

# TRANSCRIPT

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

### Inquiry into the Domestic Animals Amendment (Puppy Farms and Pet Shops) Bill 2016

Melbourne — 15 November 2016

#### Members

Mr Joshua Morris — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Nazih Elasmr

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Shaun Leane

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Ms Samantha Dunn

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#### Witnesses

Dr Joanne Sillince, managing director, Pets Australia;

Mrs Karen Peele, director, Mad About Pets; and

Mrs Jodie Knox, director, Murray River Puppies.

**The CHAIR** — I declare reopened the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing. Again, welcome to all those present. The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to our inquiry into the Domestic Animals Amendment (Puppy Farms and Pet Shops) Bill 2016. The evidence today is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by the same privilege. Welcome to our witnesses that we have present this afternoon. At this point we might hand over to your good selves to introduce ourselves, go to any introductory comments you might like to make, and then we will follow with some questions from the committee.

**Dr SILLINCE** — Thank you very much. My name is Dr Joanne Sillince. I am managing director of Pets Australia, and I am an ex-AVA president. To my left is Mrs Jodie Knox, who is the director of Murray River Puppies, a very large breeder, and to my right is Mrs Karen Peele, who is the owner of Mad About Pets, a well-known pet shop in Melbourne.

I would like to talk about what we call the top three issues of problems with this bill, and then what I want to do is identify the alternatives that would solve a lot of problems. This bill does nothing to address any issues of animal welfare. Firstly, there is no due process in relation to this bill. When we met with the minister she admitted she had never been to a commercial breeding operation but she had made some pretty significant promises to animal activist groups on their Facebook pages prior to the election. When we met with the Greens expert on animal welfare she admitted she had never been to see a commercial breeder but she had seen photos of puppy farms. When we met with the CEO of RSPCA Victoria she said she had never visited a commercial breeder but was concerned about the operations.

Unfounded beliefs and promises to fundamentalist groups appear to be the basis of the bill. Not only has the minister not properly consulted with breeders, pet shops or trainers but her department tried to entrap this organisation with a forced confidentiality agreement in return for access. The minister would have been able to say anything she liked about us, and we would not have had the right of reply, so it is hardly surprising that we declined the offer. No compensation has been offered to those breeders and pet shops who have spent millions and millions of dollars complying with the current new laws. Due process has not been served.

The facts are these: pets from pet shops are surrendered at a lower rate than the general population; there is a shortage of dogs that people want to own; and with less than 10 successful prosecutions in the last seven years, either there is not nearly the problem that is alleged or the RSPCA is negligent in its duties to prosecute cruelty. Number two, this bill will fail on so many levels. The unintended consequences of this bill are amazing. All the workload will fall on councils, and those we have spoken to have said they will not issue licences, and one said they will charge \$3000 for a licence.

Is old Mrs Snirks to be hauled before a court for not getting a permit for an adoption day if she cannot afford a licence? Is eight-year-old Sophie to be sent to the juvenile justice system when the pretty puppy that followed her home from school pops a litter? Is the dog trainer who helps out disabled Ellie with a problem pup to be hauled in for prosecution for not having a licence as a business? Are council inspectors going to leap over back fences to peep into people's laundries in case there is a litter of illegal kittens or one extra bitch? Will it be the department or the councils that set up the cyber spy units to check the classifieds and identify where the postboxes are actually held and where the websites are actually owned? Is the department going to start interstate prosecutions in case interstate classifieds are seen in Victoria? How will Victorians respond to that, or is it intended that, in spite of the bill, enforcement will only be confined to some breeders and pet shops just because they are visible, audited and licensed?

The reality is that if we close large commercial breeders, we will not only have supply drop and prices rise rapidly but there will be thousands of additional licences needed for every small breeder and all those one-man dog training organisations. Our modelling suggests that council inspection numbers will rise by more than 2000 per cent in some jurisdictions. If we ban pets from pet shops, we will encourage untrained consumers to buy from poor breeders. At least current pet shops open their breeders for inspection. Even more licences will be needed. How will a dog trainer afford the mooted \$3000? Will they be indicted for not submitting an annual report for the minister to read?

