

Canine health and welfare: Maintaining momentum through a “systems thinking” approach.

Philippa Robinson October 2012

Abstract: Dog breeding, acquiring and owning has become contested ground in terms of ethics, health and welfare. The Advisory Council on the Welfare Issues of Dog Breeding is working on a programme of projects aimed at reforming many welfare problems. This article reviews some of the assumptions on which the Council is formed and suggests a fruitful way forward for debate and exchange might be found in the managerial discipline of systems thinking.

Philippa Robinson has owned a purebred German wirehaired pointer which she campaigned in the show ring for a short while and now lives with a GWP/Weimaraner cross. Having lost the purebred to familial idiopathic epilepsy in 2006, she began finding out more about inherited diseases and what to do about them. Her philosophical position on dogs is that of humanitarian anthropocentric welfarism. Her approach to these debates is from a pluralist perspective.

In 2011 she set-up The Karlton Index which attempts to look at the progress being made in breed health on a systematic basis. She is completing her Masters in Human Resource Management at Sheffield Business School which prompted her interest in systems thinking and learning.

I am very grateful to several canine experts who have made comments on my first draft which I have now incorporated in this final version.

Canine health and welfare: Maintaining momentum through a “systems thinking” approach.

“We begin by eschewing the role of specialists who deal only in parts. Becoming deliberately expansive instead of contractive, we ask, “How do we think in terms of wholes?” If it is true that the bigger the thinking becomes the more lastingly effective it is, we must ask “How big can we think?”

Buckminster Fuller Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth c1963: Chapter 5

“But never let it be said, that the law should indulge us in the most atrocious of all propensities, which, when habitually indulged in, on beings beneath us, destroys every security of human life, by hardening the heart for the perpetration of all crimes.”

Lord Erskine 1809 Speech in House of Lords

INTRODUCTION

Erskine spoke of outlawing cruelty to animals in the context of deliberate and wilful acts. He failed in his task, as the Bill he championed for preventing malicious and wanton acts of cruelty to animals was never passed. Fortunately there is more consistent agreement that it is right to outlaw such acts of cruelty today. However there are many welfare issues that continue to occupy similarly contested ground. Not least the recent heightened debates around welfare issues linked to dog breeding, buying and owning. Consensus over what constitutes a welfare or cruelty issue on many aspects of dog breeding and ownership remains elusive, Fox goes further asserting that our dog oriented cultures “remain wilfully blind” to how humans harm dogs (Fox 2010). How cruel is the act of allowing a pet dog to get obese? How cruel is the act of continuing to breed brachycephalic dogs? How cruel is the act of purchasing a puppy from a pet shop or internet site? The intention here is not to revisit arguments about the nature and degree of those welfare issues as that has been expertly covered elsewhere (McGreevy and Nicholas 1999, Asher *et al* 2009, Summers *et al* 2010), though no doubt they will be touched upon. The aim is more to explore the processes and agencies now deemed responsible for managing and improving those welfare issues.

A significant development following the recent flurry of reports on dog welfare (APGAW 2009, RSPCA 2009, Bateson, 2010) is the creation of the Advisory Council on the Welfare Issues of Dog Breeding. Under the auspices of Professor Sheila Crispin it has gathered together stakeholders (Table 1) that will inform the advisory process (<http://www.dogadvisorycouncil.com/page3/index.php>) and embarked upon a programme of projects to address key welfare issues. As a stakeholder group it covers academia, veterinary science, a pedigree registry and breed clubs, and canine welfare charities. Which would seem a good cross section of interest groups.

The council’s brief is:

To encourage and facilitate significant improvements in the welfare issues associated with dog breeding by providing independent, expert advice to government and other stakeholders.

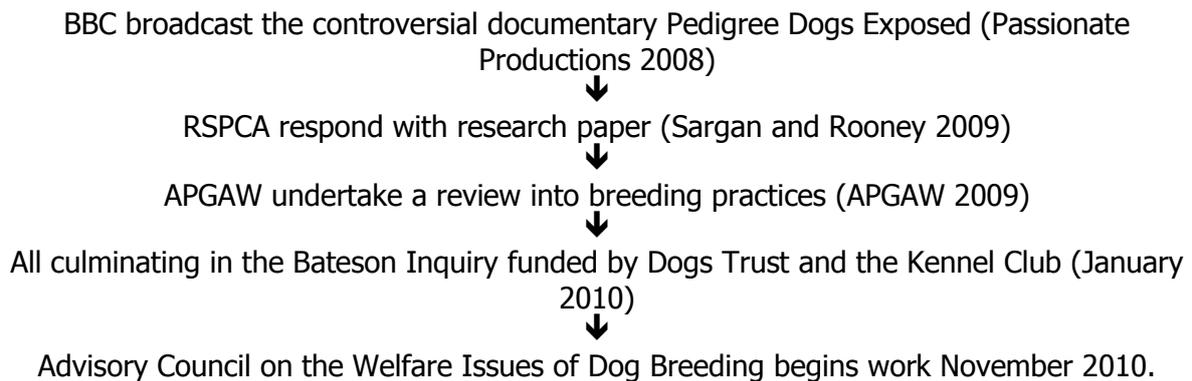
Main Advisory Council Stakeholders 2012

TABLE 1.

