



Bruce Forsyth's

Vets Get Scanning appeal

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PRESS RELEASE: 20TH APRIL 2007 WELFARE OF DOGS

POLITICAL INTELLIGENCE SERVICE



20th April 2007

WELFARE OF DOGS

Commons Adjournment Debate - **Andrew Rosindell MP** (Con - Romford)

There follows yesterday's half hour debate on the Welfare of Dogs, initiated by Andrew Rosindell MP.

As you will see, he makes reference to VETS GET SCANNING on column 543 – 544.

Welfare of Dogs

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Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to speak up for man's best friend, and to bring the issue of dog welfare before the House once again. Hon. Members will know of my long-standing interest in dog issues. Since my election as a member of Parliament, I have had the privilege of working with some of the most dedicated groups and organisations in the country, who perform a magnificent job in defending the interests of our four-legged friends.

I pay particular tribute to the Kennel Club, whose work in the dog world goes far beyond the call of duty, extending from welfare issues to dog shows, breeding and, of course, the Westminster dog of the year competition. The Dogs Trust has also campaigned on dog welfare-related issues to ensure a safe and happy future for caninekind, and has made the slogan "A dog is for life, not just for Christmas" a household phrase. The Dogs Trust will

"never put a healthy dog down"—

the popular motto that inspires so many people to sponsor its wonderful re-homing programme. Battersea Dogs and Cats Home is another organisation that does miraculous work in looking after dogs that have been cast out by cruel and irresponsible people.

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I also pay tribute to a friend of mine, Juliette Glass of the Fury Defence Fund, who has been a personal inspiration to me. She is always there with an open ear and friendly advice for people all over the country with problems in the dog world. Juliette has helped to save many dogs from immediate death following the unwise implementation of the draconian Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 before its amendment.

There is another organisation known as “Vets Get Scanning”, whose patrons include Bruce Forsyth and his daughter Debbie Matthews. It seeks to promote the practice of microchipping all puppies as a matter of routine and procedure, and the practice of scanning every dog that enters any veterinary surgery anywhere in the United Kingdom. Why, Members will ask, is such a practice so necessary and important? It will probably come as a surprise to them, as it did to me, to learn that dog theft is one of the fastest-growing criminal activities in the United Kingdom. The crime targets the natural bond that exists between owner and pet—a bond that in many cases is as strong as the bond between family members. These vile criminals will seek to exploit the natural affinity between man and his best friend, either by kidnapping the dog and holding it to ransom—as happened recently to the pop artist and singer Lily Allen—or, as happens in many thefts, by stealing the pet to sell on to unscrupulous breeders or those willing to pay exorbitant amounts for a particularly rare breed of dog. If the ransom is not paid or the dogs cannot be sold on, they will often be killed and discarded.

It is hoped that promoting the simple practice of scanning a dog when it enters a veterinary surgery will cause authenticity of ownership to form an effective barrier and deterrent to those who might enter into the

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crime of dog theft, whether it be the criminal who steals the dog or the unscrupulous breeder or others who may buy the animal from the criminal. The “Vets Get Scanning” scheme is helping to eradicate that evil activity. I commend its work to the House and hope that the Minister will consider working with it to make the scanning of all dogs whenever they enter a veterinary surgery a routine practice.

As many Members will be aware, for many years I have owned Staffordshire bull terriers. As any owner of a Staffie will confirm, they are magnificent family animals that epitomise the phrase, “Man’s best friend”. They are caring, loyal and gentle animals, which in recent times have sadly endured a bad press owing to the deplorable treatment of a minority of owners. [Interruption.] I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) is sitting beside me. He has informed me that Watchman is the name of the dog that is the mascot of the most excellent Staffordshire Regiment. Indeed, the Staffordshire bull terrier has an historic place in terms of that regiment, the county of Staffordshire and the whole of the United Kingdom.

Many Members will know that Spike was my first Staffie. He wore his own made-to-measure Union flag waistcoat and stood by me during every step of my political career, campaigning in my first two parliamentary campaigns: in 1992 during which he tirelessly trudged through the streets of the glorious constituency of Glasgow, Provan, including the Blackhill estate—an area that Mr. Speaker will know well, as it is in his constituency—and then in Thurrock in 1997, before seeing me safely into the House of Commons in 2001 with a thumping majority. Of course, Spike’s proudest moment, as the Minister will know, was when he greeted the noble Baroness Thatcher as she arrived at Romford market two days prior to the 2001 general election. Having done his duty, Spike passed away on St. George’s day 2002.

My current Staffordshire bull terrier, Buster, has taken over working as Britain’s “top campaigning dog”, an accolade he was awarded in last October’s Westminster dog of the year competition. He also met Baroness Thatcher in Romford just before the 2005 general election, wearing his Cross of St. George waistcoat, and on Saturday Buster will once again be by my side as we campaign in Romford market to make St. George’s day a public holiday in England. Spike and Buster have truly represented the British bulldog spirit, which I passionately share.