It will be just so easy to get around the current bill if you are someone who chooses not to obey the law. I have got a list of 50 ways, but I am not going to go into it here, because clearly there are no funds for enforcement

and councils are unlikely to cooperate. Only the best — the pet shops and commercial breeders — will be shut down, unfairly. Animal welfare will suffer. Retail chains will survive; independent pet shops will not.

Number three, effects on supply: this bill will deny people the right to own a pet. On our modelling, dog supply will drop by up to 15 per cent — it depends on the scenario — from the around 160 000 puppies that enter into Victorian households annually. Economics 101 says that therefore pet prices will rocket, and we are already seeing that, by the way. There is a nationwide shortage of dogs that people want to own, most visible at the moment in WA but also on the east coast to a lesser extent. High prices hit the very groups that benefit most from pets: working families, the elderly and the disabled. Animal welfare will actually suffer as more puppies and kittens are shipped from interstate or bought from substandard breeders.

So here are the alternatives, and the alternatives depend, really, on what the real objective of the bill actually is. If we truly believe in animal welfare, if we truly believe that a puppy farm is a substandard breeder, then we focus on standards — not size, profit, breed, location or anything other than standards. If the objective is to lift standards, then by far the best alternative is to use what you already have. POCTA — prevention of cruelty to animals — and the codes of practice are world's best practice, strong tools respected by commercial breeders and pet shops, but that is where the enforcement stops. All you have to do is significantly increase penalties for breaches of POCTA and the codes and then enforce them beyond the usual suspects. Pets Australia members would support that.

The important thing is this: if the government truly believes that people owning pets has benefits to people and pets, then it will flick this bill, work with industry groups and get a workable outcome, because the 98 per cent of Australians who do not identify as animal activists have a bit of an aversion to people mucking about with their dogs, as last weekend proved so eloquently. At this point I am going to stop and invite your committee to do what it will.

**The CHAIR** — Any comments from Ms Peele or Ms Knox to begin?

**Ms PEELE** — You have been given my submission in the blue folder. What we have done as a pet store in suburban Melbourne is listen to community concerns and address them. So we hear people going, 'Where do you get your dogs from? What happens here? Prove this. Prove that'. The RSPCA had quite a large campaign to pet stores saying, 'Prove that you do not buy from puppy farms'. So what we did was say, 'Okay, we need to start to document everything'. Have the traceability, have the information coming through so that if someone says, 'Okay, where does X come from?', I can put my hand on a folder, pick it up and say, 'This is what we do. These are our procedures. This is our methodology that we run our business by'.

So what I have done is go through and actually collate everything, because you cannot all get out to my business to see it. Obviously you are not all going to come down and say, 'Hey, I want to buy a dog'. So I have put it all together. I have put some videos in there of socialisation and animal behaviourist situations. Our emphasis is that the breeders do their job, and as long as we make sure that the breeders are doing their jobs, they are traceable and they are transparent — we have been there, we have audited them and we can see what they are actually doing — we know that that part of the chain is right.

When they come to us what are we doing with them? We have got them from eight weeks of age until they go to a new home. So how is that animal being socialised? What are we doing to actually prepare that dog for a life in a family? Are we handling that dog? Are we actually looking at what experiences that animal has?

This hopefully shows you, and we can demonstrate, what we are doing with our dogs in store and, by banning animals in pet stores, what we are actually losing in the community. So we are very transparent. We have got people who can come in all the time, seven days a week, and question us. We have council officers, RSPCA; they have all got powers of entry. They can walk in and demand records. I am saying to you, 'You don't need to demand it, I will give it to you. Here it is, take it, have a look and if you have got any questions, I am more than willing to answer them'.

There is a huge emphasis on socialisation, what we call futureproofing our dogs. We say to people, 'If you get a puppy, you need to make sure that what you do with that dog is going to last for a lifetime'. So it is not just your three days at puppy school; it is continuation of training. We start it off. We say, 'Okay, this is how we handle the dog. This is what we expose the dog to'. These are noise stimulations and environment stimulations. I have got pictures of the dogs going for drives. I have got Santa in there having a play. If the postman comes around,

everyone meets the postman. It is situations like that that mean that if that dog ever has to be rehomed, we can say, 'Hey, that is a pet shop dog that has come from us'. We know pretty confidently that if the people have continued on what we have started, that dog is going to be a very, very confident dog at the end of it and we can say, 'Hey, it has contributed to our community'. We are a community-based store. We do not have people coming from all over the place. We are based in a community, and most of our dogs get sold into that community.