Organisation	Date Established	Annual Income 2011	Stated Aims
Blue Cross	1897	£26,878,000	Dedicated to the health and happiness of pets
Dogs Trust	1891	£65,973,000	To bring about the day when all dogs can enjoy a happy life, free from the threat of unnecessary destruction
Guide Dogs for the Blind Association	1931	£57,366,000	Providing accessibility and independence to blind people
International Sheepdog Society	1906	£542,562	Promotes and fosters the breeding, training and improvement in the interests and for the welfare or benefit of the community of the breeds or strains of sheepdogs.
Kennel Club	1873	£13,300,000	The general improvement of dogs
People's dispensary for Sick Animals	1917	£92,741,000	Offering veterinary treatment to pets owned by people in need
RSPCA	1824	£100,700,000	Have a world in which all humans respect and live in harmony with members of the animal kingdom. We believe that how we treat animals defines us not only as a people, but also as a society. Together we work to build a better world, where animal welfare is at the heart of everything we do.
UFAW	1926 (as ULAWs)	£526,132	The organisation is concerned with promoting high standards of welfare for farm, companion, laboratory and captive wild animals, and for those animals with which we interact in the wild
Royal Veterinary College	1791	£65,832,000	Education and research into animal welfare and health

Income data Charities Commission 2012 and Kennel Club Annual Report 2012, RSPCA Trustees Report 2011 and RVC Annual Review 2011

The process that lead to this set-up looks logical and can be sketched out as follows:



Superficially, the steps taken to set up the Advisory Council could appear rational and timely, a reassuring progression towards securing better welfare outcomes for dogs. But even basic knowledge of recent dog-welfare history reveals the process may be far from rational or timely and to view it as a reassuring development prematurely optimistic. A review of recent history suggests creation of the Advisory Council through those seemingly simple steps was possibly an extraordinary development. *Pedigree Dogs Exposed* (BBC, 2008) was not revealing new welfare issues. It was not even the first televised report on breeding issues. So what rendered this particular depiction of the issues so influential? Why, for instance was the Advisory Council not established in 1963 following the BSAVA Symposium? If not then, why not in the early eighties following the publication of Simon Wolfensohn's article in the *New Scientist* (1981) and his subsequent television report on the dangers of exaggerated traits broadcast in 1985 (YouTube, Jemima Harrison channel <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5RMa7AW5u8&feature=plcp>).

What was different about 2008?

Hodgman and contemporaries conducted research between 1961 and 1963 which clearly implicates pedigree dog breeding in compromised health and welfare. Papers were presented at the BSAVA symposium (1963) and from the president's address it is known that the issues were raised with parliamentarians (Nicholas *et al* 2010:8). The issues were also picked up by national print press (Stockman, 1984) and caused a bit of controversy by all accounts.

In the early Eighties there was another outcry about breed standards and breeding practices. It came from Wolfensohn's article *What We do To Dogs* (*New Scientist*, 1981), there was a joint working party between the KC and BVA to review breed standards which reported in 1981 and progress was reviewed by the *Journal of Small Animal Practice* (Stockman, 1984). Wolfensohn was involved in a televised report on Crufts in 1985. In 1987, the Council of Europe drafted a treaty, the European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals (COE, 1987) which explores a range of welfare issues relating to breeding and outlines limitations and protocols in an attempt to delineate best practice guidance. It called into question exaggerated anatomical, physiological and behavioural breed characteristics that can compromise welfare. However, the UK has never ratified this treaty. Despite a raised awareness it is clear from subsequent research (McGreevy and Nicholas, 1999) the review of Breed Standards was by no means enough to stem welfare and health issues.

By 2008 many of these concerns were certainly not unacknowledged by the veterinary profession, welfare academics and even the Kennel Club. But very little, in terms of meaningful action, had ensued in those previous instances so why were they followed through this time?

The landscape for canine health and welfare appears to alter significantly with the broadcast of *Pedigree Dogs Exposed* (BBC 2008). A documentary that was powerful and profound (Nicholas, 2011:126), hard hitting yet flawed and misleading (Higgins and Nicholas 2008, Ofcom 2009, Lawler 2012), it reached an audience of 3.9 million (Digital Spy 2008) on the night shown alone. Despite its flaws it managed to have a "revolutionary effect on dog breeding" (Nicholas, 2011:228) and help secure sustainable improvements to the approach taken to dog welfare. It included testimony from a number of eminent specialists working in and around dog welfare, from published veterinary researchers, to eminent geneticists and the Chief Veterinary Adviser at the RSPCA. All united in criticising the state of dog breeding and indicting the long established Kennel Club system at the root of it (Nicholas and Higgins 2008, Lawler 2012). The message was loud and the message was credible.

