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### **Ban on the run**

**CONTROVERSIAL PIT BULL HEARINGS HAVE DOG OWNERS HOWLING IN PROTEST,  
SANDY NAIMAN REPORTS**

**By SANDY NAIMAN**

THOUSANDS OF dogs' lives lie in the balance as the first of four public hearings on Bill 132, the proposed legislation banning pit bulls in Ontario, begins tomorrow morning at Queen's Park. Attorney General Michael Bryant announced he was considering breed specific legislation (BSL) last August, responding to the frenzy that exploded in Toronto after a vicious pit bull attack. Since then, he has repeatedly stated he was consulting with the experts and listening to public opinion.

Yet, many of the organizations and individuals who called, e-mailed or wrote letters offering opinions and requesting meetings were not consulted.

He invited a coterie of people to a September roundtable, including officials from Winnipeg, Kitchener and Waterloo, where pit bull bans are already in place, but he refused to hear any anti-ban messages.

Dog trainer Cathie Cino, who opposed BSL at the meeting, is disillusioned by the process and will present tomorrow.

"Michael Bryant has distorted the truth, manipulated the facts and misled the public into believing that we, the experts, support his legislation," says Cino, Director of Cat and Jack K9 Safety Program.

"He received 5,000 e-mails and listened to all sides, including animal groups, academics, police, dog owners and victims," counters Greg Clone, a ministry spokesman. "And what he decided after consulting with all these people was that a pit bull ban was the way to go, which resulted in Bill 132 and public hearings, and we're going to be getting more input."

Bryant and his committee may be surprised with that input. A record number of organizations and individuals have applied to be heard. They include the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA), the Banned Aid Coalition, the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (OSPCA), the Canadian Kennel Club, the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies, the Dog Legislation Council of Canada, the Canadian Dog Judges Association, and a number of dog clubs and purebred dog experts.

Before the bill was introduced, Bryant never specifically addressed the thorny issue of breed definition, says Julie King, a leading member of Banned Aid and the political action chairman of the Staffordshire Bull Terrier Club of Canada.

"In the media, he repeatedly asked, 'Is the pit bull 'a breed apart?' " says King.

"I sent him several e-mails stressing that there is no such breed as a pit bull and that any reference to pit bulls inevitably groups multiple breeds and cross-breeds into a single category."

She kept writing, asking for a definition of "pit bull," and for Bryant to specify the breeds to which he was referring, but she never received an answer.

OSPCA chief inspector Michael Draper issued a press release Sept. 3 in which he stated that BSL would create problems and be difficult to enforce, urging Bryant to develop a wide-ranging strategy to combat dog aggression.

Draper was then invited to meet with Bryant. "But he really didn't take our advice," he says. "We don't support banning of pit bulls or any breed. He included a few recommendations, but interpreted them in a way that doesn't make sense."

Dr. Tim Zaharchuk, president of the OVMA, wrote Bryant asking for a meeting. He detailed alternative legislative measures to BSL, which would focus on responsible breeding, training and ownership and ways to ensure public safety.

Eventually they were able to meet with ministry staff on Oct. 21, says OVMA executive director Doug Raven.

Three business days later, on Oct. 26, Bryant introduced Bill 132 to ban pit bulls province-wide.

Raven ran into one of Bryant's staff at the press conference.

"I've been around government for years and you couldn't have written that legislation in three days," he said. "It must have been written before we met with you."

"Yes, but we had to have been seen to have met with you," the staffer admitted.

Christine Hartig, president of the Association of Animal Shelter Administrators of Ontario (AASAO), received only a generic form letter to her request for a meeting with the minister to discuss reasonable alternatives to BSL.

"There are enormous implications in this bill for municipalities, and their shelters and humane societies," she says from her Ottawa office. "They will be inundated with surrendered dogs, many of which have no aggressive tendencies. If they're considered pit bulls under the new bill, the only options for these animals are euthanasia or giving them up for scientific research."

Meanwhile, King was horrified when she found out that Bill 132, modelled on the 15-year-old Winnipeg ban, includes in its definition of "pit bull" two Canadian Kennel Club registered purebreds -- the Staffordshire bull terrier, known as the "nanny dog" for its gentle nature, and the American Staffordshire bull terrier.

Right now, these breeds are exempt in Kitchener and Waterloo, if owners have their registration papers and can prove they're not rogue "pit bulls," the offspring of any number of mixed breeds. They're banned if the province-wide Bill 132 is passed.

"How can you ban that which cannot be defined?" asks Mike Macbeth, an international dog show judge. "Pit bulls are not a registered breed, they are essentially mongrels of a certain shape or type, so there is no way to prove what they are."

Macbeth says that purebred breeds have a registration certificate that confirms their lineage, but mongrels have no firm identity, making enforcement almost impossible.

Meanwhile, Ontario's fight to pass a pit bull ban made headlines across the Atlantic. In England, where dogs are serious business, a 1991 breed ban proved so unenforceable that it had to be revoked in favour of a law with less teeth.

## 'FILIBUSTER'

The Nov. 19 issue of *Our Dogs*, a major British weekly, featured a story headlined: "Filibuster Slows Down Ontario BSL... or: Mr. Tascona Goes to Toronto."

Journalist Nick Mays covered the theatrics in the Ontario legislature on Nov. 4 when Bryant tried to pass Bill 132 on second reading.

He outlined all Bryant's arguments, quoting liberally from Hansard. Of particular interest was Bryant's statement that he had "met with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in the United Kingdom ... and with their chief officer and inspector."

RSPCA chief inspector Andy Foxcroft told the Toronto Sun that although he has had some communication with Bryant's staff, he never met with him.

"They were asking our advice with respect to how a pit bull ban went over here and my response was that it didn't work particularly well," he said.

"I'm not in favour of BSL and I remember saying categorically that you need legislation to target the deed, not the breed.

"It's like targeting everybody who uses drugs, whether for medicinal reasons or not, and banning everybody who uses drugs, for whatever reason, good or bad," he said.

"It seems that the legislation that's going to be adopted in Canada is going to be pretty much the same and it's a shame. Enforcing BSL is a nightmare, very expensive, very time consuming: All very, very messy."

Dr. Stanley Coren, University of British Columbia psychologist and dog expert, has written many books on dog behaviour. He's watching Ontario's antics and scratching his head.

#### 'UNLIKELY TO BITE'

"Regardless of its breed, a well-socialized dog is unlikely to bite," he says.

"Statistics show that simply taking a dog through a basic obedience class reduces the likelihood that it will bite by 90%, while giving one hour of instruction on "bite-proofing" to children reduces the risk that they will be bitten by more than 80%. Combine both dog obedience and child education and you can reduce dog-bite injuries by 98% without banning any specific breed of dog."

When so many experts are speaking in one voice, saying this bill is not only wrong, but totally unfair, you have to wonder why Bryant isn't listening.

"People in Ontario have no idea how many innocent and affectionate pets are going to be destroyed for no good reason, if this law is passed, as is," says the AASAO's Hartig.

"Even though companion animals are deemed property in accordance with Canadian law, to millions of people they are cherished family members."