I have put some data in there. We sold 80 dogs last year, so November to November, and 60 the year before. We sold 15 cats in that same time. So it is not like the councils can actually not monitor what we are doing. The RSPCA can monitor. We only buy from registered domestic animal businesses. It is fully transparent. We are transparent with the microchips. Jodie and I both went, 'Prove it'. If you say something, prove it, show me, and we have done that. So this is mine; that is hers. That way we want transparency; we want to be completely open about it.

We want people — not social media, because social media is going to have a preconceived idea about what a pet shop is — who can actually look at something that is evidence based that says, 'Okay, show me your animal behaviourist's information. Show me what you are doing. Show me the processes that you are going through. Show me what benefit a pet shop can have'. There is your information. We had a 457 visa applicant and she was an animal behaviourist. She came into store and she worked with our dogs. That was a huge commitment for us.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. Ms Knox, any opening comments?

**Ms KNOX** — My solution to the whole argument about the bill is that if you can reduce or change the registration process within councils — because my big fear is that councils cannot cope with this; it is being proved at our council alone — I think your answer and face saver for the Labor government is if you can move your 12-week registration to six months and at the age of six months if the dog is not desexed, which means there is the intent to breed, then that dog right there, right then, is registered as part of a domestic animal business. That is your safety. That gets every person who owns a dog within Victoria.

My second opinion of the whole bill is in relation to a future DAB. I have no problem with capping it in the future for the new domestic businesses that are coming in and that are going to learn how to take care of animals — what is the compulsory care, what is the welfare that is provided? But the businesses that are existing, that have been breaking their necks to get from one end of the hoop to the other end of the hoop and getting through it whilst it is on fire, are the ones that need to be audited and allowed to continue if their compliance is to standard and if that welfare is to proper care.

**The CHAIR** — We might move on to some questions from the committee. I thought I might begin with one. This has been referred to in the media as legislation by social media. Is there any comment any of you might like to make about that?

**Dr SILLINCE** — That is the way we found out that the bill was likely to happen, by all of the promises on social media prior to the election. It caused us enough concern that we sought meetings with the minister, and I was told to my face words to the effect, 'It's coming. We've got the numbers. Get used to it'.

**Mr LEANE** — I think you have probably already answered my question. You would be encouraged that there should be more transparency. You could not be any more transparent with the animals you just spoke about, but more transparency in advertising a dog, whether it be online or — —

**Dr SILLINCE** — You have got the tools to do that right now because of the microchip numbers and the microchip registries. The tools already exist. What is missing is the enforcement, and we keep coming back to the same thing: it is all about enforcement. The worry is that we add layer on layer of regulation with no enforcement of any of it, so if you are just unlucky, you get caught, but the other scum get away with it.

**Mr LEANE** — Getting back to the scum, and I suppose you sort of hit the nail on the head that you would absolutely despise that sort of enterprise that is producing puppies in a fashion that would probably highlight — —

**Dr SILLINCE** — That is the absolute frustration. I am sitting amongst the best of the best and you are planning on closing them down.

**Mrs KNOX** — We have got multiple illegal puppy farms within my shire that I have been screaming about for years, yet I am the one who keeps getting audited, I am the one that keeps getting followed up. I have got no objections to that — that is transparency, I am happy with that — but there is so much out there that council cannot cope with at the moment. The education that has come from the two breeders within the Moira Shire Council alone should have been provided by the government. It has not.

**Mr LEANE** — Can I just ask: how many members in Pets Australia.

**Dr SILLINCE** — We are very well represented in the breeding community, we have got very good representation in the grooming community, independent retail, and some boarding and pet-sitting. My board does not let me publish numbers.

**Mr LEANE** — Okay, that is fair enough. I might come back if there is time.

**Mr BOURMAN** — Thanks for your presentation. I am just going to ask some more questions about the other scum as well. One thing I am kind of getting a ping on is a lot of the legitimate breeders will also pick up intel on what is going on in the not-so-legitimate world. I am going to make a statement and you can comment on it: if the legitimate breeders and pet stores end up getting wiped out, that is going to be a loss of a source of intel.