Not unexpectedly, immediately on broadcast, the Kennel Club launched an official complaint through the BBC and Ofcom. Managed for them by the solicitors Schillings, it took several months to progress through the complaints procedures and according to press coverage at the time, was a process that "descended into farce" (The Times November 10, 2009, page 20). In an unprecedented step, Ofcom actually withdrew its initial findings shortly before they were due to publish and subsequently reduced the number of upheld complaints against the BBC. In the final outcome, Ofcom upheld four complaints and the BBC was required to broadcast a summary of the findings against the documentary. This somewhat messy Ofcom ruling only adds to the sensationalist reputation of the documentary and renders its merits less obvious. Nevertheless, it had placed the contested nature of pedigree dog breeding centre stage.

The work of Jemima Harrison emerged from a very different topology than that of Hodgman and Wolfensohn. There were some notable events that took place just prior to and in parallel with PDE. The Companion Animal Welfare Council published a report on welfare and breeding in 2006 (CAWC, 2006) and the Animal Welfare Act 2006 was passed which demonstrated a significant shift in attitude towards welfare issues (Hughes and Lawson, 2011:377). There was evidence that the veterinary profession, or one or two members of it at least were also speaking out about health problems in pets (Milne, 2007).

The KC was also taking steps on health issues with its joint health survey with the BSAVA in 2004 and its active support of some breakthrough research at Imperial College on the genetics of dog populations (Calboli *et al* in 2008). This is described as the first of such studies focusing on the domestic dog (Higgins and Nicholas 2008). In 2006 the KC published their own book on the control of inherited diseases in the dog (Irving *et al* 2006).

Additionally, PDE entered the debate at a time when social media was beginning to take hold. Online forums were springing up related to a whole host of dog topics. This one on canine genetics being a notable case in point <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/Canine-Genetics/>. There were a number of commentators building up large followings on blogs dedicated to dogs and dog breeding, none so opinion dividing yet provocative as Terrierman <http://terriermandotcom.blogspot.co.uk/>. It published a now much cited blog post *Inbred Thinking* <http://terriermandotcom.blogspot.co.uk/2006/05/inbred-thinking.html> in 2006.

What was emerging then was a systemic shift, growing consensus from a number of quarters around these concerns. The once "lone voices" were beginning to multiply. The dogs had been allowed to get in a mess. PDE graphically revealed the mess and argued persuasively on behalf of the dogs.

Addressing the welfare issues from this point forward

Now four years on from the original broadcast of PDE there is an almost universal clarion call for collaborative working to resolve these welfare issues, APGAW (2012:4), Bateson 2010, the Dog Health Workshop (SKK 2012) as well as research published in the Vet Journal 2011 (Hedhammer *et al* 2011). All seek solutions to these complex welfare problems through joint working. The Advisory Council with its broad stakeholder group is in pole position to take that forward. So why would we not be optimistic? There is every reason to be providing that the Council and its planned work are based on sound and balanced assumptions. As long as the welfare issues are accurately mapped out and provided the stakeholders are all pulling at the bit to embark upon a fruitful period of multi-agency working.

However in both the follow-up documentary to PDE (BBC February 2012) and the recently published update from APGAW (2012) there are signs that those provisos cannot be taken for granted. There are signs even of some muddled thinking.

PDE is the reasserted starting position in APGAW's report *A Healthier Future for Pedigree Dogs an update* (2012). But within its first paragraph admits "it is difficult to look at breeding in isolation and that a whole host of other issues fall under the same considerations including stray dogs, dangerous dogs, puppy farming and general irresponsible pet ownership" (APGAW 2012:4). The report is largely based on a questionnaire sent out to stakeholders, a questionnaire that privileges welfare issues relating to pedigree dogs, not surprising given its purpose is pedigree dogs and consequently focuses on the Kennel Club registration system. If APGAW's remit is simply welfare issues relating to Kennel Club registered dogs both its starting position and its questionnaire are logical but if it wants to widen its remit to other areas listed they are not. In fact the whole exercise could be seen as circular. It has to be remembered that not all purebred dogs let alone non-purebred are bred within the KC system.

But even if its primary concern is pedigree dogs, predicating welfare reform on the arguments contained within PDE is flawed. The documentary was undoubtedly catalytic in its impact but it never claimed to be a comprehensive analysis of all canine welfare issues so to use it as a basis for subsequent welfare policy reform is arguably dangerous. It is also potentially confusing for the Advisory Council and its group of stakeholders.

Skewed assumptions?

PDE chose to focus on the legitimate welfare issues raised by McGreevy and Nicholas in 1999 and indeed McGreevy is credited at the end of the film for his help. In that article they cite five main welfare issues:

- i) Some breed standards and some selection practices run counter to the welfare interests of dogs, to the extent that some breeds are characterised by traits that may be difficult to defend on welfare grounds.

- ii) Little selection pressure seems to be exerted on some traits that would improve animal welfare and produce dogs better suited to modern human living.
- iii) The incidence of certain inherited defects in some breeds is unacceptably high.
- iv) The number of registered animals of certain breeds within particular countries is so low as to make it almost impossible for breeders to avoid the mating of close relatives.
- v) There may be financial disincentives for veterinarians to reduce the incidence of inherited disease.

