

## MPs plan private Bill on animal welfare

**David Ee**

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Several MPs are planning to table a Private Member's Bill by June to toughen animal welfare laws, making it the second such kind of Bill to be submitted this year.

Private Member's Bills are introduced by MPs who are not Cabinet ministers. The last time one was successfully passed was in 1994, when then Nominated MP Walter Woon tabled the Maintenance of Parents Act.

But this year, Parliament may see two Private Member's Bills being introduced. Mr Christopher de Souza, an MP for Holland-Bukit Timah GRC, plans to table one in November to combat human trafficking, with support from the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Mr Yeo Guat Kwang, an MP for Ang Mo Kio GRC, who is leading the animal welfare legislation effort, told The Straits Times that he and four other MPs are already drafting the Bill, which will include heftier fines and longer jail terms for animal abusers.

They are Mr Gan Thiam Poh, an MP for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC; Mr Alex Yam, an MP for Chua Chu Kang GRC; Mr Edwin Tong, an MP for Moulmein-Kallang GRC; and Mr Vikram Nair, an MP for Sembawang GRC.

The Bill aims to pass into law extensive recommendations made last year by an expert committee chaired by Mr Yeo to improve animal welfare.

In addition to stiffer punishments, the recommendations also require all pet-related businesses to undergo training on animal handling, while owners have to provide a reasonable standard of care for their pets.

Mr Yeo said a Private Member's Bill would reflect the "spirit" of the committee's "ground-up" effort involving not only MPs, but also animal welfare groups, industry, grassroots leaders and the public.

"It is important that we have Bills that are initiated from the ground and carried through by all involved," he said.

"It is the spirit of understanding the diverse views from all stakeholders."

The Ministry of National Development had accepted wholesale the committee's recommendations last year.

Mr Yeo added that he expects the Bill to receive widespread support from MPs.

Mr Tong said some of the recommendations would be tabled "wholesale", and others "modified".

"Certainly, the concept and spirit would be similar," he said.

One of the challenges they face, he explained, was in ensuring the beefed up laws do not become so onerous as to discourage pet ownership.

He said: "That is not the intention... we want to make sure that whatever punishments are imposed are very targeted."

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh noted that Private Member's Bills here tend to be tabled for issues "that seek or require a change in social norms", rather than "bread-and-butter" ones such as health-care or housing.

"And it is good that backbenchers are seen to be making contributions to legislation."

### **Strengthening penalties against abuse**

IN 2012, the Animal Welfare Legislative Review Committee was set up to look into improving the welfare of animals here. Its recommendations have been accepted by the National Development Ministry. They include:

- \* Strengthening the Animals and Birds Act by clearly defining reasonable standards of care for pets, and holding their owners responsible.
- \* Increasing punishment for animal abusers from fines of up to \$10,000 and/or a one-year jail term to fines of up to \$50,000 and/or a three-year jail term. Those found guilty may also have to do community service and be barred from keeping pets for up to a year.
- \* Increasing punishment for animal-related businesses which contravene the Act from fines of up to \$10,000 and/or a one-year jail term to fines of up to \$100,000. They may also have their operations suspended for up to a year.
- \* Making it mandatory for the staff of pet-related businesses to undergo training in animal care and handling.