



GOVERNMENT OF BERMUDA

Ministerial Statement

To The House of Assembly

By

The Hon. Sylvan Richards, JP, MP

Minister of the Environment

Amendment of Policy Regarding Illegal Dogs of Prohibited Breeds

March 20th, 2017

Thank you Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker,

The issues of dogs and public safety have been raised in this Honourable House on numerous occasions, most recently by my colleague, the Honourable Minister N. Cole Simons, JP, MP in June of 2016. At that time, he reminded us that the Dogs Act 2008 had been passed by this House to bring about better control of canines, more efficient and effective enforcement, and the ability to put conditions of the keeping of individual dogs. But the 2008 Act also contains provisions that would lead us down an undesirable path where we would have weaker enforcement on some crucial aspects, such as breeding of dogs. We would not want to see an upsurge in the breeding of problematic animals. Thus I wish to inform Members of this House, and the general public, that I have continued the work of my predecessor to amend the Dogs Act 2008, based on the recommendations of the Canine Advisory Committees and various stakeholders.

The numerous amendments to the Dogs Act 2008 are in the drafting stage and I anticipate a much-improved piece of legislation about mid-year, which will place this Government in a position to re-visit the controversial breed-specific policies.

Mr. Speaker,

You will be well aware that this Government, as well as former administrations, categorizes dogs by breed into a 'Prohibited', 'Restricted' or un-restricted breed. Despite no legal breeding of these dogs since 2003, the Pitbull remains the most popular breed or type of dog of the Prohibited category.

A Pitbull can have the temperament of a loving family pet, but also that of a fierce fighter. The breed continues to be the most problematic breed, causing injury at a

rate far above its prevalence in the general canine population. The behavior of the dog is not simply a question of the owner's training or diligence.

Mr. Speaker,

Illegal dogs are those dogs born outside of the authority of a Breeder's Licence. To deal with illegal dogs, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has developed numerous policy iterations, the most recent having been established in December 2015. In this policy, illegal dogs of a prohibited breed faced euthanasia or deportation, even if the individual animal had no history of having been a threat to public safety. I find this fact to be disturbing, as do many other people in our community.

Mr. Speaker,

Today, I advise this honourable House that I have asked the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to immediately halt the euthanasia or deportation of illegal animals that have no history of aggression pending legislative amendments and a full review of policies going forward. The halting of euthanasia and deportations of illegal animals with no history of aggression does not mean that the Government will forgive the illegalities that have occurred, but simply we will not be separating these animals from their owners at this time. This action is simply a pause in this aspect of the enforcement activities.

Mr. Speaker,

The essential question remains ***'Can a Government justify the confiscation & euthanasia of a family pet dog that has not yet offended, even though its breed is responsible for very high rates of offences?'*** Mr. Speaker, I acknowledge that the confiscation of pets is highly controversial and emotive. The Government's

practice of euthanasia of healthy dogs is open to criticism and deemed unethical by opponents, although statistics and history indicate that leaving such dogs in the community will lead to increased complaints in future years.

Mr. Speaker,

Bermuda implemented breed-specific policy in 2003 with success, yet breed-specific legislation/policy is very unpopular as it paints individual dogs with a broad brush without regard for individual variation. It affects all citizens instead of only 'irresponsible' citizens who keep offending dogs. Opponents of breed-specific legislation insist that biting/injury and straying incidents are a result of irresponsible owners and are not a function of the breed. Their mantra is "Punish the deed, not the breed". Whether the owner or the dog is responsible for the offence, Bermuda's statistics indicate a positive result from our breed-specific policy, which continues to seek prevention of injury; not merely a reaction to injury once injury has occurred.

Mr. Speaker,

I will not at this time make any promises about a long-term solution to illegal Pitbulls and other prohibited breeds, but only promise a comprehensive exploration of all of the options.

Owners of all dogs are advised to fully demonstrate responsible ownership. Be aware that if your illegal dog does act in a threatening manner or causes injury, it will be subject to seizure and disposal. This Government does take public safety very seriously.

Mr. Speaker,

I take this opportunity to thank the Animal Wardens who do have a job made more difficult by actions of irresponsible people in our community. Through their efforts, combined with those of the Bermuda Police Service, SPCA, the Canine Advisory Committees and canine groups, the Bermuda has become a safer community.

Thankyou, Mr. Speaker.