McGreevy and Nicholas 1999:333

However in truth PDE only covered i), iii) and iv). Understandably these are in themselves big topics to be explored in sixty minutes of mainstream television. But the editorial choices are significant even more so if they are allowed to dominate this social policy area. An examination of point ii) for instance would have implicated the puppy buying public and its often inappropriate choices of pets. An exploration of point v) would have implicated the veterinary profession in the "biggest animal welfare scandal of our time" – and many would argue it should.

Indeed McGreevy and Nicholas themselves avoid tackling the vets and pet owners head on in their own suggested list of solutions, of which there are 8 (page 335) as they fail to proffer a solution to the thorny problem of vested interests of veterinary professionals. The stupidity of pet owners is ignored. Six of their suggestions are directed at the breed associations and "their umbrella organisations", no mention is made of the role that other dog welfare agencies might play in this solutions based approach. Only in suggestion 8 is the responsibility for change assigned to agents other than breed associations – they call for geneticists to communicate the science in a more understandable way. Consequently, the work of Harrison and McGreevy and Nicholas shied away from exploring the role played by vets.

In fact few if any seem willing to point the finger at the veterinary profession for being at least culpable to a degree in overseeing this long recorded decline in dog health and welfare. A notable exception being the blogger Patrick Burns, who has written many posts on this subject, typically in January 2010, *For Veterinarians, Silence Has Been Golden*.

In February 2012 the BBC broadcast an update on PDE, *Pedigree dogs Exposed: Three years On* (BBC and Passionate Productions 2012). Jemima Harrison once again singled out the KC asserting, "suffering will never stop whilst the Kennel Club tolerates the human whim that has led to dogs that cannot run, breathe or see freely". Shortly after that section of the commentary it cuts to Mark Evans (this time no longer Chief Veterinary Adviser for the RSPCA having left in 2010 to pursue a media career) who concurs, asking "Is the Kennel Club fit for function in terms of protecting the welfare of dogs? Absolutely not. If it is left to the Kennel Club the problem is never going to resolve."

Re-read those quotes from PDE 2 again. They are very direct, and in their directness are revealing. Because in truth it is not only the Kennel Club that has tolerated the "human whim" for disabled and dysfunctional dogs and the Kennel Club is not the sole self-appointed guardian for canine welfare. Table 1 sets out the dates each of the key stakeholders were established.

The Blue Cross, self-appointed champions of pet welfare since 1897, the Dogs Trust self-appointed champions of creating happy threat free lives for dogs since 1891, the RSPCA self-appointed campaigners for the prevention of cruelty to animals since 1824, and a

veterinary profession that has taken on the role of freeing animals from disease and treating them after injury since the 18th century.

If the Kennel Club can be accused of failing to protect dogs from poor breeding practices then surely these longstanding, well-established, and very well funded agents can also be accused of failing to protect dogs from what they deem to be a poor club. To rephrase McGreevy's summary of dog breeders (2008 Cited in Higgins and Nicholas 2008:158) and apply it to agents of welfare, they are potentially very good in what they intend to do – they are just not very good at doing it.

Looking back the testimony of Mark Evans, in particular, seems disingenuous. In the first broadcast he was speaking as the Chief Veterinary Adviser for the RSPCA – had none of his predecessors spoken out before 2008? One of his closing quotes was “unless we start now, the pedigree dog hasn't got a chance” but he was never asked why they took until then to speak out. Did Jemima Harrison not think to ask him “What role could the RSPCA have played in taking the concerns of Hodgman and Wolfensohn more seriously back in 1963 and 1981?” If the question was asked it was never part of the broadcast. Mark Evans appeared as a witness for the prosecution – and the Kennel Club was found guilty as charged. There was no doubt a case to answer. But there are questions begging of the other agents too. The Kennel Club has not been operating in a vacuum devoid of any outside influences. As argued by Bayvel and Cross in the context of New Zealand “animal-welfare issues are usually portrayed in the media in a black-and-white fashion, with simple, single-perspective solutions proposed for what are often, in fact, complex policy issues” (Bayvel and Cross 2010:3). By electing to view the welfare issues linked to breeding as only the fault of the Kennel Club the documentary fell in to that trap.

There is a strong argument that says the Kennel Club has reigned supreme over the decline of dogs but by both acts of commission and omission other agents are most definitely implicated too. The welfare record of the Kennel Club or rather the failings of their record have literally been well broadcast to the nation. Not so the shortcomings of other agents like the veterinary profession and the RSPCA. It was right to make the KC accountable for its performance on dog welfare. But it is also right to insist on accountability of all stakeholders and that must include the veterinary profession, the welfare charities and the dog-owning public. Failure to do this could skew the work of the Advisory Council and more importantly deny dogs comprehensive and far reaching welfare reform.