**Mrs PEELE** — Absolutely.

**Dr SILLINCE** — Correct.

**Mrs PEELE** — It is surprising when you talk to a customer what they tell you, and you go, ‘I haven’t heard that one. Really, you got caught that way?’. You do. Your little radar goes up and you ask questions. We document it, we diarise it and we just say, ‘Okay, that’s something for the little memory bank. Let’s keep that in the loop. Let’s make people aware. Let’s bring it to the attention of legislators, RSPCA, any of the council groups’. Customers tell you a lot.

**Dr SILLINCE** — In New South Wales we have got a very elegant, informal but transparent arrangement with RSPCA where a member can report a breach to us, and we pass it directly to the chief inspector. The reporter’s name remains anonymous unless and until there is a prosecution. We have not been able to get that arrangement in Victoria, but to your comment on intel, absolutely.

**Mr BOURMAN** — Has anyone tried to actually work with the RSPCA to get that flow of information?

**Dr SILLINCE** — Yes, we have been. As an ex-president of the AVA I have known Liz Walker for a very long time. She took over the reins relatively recently. It has been a somewhat tumultuous period for her. I have flagged to her that we would love to have that arrangement going, she has flagged to me that it would not be a bad idea, but we sort of have not gotten around to organising it yet.

**Mrs PEELE** — We have approached the RSPCA and said that we will work with them as a reputable pet store in Melbourne. We are 15 minutes away from their head offices. We believe in both rescue and purpose-bred dogs in our store. We think that there is room for both. Our pen sizes — I have put a USB there — are huge, they are massive. They are full height. We can walk in and we can deal with the animals like you would at home. We will work with the RSPCA and say, ‘How will rescue actually work in store? Show us the mythology of it. How is it going to work, how are we going to do our guarantees, how are we going to prove our source of dogs through adoption, how are we going to actually do it?’. Maybe Dr Walker actually thought that I was joking, but we are not; we are more than willing to say, ‘Here we are, we have got brilliant staff that are more than happy’ — they are really keen to get things really happening here, but we are not getting the feedback back saying they want to work with stores. All it is is, ‘Shut it down, shut it down, you are bad’. We are saying, ‘Look, we have got so many procedures and so many things of value here’.

I think we have got quite a lot more way to go to actually improve animal welfare in the state of Victoria if we have cooperation from rescue and welfare groups, shelters, RSPCA and the government, because if we do not have that support, the public has the potential to say, ‘You are just a pet store’, and rescue in the pet store is not

going to fly with that sort of attitude on social media. We need the credibility that we can get from government to say, 'Look, this is how we are going to do it'. Let's do a test case — I would put my hand up and say, 'I will be the test case', and give it a go.

**Mr BOURMAN** — How many people does Mad About Pets employ?

**Mrs PEELE** — Fifteen including me, and I am normally stuck on legislation, so they are lucky.

**Mr BOURMAN** — Lucky you. And Jodie, how many?

**Mrs KNOX** — We have got eight.

**Mr BOURMAN** — So it all adds up. A bit here, a bit there, all under threat. How many breeding bitches do you have?

**Mrs KNOX** — We have got 45 breeding at this stage, 5 we are raising up and 12 — —

**Ms HARTLAND** — Jodie, can I go back to your evidence about a responsible breeder being the whistleblower, where there have been situations around your area; can you give us a bit more detail on that, like the process? You hear something about another breeder, what do you do?

**Mrs KNOX** — You report it to the council, unless you believe there is cruelty or you know there is cruelty, then you reported to the RSPCA. I have reported several breeders within the Moira Shire Council myself. One of them lives three houses down the road. He still has won the agriculture award for best trained dog in the show two weekends ago. He is not a DAB, he is entitled to be a DAB; he is illegal and there is a lot of controversy in his group about that particular man. Nothing has ever been done, nothing. The next door neighbour's vet's nurse has got 14 fluffies running around the backyard. The council does nothing about it. We have got five rangers and two admins — seriously, I think we have got the worst bunch of dropped-out, broken-down coppers in our rangers that you could ever come across.

