

# George Jonas

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## Ban bad dog owners, not bad dogs

by George Jonas  
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If you tease a young dog with a stick -- you shouldn't, but *if* you do -- chances are it will pay no attention to you. It will resolutely sink its teeth into the stick. A young dog will fearlessly bite, pull, shake, and worry a piece of wood in a person's hand, without a glance at the person who holds it.

But as dogs get older, they learn to look for the person behind the stick. An adult sheepdog is likely to back off, assess the situation, then go straight for the stick-teaser's ankle.

Bulls also have a learning curve. If you tease an inexperienced bull with a cape -- a lousy idea, but *if* you do -- chances are it will concentrate on the cape. The pointy parts of El Toro usually follow the red cloth as long as the matador keeps moving it.

But bullfighters don't try the same trick with experienced bulls. A bull gets only one crack at a matador. The assumption is that it takes but one fight for a bull to learn that the villain isn't the cape but the person behind it, and act accordingly.

Bulls and dogs are brainy. The learning curve of many politicians and their constituents isn't as steep. If it were, Canada wouldn't outlaw, say, types of guns or breeds of dogs. It would outlaw kinds of people: The ones who keep and use guns or dogs in careless or criminal ways.

Since lawmakers aren't as quick on the uptake as fighting bulls or working dogs, they ban firearms that are (or look like) automatic weapons and ban canine breeds that are (or look like) pit bulls. Not very smart, you say? It's not supposed to be. Smart is herding sheep. Outlawing is politics.

The pit bull ban comes into effect in Ontario this week. It's controversial, but not in the way it's often reported in the media. It doesn't set dog lovers against dog haters, as some suggest. It only sets people of common sense against those without. Banning a breed is the human equivalent of a canine biting a stick or a bovine charging a red cape.

Not all dog owners oppose the pit bull ban. Some welcome it. Some would like to see it extended to any breed feistier than their own. Aggressive dogs are primarily aggressive with other dogs, not with toddlers or postmen (though postmen come a close second.) An ill-tempered pit bull running loose is dangerous mainly to a hapless spaniel running loose. Dog owners who can't be bothered to curb, leash, and obedience-train their yappy pests naturally prefer theirs to be the only unmannered canines in a public place. Then their spoiled little curs won't get into dog fights -- or, if they do, they may win.

It makes sense for casual or irresponsible dog owners to support a ban that makes casual or irresponsible dog ownership less onerous. Not being permitted to own a breed may be demeaning, but it's easy. It's the lazy person's preference over being required to be a good owner of the breed that he or she does own.

Making sure that one's Akita or Rottweiler is properly bred and behaved takes effort. Needless to say, the owner/breeder who doesn't make the effort for his pit bull won't make it for his Akita, and an ill-bred or ill-tempered Akita can do as much harm as a pit bull -- and will, too, as soon as the irresponsible or mischievous segment of pit bull owners switches to Akitas after the pit bull ban goes into effect. Within a year or two the papers will be as full of stories about man-eating Akitas (or Canary dogs or Neapolitan Mastiffs) as they're about pit bulls today -- and as they were about Doberman pinchers ten-fifteen years ago.

When that happens, the same people who lack the imagination of bovines and can't see the person behind the cape, will start clamoring for a ban on Rottweilers and Akitas. By then, of course, a perfectly fine breed will have been needlessly destroyed, at least in Ontario.

Could this be avoided by electing a premier whose discernment equals that of a mature bull? I'm not sure, but it would be comforting to know that the combined IQ at Ontario's Queens Park matches that of a bullpen behind the average Plaza de Toros in Spain, whose inmates learn after a session in the arena to charge the matador, not a piece of red cloth.

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