Vets and Dogs

The RCVS Survey of UK Veterinary and Veterinary Nursing Professionals (Institute of Employment Studies 2010) shows that vets spent 35.7% of their working time that year on dogs. More than any other type of animal, for instance just 0.31% of their time was spent on poultry. IES states that the amount of time spent on small animals has increased since 1998 and is predicted to continue in that trend (IES 2010:xi). Despite the proportion of their time being spent in this way it was admitted more recently that the profession's “science based knowledge about the welfare of dogs and how they are managed is much less developed than that of poultry and farm animals” (Stafford, 2012:257).

There is even the possibility that the profession has never claimed the advocacy of animal welfare as a key responsibility (Yeates 2009:5) and it is only the duty now placed upon them by the Animal Welfare Act 2006 that is prompting them to look more closely at this issue (Yeates 2012:272). But were it to accept such a responsibility “the profession acquires a

responsibility to speak out on issues such as the breeding of pedigree dogs” (Yeates 2009:5). Yeates and his colleague Main completed a survey of the profession focusing specifically on canine welfare issues (2011). Despite its small size it nevertheless provides food for thought in terms of how the profession views its relationship to dog health and welfare. It concluded that “respondents generally agreed that more should be done by veterinary practitioners about many issues”, particularly on the three welfare concerns they see most frequently in their practices relating to dogs, obesity, breed related health problems and chronic pain or poor mobility (Yeates and Main 2011:467). Tellingly Yeates’ concludes in his recent review of canine welfare research and practice that welfare remains as an optional responsibility (2012:277) leaving the influence of the AWA 2006 in an equivocal position in regard to its influence over the veterinary profession. That the veterinary profession despite all the research pointing to increased health and welfare issues is still uncertain as to whether it has a responsibility for canine welfare would come as a surprise to the dog-owning public.

The latter research from Yeates was partly funded by the RSPCA, they do not share the veterinarians’ professional reticence regarding canine welfare. It is stated very clearly “Veterinary surgeons have a duty to ensure their patients’ welfare both legal (under the 2006 Animal Welfare Act) and professional (under the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Code of Professional Conduct) (RSPCA Science Group Review 2011:7). James Yeates is now the Chief Veterinary Adviser at the RSPCA.

The RSPCA and dogs

The vision of the charity is as follows:

“...to have a world in which all humans respect and live in harmony with members of the animal kingdom. We believe that how we treat animals defines us not only as a people, but also as a society. Together we work to build a better world, where animal welfare is at the heart of everything we do.”

RSPCA Web site 2012

Its annual income for 2011 was in excess of £100 million. It is viewed as a giant of animal welfare (Francione and Garner 2010) and it has a track-record in influencing British animal welfare legislation and is beginning to influence it at international levels too (Hughes and Lawson 2011). Hughes and Lawson are in no doubt that as with the first piece of animal welfare legislation in 1822 the RSPCA has been instrumental in shaping the 2006 AWA. But they qualify with this “[i]n terms of notions of crime and harm prevention involving an emphasis of proactive actions before crimes or harms ensue, the preventative role of the RSPCA remains underdeveloped despite the provision in the AWA noted above” (Hughes and Lawson 2011:384). Is that perhaps why it took until 2009 for them to investigate the welfare issues caused by breeding practices? They presumably were made aware of the emerging perils in 1963, 1981, 1985, 1999 and 2008.

The annual review of its Science Group illustrates that they do seem to be turning their attention to preventative welfare issues now in the context of dogs. The scope and breadth of its recent work is impressive.

- They have collaborated on the development of the VETCompass scheme.
- Launched the Puppy Information Pack.
- Been instrumental in shaping and launching the Puppy Contract.

- Developed a Get Puppy Smart website.

They have also in the past given a high profile to canine obesity, neutering, over population and have regularly invested funds in research on a whole host of animal welfare issues. In contrast to the Science Group's 2011 review which has plenty to report on in terms of dog welfare, their review of 2006 mentions dogs only in the context of scientific research animal husbandry and welfare of Greyhounds. Suggesting perhaps that, for this *giant* of the welfare landscape, breeding and wider canine welfare issues of dogs have been given a higher priority only now – post PDE, post the AWA 2006. Their own record on policing the harm done to dogs merits scrutiny.

If its Born to Suffer campaign (www.rspca.org.uk) had been launched in the early eighties instead of 2011 the review of breed standards then may have been a great deal more comprehensive. Whilst that campaign is correct to call them Kennel Club breed standards, it clearly implicates the show world and show breeders as the main source of this potential suffering. The debate as to whether breed standards influence the fashion for certain breed looks, or the fashion for certain breed looks influences breed standards has not yet been settled. Had the RSPCA taken a more uncompromising stand in the 1980s instead of waiting until 2011 the breed standard debate could have been resolved long before now. Despite its tardiness any campaign that reaches the uneducated puppy buying public on the best way to acquire a healthy dog is a welcome contribution but renders Evans' 2008 appeal for "urgent" action from the Kennel Club somewhat hypercritical.

