

# 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

Mr Craig Ondarchie

#### Participating member

Ms Samantha Dunn

#### Staff

Secretary: Ms Lilian Topic

#### Witnesses

Mr Mark Fraser, chief executive officer, and

Mr John Grima, retail director, Pet Industry Association of Australia.

**The CHAIR** — I declare reopened the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing. Again, I welcome all those present this morning. Today the committee is hearing evidence in relation to the inquiry into the Domestic Animals Amendment (Puppy Farms and Pet Shops) Bill 2016, and the evidence today is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected for what you say in 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 present this morning. Thank you for attendance and agreeing to provide some testimony to the committee. At this point I will hand over to yourselves if you have a presentation you might like to make to the committee, after which we will move into some questions from the committee. You might like to each state your name and your organisation and then go off from there.

**Mr FRASER** — Thanks, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Mark Fraser, and I am the CEO of the Pet Industry Association of Australia. My colleague is John Grima, our retail director and also owner of Kellyville Pets in New South Wales. We appreciate this opportunity.

For those who do not know, the Pet Industry Association of Australia is the peak body representing all sectors of the Australian pet industry. We are the voice of the industry, and through advocacy and education we strive to ensure that animal welfare and high standards are a key focus across the association and the industry at large.

We do not support the Victorian proposal to ban the sale of puppies in pet stores and limit the number of breeding dogs to 10 per facility. If implemented, we believe this bill would create a large number of micro puppy farms; will destroy the only transparent sector of the industry; will see a marked increase in online sales; would not adequately address the lack of resources for enforcement, which we believe has been the real problem all along; and also have several unintended consequences. Our key mandate is animal welfare, and we welcome a review of breeding and retail standards, especially for dogs, but we are highly concerned about the severe approach this bill is taking.

PIAA believes this is an emotional and radical decision that is not evidence-based and will do nothing in the long run to improve animal welfare standards. The proposed changes do not address the root cause of the problem. Enforcement of the relevant codes has not taken place, and this is largely responsible for the problems that the industry is now experiencing.

Breeding numbers are not equated to better welfare. There is a lack of any scientific evidence indicating that limiting the number of breeding dogs improves animal welfare standards.

Poor welfare practice can happen in large or small breeding facilities. Limiting the amount of breeding bitches on its own is not going to improve animal welfare. The focus needs to be on the social, behavioural and physiological needs of the dogs and puppies.

People deserve choice. If this proposal were to go through, the demand for particular breeds of dogs will continue, but supply will significantly drop, and this will have several of its own adverse consequences, including increasing the cost of buying a puppy, leading to reduced pet ownership. We will see unwanted effects on the social, mental and physical wellbeing of Victorians, as the health values of owning a pet are well documented. It will push the breeding and sale of dogs further underground. There would be an increase in the purchase of puppies from interstate and a huge increase in the sale of puppies online, already impossible to regulate.

The changes will not reduce dogs in shelters. PIAA is concerned about the numbers of dogs in shelters and fully supports rehoming and adoption. Shelter pets, however, are not suitable for everyone. People need choice to access a pet that suits their lifestyle and their household. Pet shops account for less than 10 per cent of all puppies sold, and very few dogs sourced from pet shops actually end up in shelters.

The economic impact of this? Legitimate ethical breeders and pet store owners will be unable to maintain a viable business. This will lead to staff redundancies and other social and economic consequences.

The PIAA has its own strict standards and guidelines for all breeders and retail members. We insist that all our retailers advise us of their sources, their puppies, and supply a vet audit for all those breeders. All our breeder members have to supply an annual vet audit as well.

We are in the planning stages of a PIAA companion animal centre concept, and there is information on that in the folders that we have left you. Our accreditation standards are very high, and we value the importance of education for both the industry and the public.

To summarise, the PIAA supports any move to stamp out puppy farms, but the current proposals will only make matters worse. These proposals need to be scrapped. Any further proposals need to have the full input of all stakeholders. The focus needs to be on high animal welfare standards, education and, most importantly, enforcement.