**Ms HARTLAND** — How big is the Shire of Moira?

**Mrs KNOX** — I could not answer that; it is huge though. I have been riding the council for years. We actually asked them to conduct an audit in 2010. We pushed them to conduct an audit on domestic animal businesses. We pushed them in 2011. We pushed them in 2012. In 2013 we had our last audit. I have not seen a councillor since. I am now going to sue the council because they have failed to do their job. This all comes back to a state government that does not look after the local government.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Why would you sue the council? I just really need to understand this, because if we are saying that councils are not doing their job now, we have had evidence from the MAV that while they support the intent of the legislation they believe they are going to have trouble making people comply, because they do not have enough resources and they do not have enough money currently and it will be difficult for them. I am just looking for examples.

**Mrs KNOX** — I want the state government to realise that this is not going to work. It is not going to work, because the money is not supplied to them. So if I can get one council jumping up and down and saying, 'Hey, look what's happening to us', maybe state government would notice.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Is it only the compliance issues, or are there other issues in the bill?

**Mrs KNOX** — Look, there are other issues in the animal management plans that they have. The law clearly states that with three or more dogs you have to be a domestic animal business, yet they allow companion animals — and this is in almost every one of the 79 animal management plans. In a rural area they allow six dogs. They do not stipulate that they need to be desexed. They actually allow that to occur. They are not providing the information that the codes, acts and regulations actually stipulate. It is a web.

**Dr SILLINCE** — The problem with that is, if that is the situation now —

**Mrs KNOX** — Where is it going to go?

**Dr SILLINCE** — there is zero hope under the proposed bill.

**Ms HARTLAND** — So you do not support the intent of the bill and you do not believe that councils have got the capacity to make the bill work? I am not trying to put words in your mouth; I just need to understand.

**Dr SILLINCE** — Okay. To answer your question specifically, if the intent of the bill is to improve animal welfare, then the bill has failed already.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Why do you think it has failed?

**Dr SILLINCE** — I can think of 50 ways to get around it. I can think of 50 ways to fly under the radar. I do not condone any of them.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Can you give five examples then of why you think the bill will fail — the intent of the bill rather than the enforcement?

**Dr SILLINCE** — Well, as I say, if the intent of the bill is animal welfare, then shipping puppies and kittens from Cairns is not to the benefit of animal welfare when there is a shortage in this state. To give you a concrete example of that, there is a desperate shortage of dogs in WA right now, where there is one ‘puppy for sale’ ad for every five ‘we are looking for a puppy’ ads, and cavoodle puppies are currently selling for \$5000. People in New South Wales and Queensland are putting eight-week-old puppies on planes from rural New South Wales, so there is a 4 or 5-hour trip to the airport, then the airport, in summer.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Is it happening at the moment in Victoria that puppies are being flown interstate?

**Dr SILLINCE** — State trade happens across state boundaries, but if you reduce supply in Victoria, then people — —

**Ms HARTLAND** — No, I am asking about what is happening currently. Is that occurring now?

**Dr SILLINCE** — At a very low level. The reason for that is this: if I want a cavoodle puppy, I can go onto the classifieds and I can find one in Victoria, and I can go and visit that breeder. But if Jodie is closed, then I will be heading for Sydney or Queensland or Cairns. We have already got examples of the RSPCA shipping huskies from Darwin to Canberra because people want to own huskies and there are too many huskies in Darwin, so we know that inappropriate, high-risk animal welfare trade will happen if the demand is there.

The second is the issue that I have raised of effectively closing down world’s best practice and then leaving those who choose not to obey the law to choose not to obey the law. If you ever had any thoughts about people who choose not to obey the law, just think about how many unlicensed drivers are driving unregistered cars in Victoria, and enforcement there is very strong. So the chances of them being caught are very low. All you have to put in your classified is a postbox in Albury-Wodonga and a mobile phone number. It really is that easy to get around the bill.

**Ms HARTLAND** — All right. Can you give me some other examples of why you think this current bill that is before us is not going to help animal welfare?

**Dr SILLINCE** — If I go to Karen’s pet shop, I can walk in and know that that pet shop is licensed, audited and registered. I can know that every animal in that pet shop comes from a licensed, audited and registered breeder. If she ceases to exist, I will go onto Gumtree, I will ring the mobile number and the nice man will say, ‘I’m coming down to Melbourne on the weekend. I’ll meet you in the McDonald’s car park at Eildon and we’ll do the trade there’. I have been involved in one of those.

