

pay for their pets

s that the nation's dogs
r problem than simply
fighting breeds.

ten by dogs seriously enough
to require hospital treatment.
Only a fraction of them are the
victims of pit bulls. The law-
yers, in short, are about to
have a field day.

Already Mr Baker appears
to be having second thoughts
about his unenforceable ban.
It now seems that his absolute
prohibition on owning pit bull
terriers is to be modified for
those owners who can show
that their particular dog is not
a threat. But how can this be
proved in the light of the
Home Secretary's assertion
that pit bulls are so unpredict-
able, changing from friendly
pooch to vicious assailant
without warning.

The Government would be
entitled to more sympathy in
its dilemma if it had not stub-
bornly blocked its ears to
expert advice in the past.
First, its refusal to listen to
insistent warnings from the
RSPCA that imports of pit
bulls and other fighting dogs
should be banned.

If action had been taken a
decade ago, we should not be
in today's mess. But Minis-
ters, taking their cue from
Mrs Thatcher, have been no
less resistant to another sensi-
ble step — the registration of
dogs, claiming it would be
expensive and ineffective.
That view is contradicted by
almost every responsible
organisation involved in dog
welfare, including the police,
the Veterinary Association,
and the Joint Advisory Com-
mittee on Pets in Society.

Any enforceable system to
control dogs must involve
some form of registration, for
without it ownership is
impossible to prove. Yet in
the Commons last week, the
Home Secretary trotted out
the well-worn line that regis-
tration would be a bureau-
cratic nightmare, ignoring the
fact that virtually every coun-
try in Europe successfully
operates such a scheme.

The Dutch government has
recently introduced legislation
under which all dogs have to
be licensed. The owners of
dangerous breeds such as pit
bulls have additional condi-

tions placed on them: their
dogs have to be neutered, as
well as muzzled at all times in
public, and owners must have
substantial third-party insur-
ance.

Horrific as the attack on a
young child was, the issue of
dogs in society goes wider
than merely how to control
dangerous breeds. Every day,
dogs deposit five million litres
of urine and 1,000 tonnes of
faeces, much of it in parks and
on pavements. The condition
of our cities is not only a dis-
grace but a health hazard. The
time is long overdue for dog
owners to be made responsible
for the actions of their pets.

Let the polluter pay is a
sound principle. A licence fee
of at least £30, with exemp-
tions for the blind and perhaps
the elderly, would not solve all
the problems associated with
the nation's seven million
dogs, but it would be a sensi-
ble start. As for dangerous
breeds, their owners should
be required to have a special
licence costing at least £100,
and they should be allowed
out in public only if they are
muzzled and on a lead.