We fully support a self-funded retailer/breeder licensing system and look forward to working with government and other stakeholders to produce the best welfare outcomes for dogs and cats in Victoria. We believe that every Australian who is able should have the right to own a pet.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for your presentation. I thought I might just reference an inquiry that was conducted in New South Wales that you may or may not be aware of, being the inquiry into companion animal breeding practices in New South Wales. We are just wondering if either of you gentlemen are aware of that inquiry and, if so, were you involved in it at all?

**Mr FRASER** — We were, actually. I think I got three days into my current role, and we had to give evidence in front of the New South Wales parliamentary inquiry, so it was a rapid learning curve. The outcome of that inquiry was very positive for us in that the New South Wales government did not see any correlation between the numbers of breeding dogs. It also did not see the value in removing the sale of puppies from pet stores, being the only transparent means of trade, so we were happy with the outcome of that. It was an intense inquiry, I suppose. It did account for all the stakeholders having a say, and I think that is what is lacked in this proposal up to this date. We do really appreciate the fact that this committee is now in play and we have a chance to put all the facts on the table.

**The CHAIR** — Indeed. Finding 2 from that inquiry was:

The committee finds no evidence that the number of animals kept by breeders is in itself a factor which determines welfare outcomes of breeding animals.

Obviously that is a key finding from that particular inquiry. I am just wondering: are you aware of any evidence at all that would contradict that finding?

**Mr FRASER** — None at all. Not even the AVA got to speak on their behalf. It has not come out and said that there was any evidence that 10 dogs is better than 20 dogs is better than 2 dogs. As Matt said in earlier evidence, you can have bad conditions in a property that is operating with two or three dogs. You can have pristine conditions in a property that is operating with the same number. The number is irrelevant, as long as the social behaviour and physiological needs of those dogs and puppies are met. I think Matt is a prime example — 170 or 150 dogs with 25 staff in pristine conditions.

One of the first things I did when I started this role was hop in the car and drive out to Banksia Park and see it for myself. I must say it was a benchmark facility. I think if half the other facilities in the country and in the state were half as good as that, we would be in a better position.

What we are concerned about here is that breeders and retailers such as Matt, who operate under high ethical standards they set upon themselves, will disappear. What we will have is the puppy farms that are already out there hiding under the blankets proliferate, and it will make things even harder. It would be impossible for animal welfare standards to rise. It would be impossible to regulate the amount of unknown breeders out there. We would like to see all the facts on the table and a rethink of this whole proposal.

**The CHAIR** — Why is it do you think that the government has chosen what appears to be this arbitrary number of 10 to enforce upon the industry? Is there any reason at all that you can understand as to why they would?

**Mr FRASER** — No logical reason. I mean, I have heard it said that most of the complaints against breeders are breeders with more than 10 dogs. But most commercial breeders have more than 10 dogs, so that argument does not really sit. The fact is there is no evidence. As I said, bad conditions can happen with two to three breeding dogs. It is not the numbers. It is the behaviour, it is the way the dogs are brought up, the way they are

socialised and the way they are rehomed. All those factors come into play. It is not a numbers-based thing and it should not be numbers based.

**Mr GRIMA** — I think also that if you have got more than 10 dogs, you are more exposed, so you are more likely to get complaints. But there could be five dog breeders with appalling conditions and those go under the radar because they are not big enough to be noticed. That is probably one of the biggest issues: that you can intensively breed 5 dogs in small cages in squalor just as much as if you had 100 dogs. The number does not have any bearing on it at all.

**The CHAIR** — Do either of you believe this is a purely ideological decision by the government to introduce this random number of 10?

**Mr FRASER** — Yes. I think the number of 10 has just been plucked out of the air, really. As the minister's adviser said to us, this is an election promise, so there is no, I suppose, argument entering into it until now. It was an election promise. I do not know where the figure 10 was plucked from. There is no merit behind numbers at all.

**Mr GRIMA** — I think where there is transparency, that is the critical thing. Puppy farmers do not want to be known where they are or where they breed their animals, but if there is transparency, then that goes a big way of cleaning up a lot of these issues.

