

The dogs of war

IN normal times, Man Bite Dog is a story — and Dog Bites Man is not. But these are abnormal times, as particular dogs are involved in attacks on men, women, and children: culminating at the weekend with the savaging of a six-year-old girl by a pit bull terrier. Suddenly the news wires seem full of pit bull terriers, Japanese Tosas, and rottweilers unleashed.

There is, of course, a danger of hysteria. There is always that risk when an especially awful case focuses concern and generates supporting tales of similar incidents which would never routinely be filed. But the tragedy of Rucksana Khan and, in lesser degree, of many like her, is one to pause over. Some dogs are bred by man to be vicious, to attack automatically, to kill or be killed. They are not, and never can be, pets: they are lethal weapons. And, over the last decade, they have made a lucrative import.

No British government easily confronts the dog lobby: here, even so, it is still a mystery why the Home Office has done so little in the past decade to stanch the flow

of the killer breeds. Perhaps there was some bizarre confusion about market forces; perhaps some shrinking from the bureaucratic swamp of licenses and registers. But now, too late, that has got to stop: and the first imperative is apportioning responsibility. That rests squarely with breeders and owners. This is a human problem, not a dog problem. The Home Secretary, Mr Kenneth Baker, has a checklist of savagery (and tight quarantine restrictions in force). He could ban all further imports tomorrow. He could make it a criminal offence for any of the dogs already here to be allowed outside without a leash and muzzle. He could immediately impose high insurance premiums on all who own these dogs: further responsibility for those who are responsible. But there is a longer-term step, too. The Home Secretary should not merely ban the further breeding of these instruments of attack: he should take steps to order, over time, the breeding out of such artificial ferocity. Men made this confected danger; men can do away with it.

Guardian 26/5/91

Ed