercise. In fact, they save the national health bill more than \$4 billion a year and in return we should not treat them as commodities that can be manufactured and discarded. Respect and compassion for animals are essential to a humane and just society.

I turn now to some of the comments made about the bill.

I refer first to opposition to the bill.

It is quite clear that the pet industry and the Australian Veterinary Association want to protect their business.

They are effective lobbyists and the Minister is quite responsive to that lobbying.

I think opposition to the bill is a real cop-out and is the result of strong lobbying by vested interests.

Dogs NSW traditionally opposes dogs in pet shops and my office worked with that organisation to draft this bill, so its opposition came as a surprise.

I understand the industry tried to convince it that the bill is about banning dog shows and particular breeds.

These were scare tactics, because this bill would not do that. I have received numerous messages from individual vets and breeders who care about animals and strongly support this bill.

In response to the bill the Government has tweaked an existing code of practice. That tweaking is pathetic.

It does minor things such as making animals more comfortable in pet shops but it does nothing to prevent impulse buys and unscrupulous breeding.

The Government states that it is working on updating the breeders' code of practice. These are not public processes. The Government has failed to act for so long. The Opposition has said that it will move to defer debate on the bill to form a select committee on companion animal welfare, and I commend it for that. While the links between cruel backyard and puppy breeding, farm breeding, the unregulated pet industry and the high number of animals being put down every year are clear, this bill would address them.

Members of Parliament with any fortitude and sense of a humane society would support it.

However, I will support the Opposition's amendment to create a select committee to look at companion animal welfare. Of course, that will not prevent me from supporting this bill today.

An inquiry would give the thousands of people I have heard from who work in shelters and pounds, who try to rescue unwanted pets, who breed animals responsibly, who treat pets and who have worked in pet shops the opportunity to tell their stories to Parliament. The wider community and interested organisations would be able to make open and public submissions about animal welfare problems, and I support that.

The inquiry could look at the broader animal welfare concerns that need to be addressed, including difficulties for pet owners who rent or live in apartments, mandatory desexing, backyard breeding, puppy farming for the international cat and dog fur industry, eugenics, inbreeding of pedigree dogs, as well as conflicts of interest in the bodies that advise government.

That conflict of interest in the bodies that advise government relates very much to the opposition to this bill today.

I support an inquiry into companion animal welfare, as do the thousands of people who support my bill and have nothing to hide. I think it is alarming that the Government apparently thinks that the deaths of over 63,000 cats and dogs every year does not warrant an investigation through an inquiry.

The codes of practice that the Government has updated are pathetic and will do nothing to change the appalling toll that we in this House are so concerned about.

I stress that I intend to hold the Opposition to account if it is in a position to initiate an inquiry at a future time. I believe that supporters of my bill who are here today or who read *Hansard* subsequently would like a commitment from the Opposition in the lead-up to the election that an inquiry will be a committed part of its animal welfare policy.

With respect to comments about the worth of the pet industry, the Government has said that the pet industry is worth \$1.6 billion a year. The bill does not ban the lucrative trade in other mammals or the sale of fish, birds, and spiders and reptiles, which I regret is the case.

We know some successful pet shops do not trade in live sentient beings: shops that sell pet food and accessories and do very well. In fact, I was in one of them last Saturday. Paws on The Coast in the main street of Umina is a very successful pet shop that does not trade in live sentient beings. Given the 63,000 cats and dogs that are destroyed in New South Wales alone each year, I believe we should stop treating these pets as commodities and should not promote impulse buying. A responsible Parliament should promote responsible pet ownership.

The pet industry here can operate profitably with an emphasis on responsible pet ownership, as the industry in many European countries, including the United Kingdom, does. It would be great if Australia, New South Wales and Sydney could start showing some leadership instead of always being behind the rest of the world. Under my bill, pet shops would be able to help shelters rehome dogs and cats.

The member for Terrigal said that the New South Wales Farmers Association opposes my bill because it affects working dogs. The initial bill was subsequently withdrawn and updated in response to these concerns and working dogs are now exempt.

So that claim is misinformation put before the Parliament.

The member for Heathcote raised concerns about the costliness of enforcement. Inspectors under my bill will be the same as they are now. These enforcement officers will be able to respond to community complaints that pet shops are selling cats and dogs.

The Government's response to my bill has been to upgrade the code of practice for pets in pet shops. If the Government believes that enforcement officers will not be able to enforce the bill, how will the officers be able to enforce the code of conduct that the Government is boasting about?

There is no substance to the Government's claims, other than responding to the vested interests of the pet industry.

The result is something that should make this Parliament hang its head in shame.

Before concluding I wish to thank Kay Vernon, a long-time volunteer in my office who worked very hard on this bill. Kay worked tirelessly throughout the process and has always been a dedicated advocate for animals. I also thank Angela Radich from the Young Lawyers Animal Law Committee, who provided invaluable help with the legal drafting of the bill and is also a strong advocate for animal protection. I also thank everyone who provided information to my office, and everyone who took the time and effort to contact their members of Parliament on this issue.

I understand that members of Parliament have received more representations on this important issue than probably any other issue ever. The public have called for a more humane policy that does not treat companion animals as consumer items that can be discarded.

I particularly thank the volunteers from Paws for Action, Death Row Pets and Lead the Way who worked very hard to create excellent campaigns specifically to get support for the bill.

I welcome the new Give Pets a Chance campaign that is being developed.

I understand that the campaigns will continue beyond this debate today, and I look forward to continuing to work with these groups. I also wish to acknowledge the support of a large number of animal welfare, animal protection and animal care organisations who supported the bill by distributing information to their members, providing media comment, and including articles in their newsletters and magazines. There are too many of them to name individually.

I say to all those who worked hard to gather support for the bill: Do not be disheartened.

We have achieved much.

Since introducing the bill, problems with the pet industry have been reported on the *Sunday Program*, *Stateline*, *9am With David and Kim*, and in almost every State and local newspaper in New South Wales.

More people now know about puppy farms, backyard breeders, and the appalling number of cats and dogs that are destroyed every year in this State compared with previously.

I am certain that many members of this House never thought about this issue before I introduced my bill. I noted that speakers in this debate gave anecdotes about their pets. It is a pity they do not have a greater conscience about the good of animals across the State.

I have received thousands of letters and emails on the issue, and I have been encouraged by the many communities that care about the plight of animals. Indeed, I understand that the bill was studied in a university animal law course. I remain committed to raising this issue in the Parliament in the future. I encourage everyone to continue to inform their friends, family and colleagues about the problems with the pet industry, and to continue to write to their elected representatives in this House to protect animals. I will conclude with the words that I have spoken in this House before regarding this issue. I quote Mahatma Gandhi, who said:

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated”.

The world's great thinkers have long understood that social progress can be seen in the way a society treats its animals. Animals cannot speak; they cannot vote.

I think we have a comment today in this place about how this Parliament treats its animals, and it is a real comment on our society.

It is a comment I really regret, and a comment I will work to change.