**Mr EIDEH** — Firstly, I want to ask you how many members does your association have?

**Mr FRASER** — We have on our database at the moment 888. Forty-one of those are retailers in Victoria and three are breeders in Victoria, to give you an idea.

**Mr EIDEH** — My other question is has your association met with the minister at any point about this proposal, whether about the election commitment and so forth or the bill?

**Mr GRIMA** — That was prior to Mark's time, but I met with the minister along with our then temporary CEO Bob Croucher. Bob had requested a meeting with the minister for about 8 months on several occasions, to which we were not able to get a meeting until 8 months later. When we had the meeting with the minister, she pretty much said that, 'We've made a decision and we're going to go through with our pre-election promise'. So basically whatever we had to say was listened to, but she had already made up her mind, which is very disappointing from our perspective because we are the industry body that should have been consulted during this time, and we were not. We too are concerned about animal welfare and concerned about those illegal puppy farms that are out there, but we were not given the opportunity to give our viewpoint on how we believe this problem can be fixed.

**Mr EIDEH** — My last question is: do you submit that the bill will see the breeding and sale of dogs pushed underground through rogue operators? Does the association therefore support elements of the bill which would see the breeders registered with their local council and increase transparency in advertising?

**Mr GRIMA** — Sorry, I did not understand the question.

**Mr EIDEH** — Does the association therefore accept all the elements of the bill, which would see all breeders registered with their local council and increase transparency in advertising?

**Mr GRIMA** — Well, I believe that some form of self-funded licensing is what is required, and whatever government department as a third party inspectorate is required. It is no good having a good code of practice in place if it is not enforced. I mean, imagine if we did not have police on the road, we would all be speeding. There are speed limits everywhere but we would all be speeding, would we not? I think whether it be local councils or whether it be RSPCA, some third party, but it should be a self-funded system.

**Mr FRASER** — It has to be a system that identifies the breeders out there, and that is the problem at the moment. It is an unknown. The trouble is that those who are ethical breeders are the ones who are quite happy to register. The ones who are operating as puppy farms, they are the ones that will hide further in the bush. That is one of the unintended consequences, so we believe registration and licensing is the way to go. The current code of practice in Victoria is one of the strongest ones in the country, if not in many countries. As Matt said earlier, the problem has been enforcement. It has not been enforced. The RSPCA is under-resourced, the

councils are under-resourced, so there needs to be money put into that enforcement side of things. No matter what goes through, if it is not enforced, it is irrelevant; it does not change a thing. So enforcement for us is a key word to anything going forward.

**Mr GRIMA** — Our breeder code of practice is based on the Victorian model because we believe it is the best one in Australia. It is better than the New South Wales one. It is definitely more stringent. Our PIAA code of practice, which was only born about eight months ago or so — we are still sort of enforcing it out there — is the best in the system. If we can find a way to enforce it, then a lot of these issues will go away.

**Ms HARTLAND** — I have got a few questions. I just had a quick look at the code or the guidelines that you practise from. Have you ever had a situation where you have sanctioned a member for not complying with the code? How do you manage that when there has been bad behaviour from a member?

**Mr FRASER** — Well, there are two answers to that question. One is it can go before an ethics committee. If it is a complaint from a member of the public or a complaint from another member, we will then put that to the ethics committee, who will discuss it and put a recommendation to the PIAA board. The other side of that is because, as I said, annually our retailers and breeders have to supply a vet audit. If that member chooses not to supply that vet audit for whatever the reason may be or the retailer decides not to tell us where their puppies are sourced, they have the opportunity to cease their membership. So the guidelines are quite strict on that. If you cannot live up to and comply with those guidelines, you cannot take on membership. There have been occasions where a couple of members have for whatever reason said, ‘Well, we can’t come up with that standard, so we’ll have to resign’.

