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Hon. Simon O'Brien MLC
Chairman
Standing Committee on Environment & Public Affairs
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Chairman,

Petition No 12 – Specific Dog Breed Restrictions

I write concerning the abovementioned petition and provide the following submission to the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs concerning the issues raised.

The petition opposes dog breed restrictions which are proposed under changes to the *WA Dog Act 1976*. It supports a system which would deem dogs dangerous based on modern veterinary and canine behaviour science and calls for the Legislative Council to introduce training, socialisation, and ownership regulations for all domestic dogs. It also calls for the introduction of a system where individual dogs are deemed dangerous by a canine behaviour and training expert for their behaviour and temperament rather than their breed or parentage.

It is appropriate to note that a 13,000 signature petition, raising these same issues, was tabled in the Legislative Assembly earlier this month. The *Dog Amendment Bill WA 2013* (the Bill), in particular sections concerning dog breed restrictions are likely to affect many Western Australians, and it is with good reason that so many responsible dog owners are concerned about the implications the Bill will have on their pet dog.

One of the most concerning aspects of the Bill is that it fails to recognise the difficulty of accurately identifying a breed of dog. Under the Bill, council rangers will be responsible for identifying a breed of dog simply by looking at it. The characteristics that are likely to be used to help identify pit bulls are almond eyes; a short, chunky, strong build; pink or liver markings; and/or white markings. However there are some 30 different dog breeds that meet these criteria. It is therefore likely that an officer tasked with identifying a dog will do so incorrectly because the assessment is not based on modern veterinary and canine behaviour science.

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The American Temperament Test Society was established to objectively evaluate the temperament of all breeds. In 2010 it tested 22,000 dogs over 185 breeds. This is a scientifically valid and reliable test. The average pass rate of the breeds tested through these assessments of behaviour and temperament was 80.4 per cent. The American Pit Bull Terrier passed the temperament test with 82.7 per cent - scoring better on temperament tests than the general dog population.

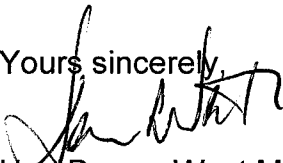
We only have to look as far as Victoria to see that breed specific legislation is not the answer to reducing dog attacks or making our communities safer. Local governments across Victoria have spent thousands of dollars on prosecuting cases, which have proven to be completely incorrect. This is because aggression is a natural, innate behaviour of dogs in response to stimulus and situations. It can be the result of a number of different factors, including sickness, fear or hunger.

Further abroad, breed specific legislation targeting certain breeds of dogs and alleging that those breeds are more dangerous than others has been a failure in countries such as Germany, Italy, Netherlands and parts of Canada and the United States. These countries have repealed failed breed specific legislation in favour of strategies that have been proven to reduce dog attacks.

To victimise one breed of dog because one assumes that it is likely to behave in a certain manner is clearly incorrect, inappropriate and in many cases harmful. There is no such thing as a bad breed. The *Dog Amendment Bill WA 2013* should focus on education programs and encouraging responsible dog ownership. We should be managing dog ownership better and working to stop the backyard breeding and sale of dogs.

It is therefore imperative that we look at the experiences of other nations and develop a system which would deem dogs dangerous based on modern veterinary and canine behaviour science. Instead of introducing breed specific legislation which is based on myths and will give Western Australians a false sense of security, we should be introducing training, socialisation, and ownership regulations for all domestic dogs. Finally, individual dogs should be deemed dangerous by a canine behaviour and training expert for their behaviour and temperament, rather than its breed or parentage. Breed specific legislation is not an effective way to stop dog attacks or prevent aggressive behaviour in dogs.

To my knowledge, the issues raised in the petition have not been taken to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations.

Yours sincerely


Hon Darren West MLC
Member for Agricultural Region
26th August 2013