



Speech by
Ray Stevens

MEMBER FOR ROBINA

Hansard Wednesday, 3 December 2008

ANIMAL MANAGEMENT (CATS AND DOGS) BILL

Mr STEVENS (Robina—LNP) (4.19 pm): I rise to speak to the Animal Management (Cats and Dogs) Bill 2008. At the outset, I would like to state that, along with my LNP colleagues, I agree with the fundamental direction of this bill, but I have some reservations that I would like to express about certain aspects of it. One of the reservations I have, through my experience in local government, is the ongoing cost to local governments across Queensland. I will address that issue later in my speech.

The Animal Management (Cats and Dogs) Bill 2008 seeks to introduce a statewide legislative framework to manage cats and dogs within our community. This bill is based on a legislative framework that is in place in Victoria. One of the objectives of the bill is to make it compulsory to register and microchip cats and dogs. At the outset, I want to say that I was the mayor of the Gold Coast when microchipping was introduced on the Gold Coast. I was one of the first people to have their dog microchipped—and that was Lottie the rottiie. It was very effective. In regard to that issue, the Gold Coast City Council has gone ahead in leaps and bounds as it will be one of the councils that will trial compulsory microchipping.

Other objectives of the bill are to make it compulsory for the ear tattooing of desexed cats and dogs and to control and identify regulated dogs, which are dangerous, menacing and restricted dogs, so as to reduce the risk that these dogs pose in the community. In regard to that objective, I might say that councils never have a problem with dogs; they have a problem with dog owners. That is what, hopefully, this legislation will address. The dogs themselves do not create the issue; it is how they are looked after, how they are handled—or how they are not handled—or how they have been left to their own devices on many occasions that cause the problem within our communities. Other objectives of the bill are to enhance local governments' monitoring and enforcement powers, to relocate chapter 17A from the Local Government Act to this bill, and to make minor amendments to the City of Brisbane Act 1924 and to amend the Local Government Act 1993.

Recently in Queensland there has been a review of strategies for effectively managing unwanted dogs and cats. Out of that review, the state government has implemented a two-stage strategy to decrease the number of unwanted cats and dogs. Strategy 1 consists of three substrategies, one of which is the introduction of a voluntary code of practice for pet shops. I am very proud to say that back in 1985 I was the founding owner of the largest retailer of pets and pet accessories in Queensland—The Pet Barn on the Gold Coast, which is still in existence today. So I am very familiar with the pet shop industry. It is a very good industry. It keeps a lot of kids around the place happy. We have to support that industry at every opportunity. The people involved in that industry do a good job. They try to comply with as many of these proactive measures as they can. They cannot control all of the people who buy pets from their stores, but over the nine years that I owned that store we sold somewhere in the vicinity of 6,000 cute and lovely puppies and made some residents very, very happy, particularly residents in my local council area. Obviously, that was the start of a budding political career. I also sold lots of cats—

Mr Wendt: You're an old softie at heart.

Mr STEVENS: Absolutely: little soft, fluffy Ray—just a pussy in everyone’s arms. The kittens that we sold—unfortunately, no-one wants to buy older cats; they all like the cute, young cats—were always of concern to me in terms of how they were looked after. I am glad to see that strong measures—

Mr Hoolihan: Use your words carefully.

Mr STEVENS: I have not used any words incorrectly. The member for Keppel probably has to readjust his dictionary on these matters.

Getting back to the subject, the second substrategy is the implementation of a joint community education program which is aimed at promoting responsible pet ownership. That is one concern that I have. Being very familiar with my good council officers and how they think about these matters, I would like to see that the fees they charge for this registration and microchipping of cats and dogs is not used to fund other programs. The registration and microchipping should be conducted on a cash-recovery basis in terms of their animal maintenance strategies rather than the fees being utilised to fund bigger and better programs to expand the bureaucracy in councils. That is a very important issue. It gets back to the cost issue that I mentioned earlier in relation to local councils. Taxes are going up. We see state governments raising taxes at every opportunity and councils follow suit. It is our responsibility to make sure that, in these difficult financial times owing to the global financial crisis, we reduce the capacity to impose more taxes on the people out there whom we serve.

Mr Moorhead interjected.

Mr STEVENS: I hear a lot of chirping from the member for Waterford. There are a lot of cat and dog owners in the Waterford area, which used to be part of the Gold Coast area. They will be disappointed if the member keeps belting them for more money to promote various initiatives in his area.