**Ms HARTLAND** — So you said there were 41 shops and 3 breeders in your membership, but you have over 800 members.

**Mr FRASER** — Yes, that is in Victoria.

**Ms HARTLAND** — So can you give me an idea of what the other members do?

**Mr FRASER** — The breakdown? Of the 800, the breakdown is probably 300-plus are retailers. Probably 150 would be boarding kennels, doggie day care centres and pet sitters. Then moving down, you have groomers, suppliers and manufacturers, right down to students — students are a smaller element. But the majority of our members are probably retailers. Breeders are a very small element. We only have a dozen breeders nationally, and that is growing slowly because we put our standards in play. We found now that because we have such high standards for our breeders, they are coming out to us saying, ‘Well, we realise you guys are on the right track. We want to be a part of this. We want to know how to become part of this’.

**Mr GRIMA** — One thing, if I can add to that. We are not actually an enforcement agency; we are an association and we have built some pretty high standards. It is actually much easier not to be a member of the PIAA than to try and comply with our standards. So those who are members are aspiring to want to become better, because otherwise why would they join? Why would they want to pay money and why would they want to open themselves up to our high standard when, especially in New South Wales, they can work under a much more minimal standard? Yet they choose to come on board with our higher standard.

**Ms HARTLAND** — So if we look at it from that point of view, would you not think that having a very high standard in Victoria would be a good thing, because then we know exactly what is happening, we know where animals are being sourced from and we know how they are being dealt with? Obviously I think — and we have heard evidence from everyone — that there is a real problem with resourcing about inspections et cetera. I think that is one of the things the government absolutely has to address, especially with local government, but I would have thought that this bill actually gives an opportunity for us to have the best and highest standards in the country so people can be absolutely assured of the welfare of the animals that they are receiving.

**Mr GRIMA** — Again, the high standard was brought in by the previous government and not given time to be enforced; it was only in place for eight months. On top of that, there is no funding towards enforcing that really good system. Why waste the money to create a good system if you are not going to enforce it? It was just a waste of time. I mean, it is so obvious that this issue needs enforcement and it needs funding provided for that enforcement. Whether it comes from the industry or whether it comes from government, it has to come from somewhere, and that is what will fix this issue.

**Ms HARTLAND** — What kind of enforcement regime would you envision that would actually make people comply?

**Mr GRIMA** — I think firstly transparency will make them comply because the ones that are doing a bad job are not being transparent. They are hiding out in the bush, so they are not being transparent. For example, if a breeder comes on board with us, the first thing we say to them is, 'You'll need to do a vet audit, and by the way we're going to hand that vet audit over to the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League. They will come out and do a random inspection. How do you feel about that?'. Straightaway from the get-go, if they are worried about that, they are not going to want to deal with us, and they are going to go away. But the majority of them do and are happy to do it, and they are happy for the RSPCA to come and visit their facilities. The RSPCA will do an audit, and if there is anything that needs to be upgraded, they will do so in due course.

**Ms HARTLAND** — This may be a question you cannot answer, but when you have a situation like that, where a breeder approaches you, wants to join and then realises that they really cannot maintain the standard that you are looking for, does that sound alarm bells in your head about that breeder, and do you then as an association feel you need to ask the RSPCA to inspect or contact their local council?

**Mr GRIMA** — I think anybody who is shady is not going to go past stage 1. They are just going to walk away. The fact that they are happy for them to come out says a lot of things about that breeder. I am happy to work with breeders and help improve their standards if they have got the right attitude. If they have the wrong attitude and all they are in it for is the fast buck, then I am not interested in knowing them and they are the ones that should be shut down.

**Ms HARTLAND** — And they are the ones I am talking about. Are they the ones that then ring an alarm bell, and do you take any other steps to inform the appropriate authority when you have someone you think is really dodgy?

**Mr FRASER** — If we think they are someone who is breaking the law or acting unethically, definitely we will pass that on. We have a close relationship, especially in New South Wales, with the RSPCA and the AWL. I and numbers of members of the board head around quite regularly visiting breeders. I think I have visited probably 80 per cent of our breeders to date, because they are all over the country. When I go somewhere in a particular state I will always make a point to go out and visit breeders. It might be random; it might be with pre-notice. If we hear alarm bells we definitely report that. We work quite closely with animal welfare agencies in all states, actually.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Do you have any sense of how many breeders there are currently in Victoria, even an approximate figure? I know it is a bit hard to know, because there will be people who are flying under the radar.

