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Winter fuel payments cut 'one of the worst decisions I have ever seen' says ex pensions minister

Crossbench peer will table 'fatal' Lords motion, as Starmer faces damaging rebellion in Commons vote

● **Steve Webb: There's no need to cut poorer pensioners' income. Smarter winter fuel solutions are at hand**



Keir Starmer defended plans to limit winter fuel payments at prime minister's questions as the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, looked on. Photograph: House of Commons/UK Parliament/AFP/Getty Images

The respected former pensions minister Ros Altmann has tabled a "fatal" parliamentary motion to kill off the government's controversial plan to limit winter fuel payments, describing it as "one of the worst decisions I have ever seen".

The move by Baroness Altmann, a crossbench peer and **leading expert on issues affecting elderly people**, comes amid growing pressure on the prime minister, Keir Starmer, from across the political spectrum, to drop or modify the plan ahead of a series of key votes this week.

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Separately, [a report by a cross-party group of peers](#) has accused Starmer and his ministers of rushing through the changes “at a pace that does not permit the appropriate scrutiny” by parliament. The peers say they are “unconvinced” by the reasons given for the urgency.

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The prime minister is facing a damaging rebellion by some of his own MPs in a vote on the issue in the House of Commons on Tuesday, with many [Labour](#) backbenchers reporting that their inboxes have been bursting with complaints from pensioners anxious about keeping warm this winter.

One Labour MP said: “They have to give way on this or old people will die. It is better to back off now. Even cabinet ministers know this is a disaster for the party if we don't change course.”

At least 12 Labour MPs have signed a Commons motion opposing the plan. There will also be a vote and calls to drop the policy at the Trades Union Congress that opens in Brighton on Sunday.

But Starmer said yesterday: “We have looked at the books, there is £22bn missing from the books and we have got to deal with that. We have got to take tough decisions. Targeting the winter fuel payments is a tough decision. We have put in safeguards for many pensioners, with pension credit, with housing benefit.”

A frantic whipping operation was under way this weekend as ministers tried to limit the scale of any Labour rebellion. But with several cabinet ministers known to share backbenchers' concerns, there were fears that without movement from No 10 and the Treasury anger would only grow.



📷 Ros Altmann leaving 10 Downing Street in May 2015 after David Cameron made her pensions minister. Photograph: Neil Hall/Reuters

Altmann was appointed by David Cameron as pensions minister in 2015 despite being a Labour party member (she was expelled from Labour). She said last night she would push her motion to a vote in the House of Lords this week because she felt so strongly.

She accepted it was highly unlikely to pass but said that it was crucial in order to focus minds.

The motion, known in parliamentary jargon as a "fatal" motion, calls for the measures "to be annulled because they would significantly reduce state support for pensioners without sufficient warning and without a proper impact assessment, and because they present a significant risk to the health and wellbeing of many pensioners on low incomes".

Altmann said claims by ministers that they were protecting the poorest pensioners were "simply not true". She added: "I am just so flummoxed because I cannot believe that they believe what they are saying."

While she agreed that better-off pensioners should not receive the payments, she said the way the government was limiting them only to those on pension credit would leave around 3 million poorer pensioners - particularly those just above the threshold for claiming the benefit - without badly needed help.

"As policy, it ranks as one of the worst decisions I have ever seen," she said. "I will push it to a vote. The aim is to stop this and to get the Commons to think again."

The former Labour minister and peer George Foulkes, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on older people, said: "As a loyalist, I would never vote against the government on this. But I feel it is my duty to point out that, unless we find ways to mitigate the effects, we will face a perfect storm.

"I worry that this will come from Labour MPs who are genuinely concerned, and others on the left, as well as the rightwing media, who see it as a perfect issue on which to attack the government. I fear that, unless there are modifications made, this will carry on through the conference season, which should be a time for celebration for Labour, and then through the winter.

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"I think the prime minister can do this by saying 'We are a listening government' and that we will look at doing what we can to help those most in need. It doesn't need to come across as a U-turn but as a change for the better."



On 29 July, the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, announced that the policy of giving winter fuel payments to all pensioners would be dropped to save the government £1.3bn this year and £1.5bn in future years, with the money going instead only to those in receipt of pension credit. The payments can be worth up to £300 a year.

Government sources insisted last night that there would be no climbdown and no modification of the plans, stressing that pensioners had been helped by government policies including continuation of the “triple lock” that ensures the state pension rises by a generous amount annually.

Reeves has been warned to expect more concerns to be raised by Labour MPs on Monday when she addresses a meeting of the parliamentary party.

While many Labour MPs will be wary of voting against, fearing they will lose the whip, several dozen could abstain to show their discontent.

Another MP said: “Rachel’s lines aren’t working, and I don’t understand why she is persisting. There isn’t an MP I’ve spoken to who isn’t worried. MPs will be hearing it in spades this weekend in their constituencies.”

Writing for the *Observer*, another former pensions minister, Steve Webb, also takes issue with the government’s approach.

“The politics of this announcement were pretty grim,” he writes. “It is one thing coming up with a package of cuts where everyone feels some of the pain but we are ‘all in this together’. But it is quite another to make one group of voters feel singled out by the government. And the problem was made worse a few weeks later when Ofgem announced a **10% increase in energy bills** for this winter.”

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