However, dogs are not just household pets. They are deeply significant in the everyday lives of many human beings, as guide dogs for the blind and hearing dogs for the deaf, as dogs for the disabled and visiting dogs for hospitals, and for therapy, too, bringing relief, joy and happiness to the sick and infirm. What other creatures could provide so much companionship to the elderly and the lonely? Dogs serve the police and the customs service as sniffer dogs, and they also work in mountain rescue, where they perform a vital task. They play an enormously significant role in the lives of all of us.

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When I last spoke about dog welfare in the House, I covered the effects of the terrible injustice on certain breeds of dog that followed the introduction of the Dangerous Dogs Act. I do not intend to dwell on the matter again this evening, but I feel that it should be stated once more that in all matters to do with the

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actions of dogs it is the deed and not the breed that should be acknowledged. As I have said before, there are no problem breeds, just a handful of problem owners. We should never lose sight of the fact that any dog in the wrong hands can be as dangerous as any weapon. Any dog can be trained to fight, bite and attack on command, and that is something that needs to be addressed. People who use dogs for such violent purposes are obviously sadistic and evil. Although we in the House cannot police their behaviour, we can do our part to make it as difficult as possible to train animals for that purpose.

I hope that we can start by outlawing electric shock collars. The Animals (Electric Shock Collars) Bill ran out of parliamentary time in 2003, but the Kennel Club has worked tirelessly since then to get that product banned. According to a report from the Kennel Club that I received recently, the electric shock collars administer a static shock to a dog that does not do what is asked of it. In that way, they train a dog to respond out of fear of further punishment rather than its natural willingness to obey. For a collar to serve efficiently as a training tool, the dog has to perceive the shock as painful. Moreover, if it does not respond, the punishment has to escalate, which creates further potential for abuse and cruelty. An angry or inferior trainer, or even a novice owner, could therefore misuse a shock collar to abuse or punish.

The product is readily available—via mail order, retail outlets and, of course, the internet. Anyone can get an electric shock collar. As there is no training or supervision, people can put one in place and administer so-called “correctional” treatment. Ultimately, however, such devices do not address a dog’s underlying behavioural problems, so the cause of its barking or aggression remains suppressed. Indeed, the collars are quite likely to cause further behavioural problems in the future.

The primary purpose of any training programme should be to improve the relationship and communication between a dog and its owner through compassionate, reward-based training. Other, more positive training tools and methods can produce dogs that are trained just as quickly and reliably, if not more so, with absolutely no fear, pain, or potential damage to the relationship between dog and handler. Given that those alternatives are available, I hope that the Minister will agree that there is no need for electric shock collars.

I come now to the issue of dog breeding and, in particular, to the training methods needed to educate people purchasing puppies. Educating puppy buyers and raising their expectations is a powerful tool to help eradicate puppy farming, while rewarding and promoting breeders who follow basic good practice will help to raise standards. The Kennel Club’s accredited breeder scheme was launched in 2004 and is working towards both of those ends. The club has joined forces with interested welfare bodies to establish a working group to identify ways to tackle puppy farmers. That is a long-term, ongoing project. There is a widely held view that a Kennel Club registration certificate puts a premium on a puppy. The club’s online puppy sales register is a valuable aid to breeders wishing to sell their puppies. In addition, it is raising its profile and that of its major show, Crufts, with the aim of becoming the first port of call for all canine matters.

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Finally, I should like to say something about greyhound racing. As the chairman of the all-party parliamentary greyhound group, I declare a keen interest in this matter. I am fortunate enough to have a splendid greyhound stadium in my Romford constituency that plays regular host to many significant events in the greyhound calendar. However, one very significant problem with greyhound racing is that some unscrupulous owners destroy their dogs when they cannot run any more. Personally, I find it incomprehensible that anyone who works with animals could destroy a dog simply because its running days are over.

The rules of the National Greyhound Racing Club seek to ensure that owners are responsible for the future of their greyhounds at the conclusion of their racing careers. Greyhound racing is enormous fun, but those who take part must also consider the welfare of the dog during and after its racing days. I commend the magnificent efforts of the Romford retired greyhound association based in my constituency. It is doing wonderful work rehoming greyhounds at the end of their racing days. Many such organisations exist throughout the country and I pay tribute to them all for their magnificent work.

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To conclude, I should like to seek one or two assurances from the Minister. First, will he assure me that the Government will not seek to introduce dog legislation without proper consultation with the main dog organisations and charities? Secondly, will the Government seek to form stronger relationships with dog-related groups, giving support where it is needed? Thirdly, will the Government seriously review laws already on the statute book, some of the limitations of which I highlighted earlier in my speech and previously on the Floor of the House?

All hon. Members have thousands of dog owners in their constituency and still more dog lovers. Let us this day properly acknowledge the special place that dogs have and will always have within our society as man's best friend, and the best friend that man is ever likely to have.

The Minister for Local Environment, Marine and Animal Welfare (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing this debate. I congratulate both him and his dogs on their success in winning awards as dogs and owner and for their sartorial elegance—that is the dogs, if not the hon. Gentleman. I also congratulate him on his courage for taking his late Staffordshire bull terrier into Glasgow wearing a Union flag. That was a brave thing to do as a prospective Conservative parliamentary candidate.