**Mr GRIMA** — I would not like to take a stab at it.

**Mr FRASER** — We have heard 10 000-plus. If you through DOGS Victoria et cetera, they are the ones you know about. It could be double that number. A person with two dogs in the backyard is a breeder, essentially — and there are thousands of those out there.

**Mr GRIMA** — A problem also is that they can sell online and create a website that looks nice, but really that is not the reality because people cannot go and check and there is no authority to go and check for them. So when customers ask us, 'Where do your puppies come from?', we say, 'We have breeders that we associate ourselves with. We go and visit them, and we also send the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League out to visit them at any time they want to, to make sure that they are complying and that all their animals are happy and healthy'. People are happy with that, once they know that you have that level of transparency. I think that is a critical thing. If you have transparency, it goes a long way to fixing this issue.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Do you think part of fixing the issue would also be that the government should have a public website so that people can actually look on that website — this happens now with hospitals and schools et cetera — at where these puppies are bred, and if there is an adverse finding against that breeder, people actually know that?

**Mr FRASER** — Absolutely.

**Ms HARTLAND** — The information is quick and easy to access.

**Mr GRIMA** — I think you could have that, but if you have a licence system, then that protects the consumer as well, because they should not have a licence if they are not able to comply with all the welfare standards that they need to be complying with.

**Mr BOURMAN** — Thanks for your presentation. I assume that the pet industry association is split into different states, with different chapters. Should this legislation go through as is, what do you think will happen to the Victorian chapter?

**Mr FRASER** — It is more, I suppose, split into sectors, as we have breeders, we have got boarders and we have got retailers, regardless of what state they are in. Essentially the retail members that sell puppies in Victoria and the breeders will disappear. Some might move interstate; some might shut down and move into a completely different industry. What we are worried about probably further down the line is the flow-on effect. If suddenly there are no puppies in pet stores, the next thing there are no kittens, no birds, no reptiles — because there are activists out there who say we should not have pets, despite the health benefits of owning a pet being well documented. As I said, we believe that everyone who can ably do so should own a pet, regardless of what kind of pet that is.

The consequences I think extend further than Victoria, and that is why as a national organisation we work in various states with the governments and with the animal welfare entities to sort of ensure that animal welfare is the key focus — it is not votes; it is not numbers; it is animal welfare. So it would be quite devastating for Victoria, and the flow-on effect would carry over to the other states.

**Mr BOURMAN** — So basically it is fair to say that you would lose at least 44 people or organisations that are actually devoted enough to animal welfare as well as, obviously, their business to join the pet industry association, that they will be gone and replaced by others?

**Mr FRASER** — Exactly; and that is what is happening already. People are already feeling the effect of selling puppies. The activists are breaking into the shops or damaging the windows or whatever. They are moving away from puppies into reptiles or aquatics. The aquatics sector is experiencing rapid growth at the moment. So you are right; those who are doing the right thing are the ones that will end up being shut down. Unfortunately there is still an underground movement that we believe will proliferate, the puppy farmers, the online sales with puppies that are not microchipped, not vet checked and not vaccinated. That is what worries us the most. We put this to the minister's advisers: if we were to shut down pet shops and you cannot buy a puppy there and your breeders do not want to be retailers, where do you buy puppies? The answer was, 'We don't know, probably online'. 'So how do you regulate online?'. 'We don't know. We'll have to think about that'.

**Mr GRIMA** — At a pet store, I consider every customer of mine that comes into our store — we have thousands of customers come into our store every single week, and I consider each and every one of those as an RSPCA inspector because they care about animals. That is why they are there. The fact that we are on public view seven days a week, very long hours — it is very hard not to be transparent in that sort of situation, so it is ideal for that.

**Mr BOURMAN** — I guess it is also safe to say illegal puppy farms existed long before the internet, so it might be the old case of going down to the pub and buying a puppy sort of thing.

**Mr GRIMA** — Or in classified ads.

**Mr BOURMAN** — Yes. It is impossible to stamp out illegal activity. In your opinion, if this legislation goes through as is, what is going to be the net effect on animal welfare to the wider animal community?

