Old Grey Matter article published in Saturday’s EADT (8th December 2018)

'Austerity is over – Oh no it isn't!'

Two items from the issue of National Pensioners Convention (NPC) Campaign Bulletin caught my eye this month.

First was news that the scale of winter deaths among the country’s older population reached the highest figure since 1975/76. Official figures show an estimated 50,100 excess winter deaths occurred in England and Wales between December 2017 and March 2018.

This equates to 417 deaths a day or 17 deaths an hour. During the winter months of 2017 to 2018, the number of daily deaths exceeded the daily five-year average for all days except 25 March. The figures also showed that excess winter mortality in 2017 to 2018 significantly increased from 2016 to 2017 in all English regions and Wales, and those most affected were females and people aged 85 plus.

Jan Shortt, NPC general secretary said: “Successive governments have simply ignored the problem of winter deaths amongst the older population and seem to have a policy of crossing their fingers and hoping things will improve. These figures show this policy simply doesn’t work – and things are now the worst they’ve been for over 40 years. It’s time someone took responsibility and that has to lie with the Energy Minister,” she added.

At least 1.4 million older people are already in fuel poverty, and almost one in three live in homes with inadequate heating or insulation making their homes more difficult to heat or keep warm. The key to tackling winter deaths is to make sure older people have got a well-insulated, warm home and the income needed to pay the fuel bills. The NPC says this is a basic requirement of what a decent society should do.

The second article concerns the BBC acting as the government’s welfare agent by preparing to limit the free TV licence for the over 75s. The BBC consultation ends in February, and the broadcaster is meanly seeking to reduce the value of the concession by 50%, means-test it or remove it completely. Yet for over a million of the oldest people in our country, television is their main form of company. Almost a third of over 75s are living in poverty or just above the poverty line. For them, paying a hefty extra bill would simply be impossible when they’re barely scraping by as it is. Half of all over 75s are also living with a disability, and many rely on their TV for companionship and entertainment. For those who don’t have the internet, TV lets them stay up to date with what’s happening in the world. Removing their access to TV would be a cruel blow when they’re already facing such huge challenges.

Dot Gibson, NPC deputy general secretary said: “It’s the government’s responsibility to look after vulnerable older people, not the BBC’s.” The NPC has joined with Age UK and other pensioner organisations to mount a campaign against the change, and the first step is encouraging all who are concerned at this to sign a petition at: ageuk.org.uk/tvpetition.

Christopher Brooks, Chair,  
 Suffolk, & Anglia Region,  
 Pensioners Association (NPC)