At the end of his speech the hon. Gentleman asked me to assure him that we would not rush into legislation without consulting interested groups and parties, that we would build good relations with the organisations that he mentioned in his speech and review existing legislation. I can give him assurances on all three counts. As a result of some of the horrific attacks that we have seen over the past six months, including on Merseyside, we are undertaking a review of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. He stressed that he did not want to major on that issue having spoken on that on at least one previous occasion in the House, but I urge him and the groups

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that he mentioned to respond to our consultation. In the first place we have asked police forces throughout the country for their views as they are in the front line of trying to enforce the legislation, but we are keen to receive the views of all hon. Members on what we should do. He is right to say that it is the deed not the breed, but it would be difficult to row back significantly on that legislation, especially when one casts one's eyes to its genesis and some of the attacks that were taking place. He is, however, entirely right to say that the main responsibility for dog behaviour must rest with responsible owners and I endorse what he said about that.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the "Vets Get Scanning" scheme. I was not aware of this and I consulted my officials. It sounds like an interesting idea and we should like to hear more about it if he would care to write to me or suggest that the organisation behind it writes to me. We certainly encourage as many owners as possible to microchip their dogs. I think that only one dog welfare organisation thinks that it should be made compulsory, but we would certainly endorse the encouragement of doing so voluntarily, not just for security but for reasons of disease and the other factors that he mentioned.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the welfare of greyhounds. I am sure that he will be aware that we recently saw the entry on to the statute book of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. It is a huge advance not just in dog welfare but in all animal welfare because it introduces for the first time a duty of care that will apply immediately to all greyhound racing. We are reviewing greyhound racing and we have given assurances that we will introduce either statutory or some other form of regulation for the greyhound industry. I think that I am right in saying that the associate parliamentary animal welfare group is also conducting an investigation into greyhound welfare, as is the former agriculture Minister, Lord Donoughue.

If the hon. Gentleman has not already spoken to the parliamentary group, and to Lord Donoughue, given the expertise that he has gained from his constituency as someone who is interested in dog welfare and greyhound racing, he will be well placed to feed into all those discussions to ensure that we have a credible system. I acknowledge that there is a lot of concern out there that the regulatory regime for greyhound racing is not fit for purpose—I hate that phrase—in the modern age. It certainly needs improving. We have made it absolutely clear to the greyhound racing authorities that if they do not get their act together, we will not hesitate to introduce statutory regulations to secure the welfare of greyhounds.

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The hon. Gentleman was right to encourage more people to adopt greyhounds and look after them when their racing life has finished. Sadly, I do not own a dog, but if I had a pet, I would have a dog. I am sorry to disappoint Cats Protection, but I would go for a dog rather than a cat. The league was very nice to nominate me for an animal welfare award this year, which I won, but I was open with it that I was a dog person rather than a cat person. My partner recently bought me a pet stuffed dog as compensation for the fact that we do not really have a lifestyle that is conducive to having a real one, but one day I hope that we will. The hon.

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Gentleman is right to say that we all have a responsibility to ensure that greyhounds have a decent life both when they are racing and when they are retired. Some of the measures that we will introduce on greyhound racing will help us deliver that.

Electric shock collars were debated at considerable length during the passage of the Animal Welfare Bill. In that context, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North (Sarah McCarthy-Fry) has introduced a private Member's Bill that is due to be debated next Friday. If the hon. Gentleman was not already aware of that, he may want to have a look at his diary to see whether he wants to be around for that debate. We have not given a commitment to ban all the devices that people generally refer to as electric shock collars, partly because we have listened carefully to some owners and trainers who say that, as a last resort, to prevent an animal from having to be put down, they can serve a useful purpose. The invisible fence types are particularly useful for people living in the countryside to prevent their dogs running away or worrying farm animals such as sheep and so on, which could lead to the dog being shot. They also may prevent dogs running on to a road and causing an accident.

I am aware of the concerns of the Dogs Trust and other animal welfare organisations that we should take action on electric shock collars, and we are in the process of commissioning some research. One of the difficulties is that there is no real scientific research on the welfare problems associated with such collars and whether they outweigh the advantages that those who advocate their use claim. I hope that people who use them do so responsibly. The cruelty clause of the Animal Welfare Act contains powers to prosecute people who abuse them. It is something that we keep under review. I had a long conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North about the issue when she came to see me to raise some of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman raised and that have been raised with him by the Dogs Trust.

As someone who takes an interest in these issues, the hon. Gentleman will be interested to know that as part of the Animal Welfare Act we shall introduce a dog code of practice, which will help to address a number of things, including the concerns he raised about information for prospective dog buyers before they embark on a choice of breed and his concerns about puppy farming. The code is likely to be based on the five needs detailed in the Act and provided for us by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It is intended that it will be completed in draft by the end of 2007, with a view to its being made available to the public in 2008. It will be introduced to Parliament through the negative resolution procedure, and we are working with colleagues in Scotland and Wales to make sure that we have a joined-up approach in the three countries.

I hope that I have not missed out any of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised and that I have reassured him that the Government take the welfare of dogs seriously, both through animal welfare legislation and other measures. I welcome his interest in the matter, as, I am sure, do his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.