**Mr GRIMA** — I think there are going to be a lot of micro puppy farms. There is definitely going to be a lot of backyard breeding, as Matt said earlier, by inexperienced people, and that concerns me. Ten dogs in a suburban backyard will happen because the price of dogs will go up, and unfortunately it is going to attract the wrong people for the wrong reasons.

We had a second meeting in the minister's office, and I asked some questions, such as, 'How are you going to stop cross-border trading?'. They did not have an answer for that, and I said, 'You're about to bring out a bill, and you don't know how you're going to stop cross-border trading. How are you going to control the increased breeders in backyards, because there will be an increase in breeders to supply the demand? All of a sudden you

are going to have 1000 or 2000 backyard breeders breeding 10 dogs at a time. How are you going to police that? Isn't it easier to police someone who has got 50 dogs and you can go and visit them every month if you need to? How are you going to police it?'. They actually did not have an answer to that either.

I also asked them how they are going to deal with other breeding facilities, such as guide dogs and service dogs, like police dogs and things like that. They basically said — the minister's adviser at that time, because the minister was not present — there will be no exemptions. I am not sure under the bill whether there is an exemption, but in my opinion if you can breed guide dogs in a facility, if the pet industry has the same standards, then why is there a problem with that? What is the difference between breeding guide dogs and breeding companion dogs, provided they are bred in the same conditions?

**Mr BOURMAN** — I did not notice any exemptions for anyone, so all the police and service dogs look like they are going to be figuring out a new paradigm themselves.

**Mr FRASER** — Which in itself is a tragedy. In answer to your question, we do not see this doing anything to raise animal welfare standards at all — in fact the opposite, for the reasons that John has explained and I have earlier as well.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Mark, you hit the nail on the head. This is about animal welfare, making sure the standards are maintained and being able to enforce against those who are doing the wrong thing. For me this is a bit sort of ad hoc because they have not really given the current legislation a chance to run its course. I do note that you said there are some people who think we should not own pets. I am not sure if I own my dog or my dog owns me, actually; I am not quite sure which way it goes!

I do want to touch on something you said in your presentation. That was around sale of puppies at pet shops. You made a comment — if I get it wrong, correct me — that very few of those dogs end up in animal shelters. Do you have any data around that at all?

**Mr FRASER** — No. Actually I was speaking to the RSPCA this week. It is not something the RSPCA collects — if puppies turn up at the shelters. As I said, 10 per cent of sales of puppies are in pet shops; it is only 10 per cent. The only way to say that the ones in pet shops are not ending up in the shelters is the breed type. Your groodles and your cavoodles that people pay \$3000 for are very unlikely to end up in a shelter, whereas most of the breeds that are in shelters are different crossbreds — cross cattle et cetera. From our point of view it is not about breeds. Regardless of whether you are purebred breeder or a cross breeder, a breeder is a breeder and a retailer is a retailer. But the fact is that less than 10 per cent of the sales of puppies come from pet shops. Even if all of those ended up in shelters, it is a very small percentage. What we have found is that very few, if any, end up in shelters.

We have a traceability and rehoming program — that if any of our puppies are sold from a PIAA retailer or breeder and end up in a shelter, they are tagged and we are notified. We then pay for, I suppose, the lodging of those puppies until they are rehomed, unless there is a vet reason for them not to be rehomed. We encourage that those puppies be sent to another home, really.

**Mr FRASER** — I think if you had a look at any of the shelter websites, you will never see a cavoodle or a groodle or anything at those sites — or it would be extremely rare, and if it was, it would be snapped up pretty quickly. I think Matt said earlier that he has got a six-month waiting list for rehoming his mum, so there is actually a shortage of those sorts of breeds.

We did a survey on some of our customers, and we asked them if they considered rehoming a dog before they decided to come and buy a puppy from us, and 64 per cent of them said that they considered it and they had a look, but the overwhelming majority of customers bought a puppy from us because we had the breed that they wanted. So unfortunately a lot of the shelter animals are bred for no purpose. A lot of them are staffy crosses or foxy crosses or mastiff-type crosses, and they are not the breeds that people want. There is a place for those dogs as well, but they do not suit everybody.