Mr Moorhead interjected.

Mr STEVENS: I thank the member for Waterford for his interjection. I would say that the worst thing the Gold Coast City Council could do is build new headquarters for itself. So I agree with the member for Waterford and thank him for his interjection.

The third substrategy is a two-year pilot involving four councils that have agreed to implement a variety of innovative strategies that are aimed at promoting responsible animal ownership and desexing. Those councils are, as I mentioned, the Gold Coast City Council, the Logan City Council—which is in the area of the member for Waterford—the Moreton Bay Regional Council and the Townsville City Council.

The second part of the strategy consists of implementing a legislative framework for the introduction of a statewide regime mandating the identification and registration of cats and dogs and implementing a compulsory incentive scheme for desexing, which I endorse wholeheartedly. It is wonderful to see families having pets, but there should be control on the breeding side of things. Most people do not want their animals out there breeding, anyway. That usually happens by accident and kitty comes home with about 12 little kittens that families did not know about. Unfortunately, those kittens are given away to friends and enemies and eventually end up at the pound, which is the problem that we are trying to alleviate. These matters have led to the introduction of this bill.

The registration and microchipping of cats and dogs in our communities would be an effective way of managing a growing problem that results in lost and unwanted animals ending up in RSPCA care. The RSPCA, of course, under management agreements, has taken over control or has offered assistance to a lot of the pounds that the councils run. Each year, hundreds of cats and dogs are euthanased by the RSPCA. The registration and microchipping of cats and dogs would reduce the numbers of animals that would have to go through this process, which the RSPCA and certainly councils find most objectionable. In 2007-08 in Australia, 23,772 dogs and 42,731 cats were euthanased by the RSPCA. In the same period in Queensland, 6,962 dogs and 11,243 cats were euthanased.

The permanent identification device, or microchipping, would have all the contact details of the owner and address information. I think that is particularly important. As I recall, we went through all of these things when I was a member of the council. Whilst dogs run around with collars on and with their annual registration tags, which are pretty easy to recognise, they can be returned to their owners. But putting a collar on a cat is a very different scenario. It may end up with the cat hanging itself from a backyard fence. It is just not possible to legislate for that. So to microchip cats is a wonderful move in the right direction, particularly as a lot of owners, unfortunately, think that night-time is a good time to put kitty out. Cats wander at night and a lot of cats end up in the pound, and with no possible way of identifying them they just rely on their owner to come looking for them. This move will alleviate a lot of those problems and, again, will reduce the number of those poor little cats being put down.

Clause 24 states that the permanent identification device cannot be implanted in a dog or cat that is less than eight weeks old. I do not think that many pet shops sell kittens that are much under eight weeks as they are just too difficult to maintain in a store situation. Clause 14 places an obligation on owners to

ensure that their cat or dog is implanted with a prescribed permanent identification device before 12 weeks of age.

Chapter 3, parts 1 to 4, refers to the process of registration and requires a permanent identification register to be established. Clause 51 of chapter 3 places a requirement on the local government to record the relevant cat and dog information into a register within seven days of being registered. Councils face difficulties in enforcing the registration of dogs and, from here on in, cats as well. I know that the Gold Coast City Council went to great expense to undertake a door knocking campaign where inspectors tapped on doors and asked, 'Is your dog registered?' That approach upsets a lot of people as it looks like a heavy-handed approach by the council concerned and gets a lot of people offside. Obviously, it is a politically unpopular approach. It creates a lot of angst between the residents and the inspectors. It costs a lot of money to undertake. Again we want to be careful about the financial impositions of implementing these programs, which are good in intent and do improve community attitudes towards animals, particularly dogs and cats, which are the most common form of pets in the suburbs. However, we have to be careful about the costs imposed on the owners of dogs and cats and we have to be reasonable about how that is done. It will be incumbent upon councils to be a little delicate in the implementation of these programs.

