

Let dog owners p

SIX out of ten British dog owners are reported to take their dogs to bed with them at night, very possibly a higher proportion than take their spouses. When you cross this bizarre canophilia with public demand for action to curb the menace of fighting dogs, it is hard not to feel a twinge of sympathy for the Government.

The spectacle of Ministers panicking in public, however, does not inspire confidence. If the Cabinet can't even deal with the relatively simple matter of dogs, how on earth can it be trusted to run the economy? Yet when the Home Secretary, Mr Kenneth Baker, told MPs of the Government's plans to deal with fighting dogs last week, he gave an unmistakable impression that he and his colleagues were being swept along on a tide of public hysteria without a clue on how best to proceed.

Banning the breeding and ownership of pit bull terriers is a classic example of legislation being proposed on a flood tide of windy, populist emotion. Three days earlier, the Home Secretary gave a televi-

sion interview in which he made clear his personal opposition to such a policy: 'A real problem is banning particular breeds. New York tried to do this and had to repeal it because it was not enforceable.'

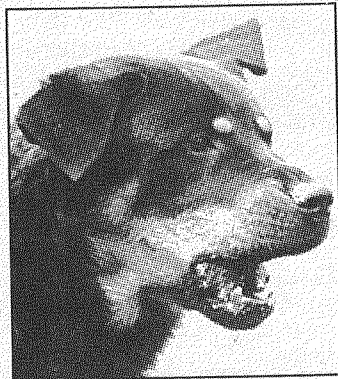
So what has made Mr Baker suddenly change his mind? Almost certainly the way in which Britain's tabloid papers used their front pages last week to show the terribly mauled face of six-year-old Rukhsana Khan. Yet those frightening pictures of the latest victim of a pit bull terrier attack do not form a basis for effective legislation.

Who, for instance, is going to round up and slaughter the 10,000 pit bulls, which is the best estimate of the number around the country? The RSPCA and the Veterinary Association have both said bluntly that they will have no part in it. The police will do what they are told, but are naturally unenthusiastic. As for the owners, few are likely to be co-operative in bringing their dogs forward to be exterminated. So how are they to be traced? In any case, how

Adam Raphael argues pose a much greater controlling the f

does one define 'a fighting dog'?

Pit bulls are themselves a cross-breed. The Home Office has sought to draw a distinction between the danger posed by pit bulls and other breeds such as rottweilers, dobermans and alsatians. But it is doubtful whether any such sharp distinction exists. Every year more than a quarter of a million people are bit-



Rottweiler: No longer man's best friend.