We do a lot of rehoming programs in the store. We have rehomed nearly 50 greyhounds in the last 6 to 12 months. We have rehomed cats and so forth. So pet shops can still play a very big part in rehoming animals, and they should, but they should still also be allowed to sell puppies responsibly from sources that are breeding ethically and responsibly.



**Mr ONDARCHIE** — This relates to the meeting that PIAA had with the minister and the minister's office. You felt the commitment or the statement made by the minister responsible was, 'This was an election promise, so we are going ahead with it'. Just as an aside, they also made a commitment not to increase taxes or charges in Victoria, and they have let go on that one, so anything is possible here. You had a sense that the minister had made up her mind already, so I want ask — perhaps this is referred to you, John — in terms of your expertise, were you asked for any guidance or counsel or advice about the construction or how the bill may roll out through that meeting?

**Mr GRIMA** — No. We presented our case of where we think it should go, which is around self-funded licensing. I felt it was falling on deaf ears. We had 30 minutes to talk. We actually requested an hour, and they would not give us an hour. They said we only had 30 minutes.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — You waited eight months and you got 30 minutes?

**Mr GRIMA** — Yes, we got 30 minutes. During that conversation she made it really clear that she was going to go ahead with the pre-election promise. So it was very difficult to state our case when her mind was already made up.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — So what was the point of having you in for the meeting?

**Mr GRIMA** — Exactly.

**Mr FRASER** — None really. We did have subsequent meetings soon after I started with the minister's senior adviser as well and there were the same words, 'This is an election promise. Nothing you can say to us will change our minds'.

**Mr GRIMA** — We also talked about domestic kittens, because we are always talking about dogs. But we talked about domestic kittens. Pet shops actually sell kittens, which are kittens that would otherwise be dumped in shelters. So if there are unwanted kittens, they often bring them to pet shops. Pet shops vaccinate them, microchip them and sell them. If we were not allowed to sell kittens, all those kittens would end up at a shelter, which would exaggerate the situation for cats even more. When we explained that to the minister she said, 'That's okay. That should still continue. I don't have an issue with that still continuing', but I am not sure this bill allows for that.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Maybe she is a cat lover and not a dog lover.

**Mr GRIMA** — I do not know.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — I am ambassador for Guide Dogs Victoria, Chair, so I will just put on record that we are worried about how this might catch our breeding program as well.

**Mr LEANE** — Thank you for helping the committee today. On your membership in relation to pet stores, it seems to me that the sale of particularly puppies in pet stores has decreased over a period of time. That is from my observation and I am happy to be corrected. How many of your members that have pet stores still sell puppies?

**Mr FRASER** — Of the 300 retailers I would say 10 per cent, if that, which still sell puppies.

**Mr GRIMA** — It is more like 20 members that sell puppies. That is nationally.

**Mr LEANE** — Is there a reason that that has reduced over the years?

**Mr GRIMA** — I think in the time of the internet. There are a lot of breeders that are selling directly online. Not all online sellers are bad, but unfortunately online is there and it is there to stay and a lot of breeders are opting to sell their animals online.

**Mr LEANE** — This might be a little bit outside the reference, but before you said that there is a place for certain breeds and there are certain breeds that look big and fluffy and really cute that may not be appropriate for babies, because of the nature of their breed. Was sort of advice does your association give? What sort of advice do you want to see potential clients get in that instance?

**Mr GRIMA** — Advice to potential customers?

**Mr LEANE** — Yes, about a breed.

**Mr GRIMA** — We will only carry breeds that are suitable for families, so the majority of the dogs sold are cavoodle crosses, because they make good pets. They are hypo-allergenic, they are not aggressive, they are easy to train and we have some very good results. Our customers often bring their dogs in. We run a very successful puppy preschool program. It has been running now for about 16 or 17 years so we are seeing second generation dogs now. People have bought dogs from us and now they are coming in. They have got their next dog because the other dog is older or has passed on, or they are getting a new dog and they are coming back to puppy preschool.