**Ms HARTLAND** — So is that what happens currently without this legislation?

**Dr SILLINCE** — At a very low level — and that is the point. There are no absolutes in this business. The fact that it happens at a low level now is proof that it happens. But if we cut supply by up to 50 per cent, then I can guarantee it will happen at a much higher level, and we have data from WA that is proving that.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Can you supply that data, because the data we have from the RSPCA — —

**Dr SILLINCE** — I do not have it on my right now.

**Ms HARTLAND** — No. But if you can supply it, because the data that we received earlier in the day from the RSPCA was that they believe that even with the new legislation there would be enough animals on the market to meet current demand. What would you say to that?

**Dr SILLINCE** — I would say that their numbers and our modelling are very, very different.

**Ms HARTLAND** — If you could supply your modelling to the committee, that would be extremely helpful.

**Mrs PEELE** — I have actually included that in the submission.

**Ms HARTLAND** — That is good.

**Mrs PEELE** — That comes from Mars Petcare. They did a Pet Positives score in 2015, and it said that dog numbers in Australia have actually declined by 100 000. There are apparently 4.1 million dogs. Homes with dogs have actually declined from 40.1 per cent to 39.7 per cent. But what is most concerning is the rate of senior dogs. Senior dogs have actually increased to 34 per cent, and that is dogs of eight years of age and over. We are going to have quite a gap between the elderly dogs passing on and the lack of dogs coming through to actually meet those needs.

Cats are similar. Their numbers have declined by 200 000 to 2.2 million, so they are actually half of the dog population. The 21.2 per cent of homes with cats have declined from 23.5 per cent, and senior cats are actually up 31 per cent. On their whole report there are a lot of reasons for that — there is lack of suitable housing, people's lifestyles, lack of suitable animals. There are a lot of things that actually go into those figures. It is not just lack of supply. But lack of supply is something that is going to hit quite quickly, and I think we are unaware of the effects of that, especially in Victoria.

**Mr FINN** — I have to say right at the beginning, if I was a husky, I would want to get out of Darwin.

**Mrs PEELE** — Well, that is right.

**Mr FINN** — Karen, I am just assuming here that pet stores are not just places for the doggie in the window. You have explained to us a little bit today that there is a lot more involved than just getting a dog, putting it in a box and selling it.

**Mrs PEELE** — Absolutely.

**Mr FINN** — Could you give us a bit of a run-down on what you do from picking it up from the breeder to when you actually sell it to the new owner?

**Mrs PEELE** — Absolutely. A box is a box. It does not matter what you make it look like, it is still a box. It is a confined area, and for that animal that is where it is spending its life. So what are you actually doing with it? How are you handling it? What exposure are you giving it? How are you dealing with that animal? So when the dog comes in from a breeder, we will do a very good health check. The vets have already done a health check; we will do another health check. We will mark it all off; we will do a weight check; and we will see how that dog settles in. Is it confident? Is it lethargic? What is it doing? Our breeders are spot-on. We know our dogs are going to be great.

Our socialisation program starts with basically putting a collar on, getting the dog out and giving it time alone from its siblings, so it actually gets that confidence to be by itself with the public. We have got a set criteria that we work through. It is like having a kindergarten teacher. You send your kids to kindergarten and the teachers there are playing with the kids, but there is actually an educational component to that. That is what we are taking on, that educational component for those animals. We are saying, 'You're here. You're in a store. You can't do anything about it. You're waiting for your home to become available'. We are waiting for people to come and say, 'That is the dog I want'. So we have got an obligation to that dog to give it as much exposure to life as possible, and we have a program to do that.

We document it. A lot of our stuff is not actually documented because we are too busy running around going, 'Okay, we need to do that one and that one', serve a customer, answer the phone and do all these things. But our customers get involved. On one of the little videos there is a little boy who has got a transformer mask on. We had the little puppies out, they were just going for a little walk in the store, and he was talking to them through



the mask. The puppies were like, 'Oh, this is awesome', and we were thinking, 'That's what we want'. We want puppies to actually interact with children in that noisy, busy environment where they go, 'Hey, this is all cool. We're going home to children'. We teach them to keep all four paws on the ground. We do not want them jumping up on to kids. We do not want them mouthing, we want them to be socially acceptable dogs that can actually live in a family home.