The pet-dog owning public

The inappropriate choices of puppy/breed made by the British public was not addressed by McGreevy and Nicholas nor explored at all in either PDE programmes. The editorial choice was to focus on the supply side of the canine socio-economic exchange. Emma Milne did not let pet owners off so lightly and outlines many stupidities she has witnessed at their hand (Milne 1997:41-45). Patrick Burns is another who frequently highlights the plight of dogs at the hands of their less than rational, far from sensible owners, So You Want a Dog (Burns 2009) for instance or a particular favourite, Double-dipped in Stupid (Burns, November 2011) <http://terriermandotcom.blogspot.co.uk/search?q=double+dipped+in+stupid>.

Canine Action UK, an independent organisation, explored the demand side as well as supply of dogs, and the fickle nature of dog owners is well evidenced in their report (Carr, 2012:37). The report highlights the research confirming that pet owners too often acquire puppies on a whim, are lacking the skills and knowledge to care for dogs adequately in many cases and view puppies as a fashion accessory (page 9). These are all welfare issues worthy of the Advisory Council's attention.

As noted earlier the top canine-welfare concern of vets revealed in Yeates and Mains survey (2011) is obesity, a welfare issue that directly implicates the pet owner and one that surveyed vets said they encounter "most days" at work (Yeates and Main 2011). This means that fat dogs are waddling into surgeries on a daily basis, and owners who let their pets get like this are not taking their lead here from the Kennel Club, nor indeed the show world.

Rooney (2009:180) assumes that fashions and trends in puppy buying are largely influenced by the show ring, but there is no research demonstrating this to be the case. Take the public predilection for the bulldog and the pug (2010 registrations 4746 and 5726 respectively). The population of show bulldogs and pugs is small with Championship show

entries of 150 pugs and 125 bulldogs considered good (Dog World Breed notes 2012). It is difficult to see how the regular showing of these tiny numbers of bulldogs and pugs influences the growth in popularity of these severely health compromised breeds. The public are more likely to be influenced in their buying decisions by today's celebrity culture. Jonathan Ross featured his pug on his primetime BBC show (14/09/07), he and others like Victoria Beckham regularly feature their pet pugs and bulldogs on twitter, often in the context of finding their dogs and their dog's breathing troubles comical and with 2,261,000 and 4,000,000 followers each respectively, that is a wide audience. Furthermore popular crosses like Labradoodles and Cockapoos are not part of the KC show scene so what explains their popularity? Certainly not the show fancy.

There is no doubt that in a world where humans persist with thinking strange things about dogs (Wolfensohn 1985, Burns 2012) the show world is where the strangest of strange thinking is located. But to attempt to hang all welfare issues on such an easy-to-ridicule and minority target is sending welfare reform down a skewed route.

Collaborative Working

The roles played by the veterinary profession, the RSPCA and pet-owners as outlined above are not spotlighted to deflect from the role of the Kennel Club, but to illustrate that health and welfare of dogs is impacted by many variables and shaped by many influences. The disruptive power of PDE was enabled by the developing relationships between some of those influences and it is only by continuing to view dog welfare as a product of many, often complex, and difficult relationships that progress will continue.

The concept of multi-agency working and interdisciplinary approaches is not new to the field of animal welfare (Bayvel and Cross 2010) and under any circumstances collaborative working is a challenge. If its basis is set on skewed assumptions, if there is a muddle over which welfare issues need to be tackled, if stakeholders refuse to accept their individual contributions to either existing problems or the possible solutions then yes, optimism is premature. Groundwork for collaborative working needs to be levelled and fair and there has to be recognition that imbalances of power will never be resolved. Tensions between agencies, and indeed even within them will dominate the process. Despite many of the stakeholders having a long and robust history they have no real track-record for effective multi-agency working. Recent press releases on the RSPCA's Born to suffer campaign, the puppy contract and APGAW's update betray many ongoing tensions. These institutions have co-existed rather than co-operated for centuries in some cases.

Systems thinking and learning

Cross-agency working is notorious for friction and frustration (Atkinson *et al* 2005, Bayvel and Cross, 2010) and indeed in practice is often found to be unworkable. However, when this landscape is examined through the lens of systems thinking and systems methodologies the friction takes on a different significance. The tensions acquire value as do different and even competing perspectives as long as they are used to fuel open, transparent, and well-researched debate.

A useful and simple definition of systems thinking is:

"The systems approach organizes one's thinking to understand the complexity of a real world phenomenon. Systems thinking represents a view of the world, it is interdisciplinary and it stresses interrelationships and interactions." (Kefalas 2011:345).

Under systems thinking the focus shifts from what each individual element, in this case the various agents of canine welfare, is achieving and falls on what the system as a whole is achieving. This brings to the fore the quality of the interrelationships between agencies.

Within an effective system, therefore you need a media not afraid to challenge, despite knowing defensive and even hostile routines will ensue. Parliamentarians willing to take dog-welfare more seriously and dedicate more governmental resources, fiscal and time to the debates. Welfare agents that balance the protection of their own agendas with the collective, but never at the expense of the greater good. Registries that take bold and brave decisions, and innovate at every level of their service to benefit the wider dog community, not just small minorities within it. A veterinary profession, that is outspoken and uncompromising on dog health and welfare matters and willing to actively engage in solutions. A pet-dog owning public that listens, heeds and acts on the evidence based research and guidance that is available to it.