Your staff are integral so far as educating is concerned. That is one area I would like to see improved in the retail industry — that is, better education for retailers. In your pack you will see a proposed system for a companion animal centre, where if you are a companion animal centre your staff have to be TAFE trained. We are actually talking to TAFE at the moment to facilitate a course in that area. It is something that I would like as a retailer. I have already talked to my staff and they are pretty keen to do it. There is no specific course out there for pet shops, but one will be developed. We need to get support from the industry, though, to be able to make that course work because you need a volume of students to be able to make that course work.

Pet shops play a very important role, particularly for first-time pet owners, because we have the time and the know-how to actually guide them in the right way. We have got supporting products. We are also there seven days a week should they have any questions after they have purchased a puppy.

**Mr LEANE** — So you only sell a certain breed anyway?

**Mr GRIMA** — That is right.

**Mr LEANE** — The trap that I was talking before, where some breeds, as I said, look big and fluffy and lovely and that — —

**Mr GRIMA** — The other thing is that we have a diversity of breeds, so some breeds might be more suitable to people than others.

**Mr LEANE** — For different reasons.

**Mr GRIMA** — We are not biased towards one particular breed. If someone comes in and they are interested in something in particular, we will ask them why. We establish whether they are the right person for that dog and then we will match them; and if they are not, we will match them with something else. In some cases it is not a dog. It is a pet rock or something. That is the beauty about pet shops. They can get an aquarium or they can get a reptile if it is more suited to them. If they have got a busy lifestyle and they have not got time to walk their dog or socialise it, there are other options. That is the beauty of pet shops, that you have other options there.

**Mr FRASER** — There are some good online resources as well. If you do the research there is some good online stuff. The RSPCA has some good papers on what pup suits me best. You can do a bit of research before you buy a puppy.

**Ms HARTLAND** — I have a question about the suitability of people who come into a pet shop. I have always had cats and dogs and they have always been from a shelter. My local vet seems to have had a number of animals dumped on her which have ended up at my house. I am one of those people where we live with the dog rather than the other way around. So when someone comes into a shop and you think that they are not suitable or you just get a bad feeling about them, what can you do about that person in terms of not selling them an animal?

**Mr GRIMA** — Quite simple. The staff refuse. I have seen it many, many times over. We have got about 50 staff and each department is staffed separately, so the people who work with small animals do not work anywhere else in the store. Reptile people do not make good fluffy animal people; they are just a different sort of person. They ask a lot of questions, and if they are not the right person for that dog, then they will actually refer them off, give them reasons why and make them go back and think about that.

We are a destination store, so they do not walk past a shop window and say, 'I'm going to buy that puppy in the window'. They have made a decision that they want to buy a family pet. By the time they come to us they have probably already done some research. They have gone online and they have asked some friends. That is probably why the cavoodle is one of the most popular dogs, because actually it is a very suitable dog for families. By the time they come to us they have actually done a fair bit of research, and my staff will actually go through and question them. We actually created a questionnaire that you can do online. It has still got a couple of bugs in it, but it is actually a good way of getting a ballpark of whether you are actually ready for a dog now or not. Customers can do that online before they get there.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Can you give us a sense of what the percentage is of people you have refused in, say, a year to sell an animal to?

**Mr GRIMA** — I could not actually answer. I would not know that. I would not like to answer it. But, like I said, if people are coming into our store, they have already made a decision that they are looking for a particular animal. A lot of the time they have done the research. I would hate to pick a percentage, but it happens a lot. I see it happen a lot.

On top of that we have cooling-off periods. We have a seven-day cooling-off period, but our cooling-off period is really forever. If a customer calls back 12 months later and they got transferred overseas and they cannot take the dog with them, or grandma died, or for whatever reason that could not be helped, we will always help them to find that dog a new home. We take it on. We do not even use the overlay adoption thing; we will just help that customer rehome that dog ourselves. We have done it for years.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, gentlemen, for your evidence today. You will receive a copy of the transcript of your evidence for proofreading. That will ultimately make its way onto the committee's website. Once again, thank you for your attendance this morning.

**Witnesses withdrew.**