To the Economy and Infrastructure Committee

I write to you today to voice my concerns about Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) and how it is completely ineffectual in protecting the Victorian community from dog bite.

Breed based approaches are fundamentally flawed as a dog’s behaviour cannot be predicted based solely on its appearance or genetics alone. Scientific evidence has identified that the factors that contribute to dog bite incidents centre on how the dog is raised, kept and managed, including its early experience, health and socialisation and also upon the owner’s attitude to responsibility in canine guardianship.

BSL has been implemented in many places and has failed miserably – so much so that many places have repealed the legislation and are looking for alternative approaches to protect the community from dog bite. If BSL were an effective strategy to reduce dog bite then there has been ample opportunity to find evidence of this. But there is not because it does not exist.

What does work is a comprehensive program of education, increased emphasis on owner education and responsibility and increased access to desexing programs as implemented in Calgary, Canada by Mr Bill Bruce. It is noticeable that now Mr Bruce has retired and the programs have been progressively dismantled that dog bite statistics in this city have dramatically increased.

I implore the Committee not to make the same mistakes but rather to consider and investigate the following during the course of this Inquiry:

1. The apparent lack of evidence supporting BSL as an effective approach to towards community safety.
2. The fact that similar policies have been shown to fail to prevent, and in some cases contribute to, an increase in dogs bite injuries including fatalities.
3. The heavy financial cost and resource drain that BSL places upon an already understaffed, undertrained, and under appreciated animal management community.
4. A complete lack of reliable statistics in relation to dog bite incidents in Victoria, and the unavoidable truth that BSL has been introduced and strengthened on an emotional basis as opposed to evidence driven analysis.
5. The continuing rise of dog bite injuries in Victoria and the worrying increases of dog bites that coincide with the strengthening of the already regressive BSL based policies.
6. There are proven, effective, alternatives that focus on responsible canine guardianship through education, support and incentives.

While my personal submission is relatively short, I am aware of a detailed submission titled “Victoria’s future in responsible canine guardianship: Smarter laws, safer communities”. Co-authored by a team of experts from a variety of relevant disciplines and professional backgrounds, both the document and the authors have my support, and I urge you to thoroughly consider their information and opinions.

It is my sincere hope that the Committee undertakes the following course of action:

1. Aspire for Victoria’s animal management systems to be world’s best practice.
2. Explore how proven alternatives focused on responsible canine guardianship can be implemented in Victoria.
3. Ascertain how and why data relating to hospitalisations was not used as a basis to address how effective dog bite prevention strategies are in Victoria.
4. Research and develop a model that would include registration, microchipping, optional desexing, education, training, socialisation, health and regulation of threatening and nuisance behaviour as core elements.

Empirical evidence shows that effective dog bite prevention must be based on sound understanding of dog behaviour and risk factors associated with dog bite injuries. As dog bite prevention is about managing both dog and human behaviour I hope that the Committee to seek advice from experts in dog behaviour and education, as well as animal management policy specialists in jurisdictions with successful programs.

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