

Barbara Kay: Pit bull lobby put on its heels by Quebec's dangerous dog bill, CBC documentary

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In April, the Quebec government introduced Bill 128, which will authorize the province to prohibit any person from owning, breeding or acquiring “potentially dangerous” dogs, which includes pit bulls and Rottweilers, the two highest-risk dogs.

Impetus for the bill — and a similar one passed in Montreal — arose largely from distress over the June 2016 fatal mauling of Christiane Vadnais by her Pointe-aux-Trembles neighbour's pit bull. A passionate, year-long public debate ensued, featuring intense lobbying of Quebec politicians by U.S. pit bull advocates opposed to breed specific legislation (BSL).

In a recently-published report on Vadnais' death, Quebec coroner Ethan Lichtblau re-opened wounds, asserting (to the Vadnais family's disgust) that Vadnais was “simply in the wrong place at the wrong time” (she was in her own backyard).

Rarely has a public policy issue so divided Quebecers. The turmoil did, however, have the salutary effect of capturing the investigative attention of CBC's Fifth Estate. The production team immersed themselves in the debate literature, then interviewed leading combatants, along with victims' families, (including Christiane Vadnais' daughter Emilie Routhier), as well as “no-kill” rescuers, a shelter-system whistle-blower and a plastic surgeon. The result, aired in September, was “Pit Bulls Unleashed: Should they be banned?”

Other documentaries on pit bulls exist, but most are propaganda from the pit bull advocacy pipeline, for my BSL camp is David to the pit bull lobby's Goliath, the canine equivalent of the NRA.

The combined objectivity and professionalism of the Fifth Estate doc is therefore unique in my 15 years of engagement with this subject. It merits hearty commendation, and not because I appear in it (for 15 seconds). It is an expertly crafted reduction of the essentials of the contested claims on this topic, by an ensemble that privileges hard data, public safety perspectives and victims' suffering over emotive pleading for a high-risk dog type's “right” to social parity with normal breeds. I was gratified to learn that content related to the episode received over 10,000 comments, about 10 times what a typical Fifth Estate episode would receive.

Every documentarian seeks that telling interview moment when a marketing mask briefly drops, and truths normally suppressed rise unbidden to the tongue. Mild-mannered Fifth Estate host Mark Kelley found his in conversation with Ledy VanKavage, hired lobbyist for the pit bull advocacy group, Best Friends Animal Society.

Kelley asks VanKavage: “Why do [pit bulls] need a lobby?” Back flows a silky stream of advocacy mantras: “misunderstood,” “hysteria,” “media hype,” “fake news.”

Kelley then spreads pages of a sole month's pit bull disaster-related newspaper headlines before her, asking if all of them are misleading. Woodenly, VanKavage sticks with “some” being “media bias and fake news.” Kelley gently asks if reports of a lethal attack on 14-month-old Daxton Borchardt by two pit bulls are also fake news.

Flashback: The 2013 mauling death of Wisconsin toddler Daxton Borchardt was a game changer in the pit bull laundering industry. The documentary devotes a full 10 minutes to the story's principal players, which is appropriate, given the constellation of features that are so damning to the pit bull lobby's reflexive catechism of excuses: the killer dogs had been lovingly raised from puppyhood by a responsible owner; they were neutered, well-trained and well-socialized; the owner, Daxton's babysitter Susan Iwicki, kept the dogs crated when Dax was in her home; there was no discernible trigger, during their brief backyard pee break, for the two dogs' sudden assault on Dax and their own beloved owner.

Moreover, the facts were meticulously documented by police, backed by Iwicki's powerful testimony. Uncommonly for a pit bull owner, Iwicki sought to make amends, emerging as a courageous ally of Dax's dad, Jeff Borchardt, in the campaign for BSL. Her moral integrity is featured to stunning effect in the documentary.

Back to Kelley's question: Was Dax fake news? VanKavage's first gambit: “I don't know what happened that day.” Kelley doesn't blink. Everyone in the pit bull cosmos knows what happened that day. Gambit two: most dog attacks come from children being “unsupervised.” Kelley replies, “[Iwicki] was holding the child at the time” (the dogs leaped up and dragged him from her arms). At this point, a cooler head would have counselled a simple, “I am mystified; I have no explanation.” Instead VanKavage took the bait: “Y'know, I can't, I can't — I don't know the history of the dogs. I don't know if the child was crying.” Kelley (incredulous but calm), “But if the child was crying?”

VanKavage — you can see the light dawning — realizes she has inadvertently given her lobby's game away. She has (wickedly!) shifted the blame for his death to a 14-month-old baby rather than admit that pit bull type dogs are inherently unpredictable and, once aroused, exceptionally vicious. To these activists (and trust me, such blame-shifting is commonplace amongst them), the victims are nothing; the dogs' image is everything.

Since Daxton Borchardt's death, more Americans — 103 — have been killed by pit bulls than by all other breeds combine