Chapter 7, clauses 172 to 176, refers to a regulated dog register. As I have previously stated, a regulated dog register is divided into three categories: menacing, dangerous and restricted. I have already commented in relation to dogs. I can remember the great hullabaloo on the Gold Coast in relation to Sarge, the pit bull terrier. I think he came from Logan as a matter of fact. Literally thousands and thousands of dollars were spent on court cases over the matter. It became an embarrassment to both the owners, who love their pet dearly, and the enforcing body which, in this case, was the council. The courts get bogged down with ridiculous cases brought on to determine what breed a dog really is. The courts ask vets to identify the animals. With due respect, during my nine years of owning a pet shop I dealt with most vets on the Gold Coast and I can assure the House that I have far more experience in determining what sort of cross breed a dog may be. I have had far more practical and hands-on experience in determining what breed a dog is than a vet. It is very difficult to determine that a dog is, for example, a Staffordshire bull terrier crossed with a Rhodesian ridgeback, and whether it may be quarter-part pit bull terrier, which obviously are regulated dogs.

Chapter 7 also refers to a licence holder register, which requires the establishment of a statewide register for holders of licensed PID registries. As I said, I used to own The Pet Barn at Nerang, which is still in existence. It is a wonderful shop. It has great owners, who are the people I sold the shop to in 1994.

Mr Dempsey: You don't have to give them a plug.

Mr STEVENS: I have to give them a plug because they do a great job down there. They run a great business, continuing on from the fine basis that I set up for them all those years ago. If anyone wants a good healthy pet, a dog or cat in particular, I am sure they would be most compliant with all aspects of the law and the new legislation coming through.

Personally, I believe the introduction of the compulsory microchipping and registration of cats and dogs is a good management strategy for pet care, although I do believe it does not go far enough in the broad sense of the bill. The bill will allow for the responsibility to be given not only to the owner of the cat or dog but also to pet shops that sell the animals. In the bill, the voluntary code of practice is probably a good thing for the good store owners. However, smaller stores do pop up frequently, even in my area, then quickly close down and go out of business. The legislation does provide a window of opportunity for those people not to engage in the best practice that this legislation recommends.

As local government is to maintain and pay for the register, I would like to know what amount the state government will contribute to further help local councils to enforce the legislation. I remember vividly the pool fencing regulations that the Hon. Tom Burns introduced at great expense to councils. That legislation was a good idea from the state, but unfortunately the state did not come up with any funding. Whilst it is great to come up with good ideas for future regulations, if the state government brings these things in and is reasonably responsible, it should add to the implementation funding to make the legislation stick.

Clause 197 of the bill refers to decommissioned greyhounds being in a public place without being muzzled. For the first time ever in my life, with my son I have become a greyhound owner. I am told the dog is a budding champion.

Mr Hinchliffe: You bought a dish licker.

Mr STEVENS: I've bought a dish licker, as the member for Stafford has kindly said. I am hoping to get great amusement and entertainment from our new super-duper, as yet unnamed greyhound, particularly as it is not far away from its first start. For many years the greyhound industry has followed the

practice of letting most greyhounds have a go at running. They are bred to run fast. To do that they are taught to chase a little white bouncy thing that flops up and down in front of them. As Mayor of the Gold Coast, I was inundated with complaints about a number of English pig dogs or English bull terriers that would see little white fluffy dogs and go up and crunch them. There would be all sorts of disappointment and tears flowing from the owners of the little dogs, which were normally Maltese, Lhaso Apso or Shih tzu dogs. They were often the target of bull terriers that knew only that they had to grab another dog. A long time ago they were bred for pit fights, so when they see something white and fluffy they grab it.

Unfortunately, greyhounds are trained to chase fluffy white lures. As we know, some dogs such as Maltese look like little white fluffy lures. Greyhounds are very fast and a little Maltese would not have much chance of outrunning a greyhound. Therefore, I am concerned about the unmuzzling of decommissioned greyhounds, which are a lovely dog. The greyhound is a lovely friendly dog to have around the house.

Mr Langbroek: Have you declared the conflict on interest?

Mr STEVENS: The member for Surfers Paradise is also a part-owner of a budding greyhound champion. We should look very closely at clause 197, which will remove the requirement to muzzle a greyhound in a public place.

In conclusion, we are a society of constant change. The value of pets has been increasing in importance within the community. Our communities are far denser with less areas to enjoy pets in. Obviously we are all aware of the different dog areas that people are limited to. Beaches on the Gold Coast have very limited areas for dogs to roam in. This bill will help to manage the problem of unwanted cats and dogs being neglected. After all, we are a compassionate and humane society that requires the best treatment possible for animals. I commend this bill to the House as it will implement better practices in relation to cats and dogs.