Systems thinking has been a line of inquiry in the field of managerial science for many decades now. It is acknowledged that it is not a panacea for all organisational ills. If it were there would have been a far less severe banking crisis and, more significantly fewer tragedies resulting from ineffective social services care. Systems thinking is open to misinterpretation and is fundamentally flawed because people are fundamentally flawed. Nevertheless, even with those caveats it has merit in helping to view the territory of any complex public-policy area in a new light and affords tensions a constructive dimension.

Peter Senge sees value in systems thinking because not only does it give prominence to interrelationships it also shows "small well focused actions can produce significant, enduring improvements, if they are in the right place" (1996:302). A good example of this would be the incremental improvements the Kennel Club has made to its online services section of its website (<http://www.the-kennel-club.org.uk/services/Default.aspx>). This gives access to data on health tests for individual dogs, predicts COIs for planned matings, provides number of litters and puppies sired. This constitutes a major step forward in being able to track trends and patterns in pedigree dog breeding. Also the work done at breed club level excellent examples of which include the Dachshund Breed Council, Hungarian Vizsla and Leonbergers and others (Robinson, 2011).

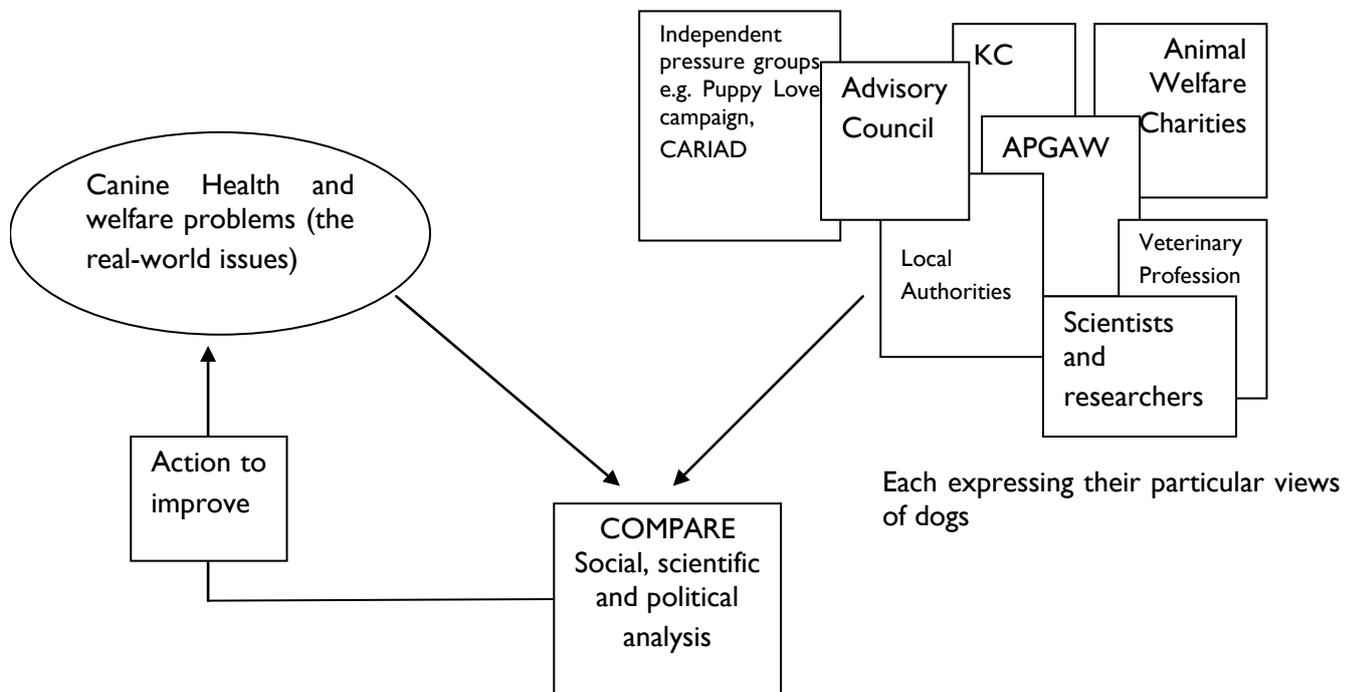
Senge cautions against behaviours that threaten an effective systems approach and calls for moving beyond blame of one party over another, concluding, "it is poorly designed systems, not incompetent or unmotivated individuals" that cause the problems. He also argues that players within a system need to work hard at understanding dynamic complexity i.e. that which arises when cause and effect are distant in time and space" – such complexity is central to the practice of breeding decisions so resonates strongly with animal welfare. Knee-jerk reactions are dangerous which is why the quality of the debate and argument between all elements of the system are so important and should be privileged (1996:302).