Sometimes they might end up getting rehomed. If they are going to get rehomed, the best chance they have is that they are toilet trained, they are socialised, they have got good acceptable manners in the family home, so when someone goes, 'Hey, I know that dog. I'll take it'. It goes nowhere near a shelter. That is what we call futureproofing our puppies. That is our dogs. We have got a full rehoming program where we say, 'We will take those dogs back no matter what. No matter what happens to that dog, phone me up, my mobile number is in there. Give us a call, I'll come get the dog and we'll look after it'. That is our obligation, because we do have a full lifetime obligation to that dog. That is why we start our socialisation program so early. Then when we say to our customers, 'When you get the dog, it's not just three days of puppy school, it's up to two years of training'. You cannot expect a six-month-old to be like a teenager and have those social graces and everything. You have got to actually put the time in over a considerable period. That is what we do with our dogs.

I think if we get taken out of the community, we are a very open place for people to come and get free information, especially if you have got animal behaviourists working in the store. It is just a couple of little tweaks, and you go, 'Okay, we'll nip that in the bud. Let's deal with this. Let's move on to the next issue'. If you do not have people who are dealing with animals all the time, you do not have that wealth of information in the community. You do not have that experience. For people that are concerned about something, where are they going to go? They would say, 'I am not going to go to the vet; the vet is going to charge me for it. Have I got time to go to the dog club? Maybe, maybe not. Can I just pop into the store? You know, he's mouthing me a little bit. Can you just show me what to do? Can you just teach me that grip again?' Yes, easy. We are very, very accessible to the community.

**Mr FINN** — Karen and Jodie, I imagine that you both have a vested interest in ensuring that your dogs are well looked after and healthy.

**Mrs PEELE** — Absolutely.

**Mr FINN** — What lengths do you go to to ensure they are?

**Mrs PEELE** — I grill Jodie all the time. I say, 'Prove it. Prove it'. We bang heads.

**Mrs KNOX** — This is basically the book written for idiots, so you can pick it up tomorrow and look at this and read everything that we do with our dogs. Our socialisation program is proven. You can just go on to our Facebook page and there are thousands and thousands of happy stories. The fact that our dogs have been involved with the Starlight Foundation — we have got two dogs that we have donated to the Starlight Foundation — and they are working with special needs. We have got a dog working in a dementia home in Cobram that is working with dementia. I have got a dog in Canberra that is working with dementia. If the lady becomes discombobulated in the home, the dog will go and get her and take her back to the lounge room. We have got various stories on our website of children with special needs where our animals have just made their lives worth living so it is worth getting out of bed each morning. That proves the temperament and the training and the time and the welfare care that we put into our animals each and every day.

**Mr FINN** — Joanne, just getting back to what you were saying before about the lack of consultation on this bill, were you aware this was coming before the election or after the election? When were you alerted to this possibility?

**Dr SILLINCE** — We became aware when a number of members contacted us about Labor members posting on activist social media prior to the election. After the election we kept monitoring those websites, and there were certain promises made, which got us a bit interested. We then sought a meeting with the minister. It was not a very constructive meeting. We were basically told that the bill was coming, but that was it. We spoke to a few people in this house and were quite warmly received. Then we knew nothing of the bill, nothing of the content of the bill, no consultation as to what we thought would work — nothing — until I got a call from the department saying, 'Oh, we're prepared to show you the bill but only if you sign a confidentiality agreement'.

**Mr FINN** — How long ago was that?

**Dr SILLINCE** — Two, three, two and a half months maybe — I am guessing — but a decent gap, yes.

**Mr FINN** — So when did you actually get to see the bill?

**The CHAIR** — One last question, Mr Finn. I am just conscious of the time. We are running 15 minutes over, so if you want one last question, please go ahead.

**Dr SILLINCE** — The answer to your question is, when it was tabled, when it became public, and that was the first we saw of it.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for your evidence today. I will just remind you that you will receive a copy of a transcript of evidence for proofreading. That will ultimately make its way onto the committee's website. Once again, thank you for your attendance today.

**Witnesses withdrew.**