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Dangerous dogs

DOGS, like guns or cars, can kill people. Dog-owners, therefore, like gun-owners and car-owners, should be subject to certain restrictions. To argue for such a policy is not merely to react emotionally to the recent spate of attacks by dangerous dogs, but to recognise that public disquiet is growing, rightly, at the apparently unchecked way in which certain breeds of dogs can be bought and bred.

It is estimated that some one million people are bitten by dogs in Britain every year. Last year alone, the incidence of recorded attacks increased by 18 per cent. It is not enough to insist, as the deplorably insouciant Environment Secretary, Nicholas Ridley, did last Friday, that owners alone are responsible for controlling their pets, for the security and well-being of ordinary citizens is at stake.

To own and drive a car, one must first pass a driving test, register the vehicle and pay for third-party insurance. Similarly, gun-owners must register and, in some cases, convince the authorities that they are fit and proper people to own a deadly weapon. Dogs — or at least those above a certain size and belonging to certain well-known breeds — fall into a similar category.

People who own and feed alsatians, rottweilers or pit-bull terriers are not living on the breadline. These dogs are expensive to feed. Their owners should be made to pay a registration fee and for compulsory third party insurance. It might be an idea to demand that they also satisfy an appropriate authority — the police, perhaps, the RSPCA or the Kennel Club — that they are fit to keep such an animal.

Elderly pensioners with their adored mutts need have nothing to fear. But people who keep dangerous dogs because they like to be seen in aggressive company should be asked to pay for the risks they are asking the rest of us to endure.