The benefit of bringing a systems thinking approach to the highly emotive policy area of dog health and welfare is that it calls on players in that system to reflect on the part they are playing within it. Moving forward, the potential of shifting accountability to not just what each player achieves but also how they are working together has real power. How they are

each supporting one another in this gruelling and seemingly interminable struggle to produce healthy, happy, well cared for dogs on a universal basis.

Support should not be mistaken for acquiescence. Support often means challenge and opposition. Checkland suggests that systems thinking especially the model developed by Vickers, Soft Systems Methodology and appreciative systems thinking would serve well in fuelling meaningful debate around the issues (see Figure 1). It was developed for the area of social-policy making.

Figure 1
Applying a Soft systems Methodology as a Learning System to dog welfare in the UK
Model adapted from Checkland and Scholes (1990) cited in Checkland (1994:87)



Further insight is available from Cook's interpretation of SSM:

"Learning how to craft moral communities that respect both our common ground and our differences can bring a measure of stability to those social institutions through which we aim to fulfil our expectations of public life." He goes on to argue:

"Experiencing relations with others who hold to different goals and ends is a source of instability only if we forget that it is out of experiencing relations and not seeking ends that we can craft a responsible life within an interdependent world".

Cook (1994:164)

One of the key words in Cook's argument there is "learning". If the veterinary profession is ready to admit it knows more about the welfare of chickens than it does dogs, if welfare charities are also ready to acknowledge that it is only recently they too started to take canine welfare issues seriously, and scientists agree that we are only now finding some empirical solutions to health problems, then that all points to the start of a learning journey. There is a lot to learn. Recognition of this is vital.

An additional strength of the Soft Systems Methodology outlined by Vickers is its capacity to accommodate pluralism. The world of dogs is nothing if not plural and this characteristic has hindered progress and stifled meaningful debate. Fox illustrates this very effectively, albeit in relation to the specific issue of tail-docking (Fox 2011). Another helpful observation comes from Cook who examines three perspectives. An absolutist position "forecloses" meaningful debate. A relativist one means debate has to be effectively "abandoned". It is only by adopting a pluralist perspective that any headway can be made. This resonates in the dog-world because the dog fulfils a vast array of "functions" for their non-dog carers (1994:163).

All of these considerations, complexity, pluralism, science, ethics are summarised by Bayvel and Cross who conclude, no apologies for quoting them in entirety here:

"The development of public, political, media, and scientific interest in animal welfare over the past 30 or so years has been exponential and, because of its public-policy complexity, the subject area will continue to provide strategically important challenges and opportunities. A science-based, ethically principled policy approach, complimented by an incremental change management paradigm, will ensure continuous improvement along the animal-welfare journey. It is vital that all stakeholders be actively engaged in the policy debate."

(2010:10)

A systems thinking approach particularly an adaptation of Vicker's model allows for such a development. The Advisory Council is the instrument through which this can be achieved here in the UK. As argued above there is no justification to continue to see the Kennel Club as "a villain of the piece", they are no more than any of the stakeholders. The problems dogs have were not created by a defective registry but by a wholly inert and blind, wilfully or not, system. Whilst it is entirely accepted that problems of health in the pedigree dog is a legitimate target for welfare reform it is by no means the only one and to only give focus to that would be doing all dogs a massive disservice. PDE set off the alarm very loudly but to continue to predicate the dog-welfare agenda on its preoccupations alone is folly.

CONCLUSIONS

If this systems approach is accepted and applied, it changes the measures of success considerably. The veterinary profession and the RSPCA, together with all other stakeholders will be assessed not just on what they achieve for themselves and the system, they will also be held accountable for how they have achieved it and how much they contributed to the system. They will be answerable to questions about how they engaged in these important debates, how effective were the relationships they built with other groups. What constructive role did they each play in "crafting a moral community" that centres on the health- and welfare-compromised dog.

Buckminster Fuller, proponent of general systems thinking and author of the quirky but fascinating *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* conjured up a great image that could possibly apply here

Paradoxically, at the present moment our Spaceship Earth is in the perilous condition of having the Russians sitting at one set of the co-pilot's flying controls while the Americans sit at the other. France controls the starboard engines, and the Chinese control the port engines, while the United Nations controls the passenger operation. The result is an increasing number of U. F. O. hallucinations of sovereign states darting backwards and forwards and around in circles, getting nowhere, at an incredibly accelerating rate of speed.

Buckminster Fuller *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* c1963 Chapter 8

We are all aboard Spaceship Dog but are we working with one another or against one another? Are we communicating in a meaningful way? Have we got an accurate map? Are the plans for reform based on the right assumptions – if not what do we need to do to ensure they are?

“Bucky” wrote that around 1963 roughly the same time the BSAVA held its symposium on dog breeding. The dogs cannot afford another fifty years of siloed thinking. The UK has enough very clever people from all walks of dogdom, some of whom have considerable resources at their disposal, all of whom care deeply about dogs in one shape or another. Time for them all to craft a welfare system that puts dogs rather than organisational agendas right at its heart.

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