

# House of Commons debate on the over 75s TV Licence concession

## Briefing Paper May 2019



### Introduction

On the 8<sup>th</sup> May 2019, the House of Commons debated the over 75s' free TV licence concession. The debate came about as a result of a motion tabled by Kevin Brennan MP and supported by 134 members. There was further cross-party support for the motion from Independent, Plaid Cymru, Green Party, DUP MPs and a Conservative.

The motion moved by Tom Watson MP called on the Government “to honour the Conservative party’s 2017 manifesto promise to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s for the duration of this Parliament by ensuring sufficient funding to do so and, should the BBC propose changes to the concession, to ensure that the proposed changes were subject to parliamentary consent.” The motion was in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, plus the leader of the Liberal Democrats and the leader of the SNP.

### The Debate

Numerous Labour, SNP and DUP MPs interjected the opening statements with details of the thousands of their constituents that would be affected by the licence fee concession being removed and outlining the matters such as poverty, loneliness and isolation in their comments.

There were some questions from Conservative MPs as to whether a multimillionaire should receive a free TV licence and if a Labour government would restore the TV licence, costing £745 million per year after 2020. Mr Watson stated “If we believe in universal benefits and that people who have paid into the Exchequer over their working lives are entitled to benefits, then yes. I hope the hon. Gentleman believes that his party should stick to its manifesto pledges.”

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, Margot James, then started the government’s rebuttal outlying that the BBC was a world-class broadcaster and acts as a companion for many people – especially older people – throughout the country.

Almost immediately she was interrupted by Labour MPs challenging the government on outsourcing a social security concession to the BBC and why keeping the concession had then been included in an election manifesto pledge in 2017.

Ms James acknowledged that it had been a pledge, but also that Parliament had voted through the Digital Economy Act in November 2016, thus the responsibility had passed to the BBC. She said that when the BBC agreed to fund these TV licences, the BBC promised to consult on any further changes to them. The government has also unfrozen the cost of the TV licence for the first time since 2010, meaning that the BBC was now able to charge for their broadcasting in line with inflation.

The debate continued with further examples of how the change would adversely affect the over 75s, and the NPC was mentioned by MPs throughout the debate. Mr

Watson said the BBC had been put in an "impossible position" by the government, where it would either have to choose between cutting programmes, or to end a benefit for older people. Further adding that "this is austerity by the back door," citing Age UK analysis which said ending the benefit could push 50,000 pensioners into relative poverty. Queries as to whether the BBC would have to cut programming and services were also mooted by Patricia Gibson MP (SNP) who stated "the BBC will have £745 million less to spend annually on programmes - the combined budget of BBC 2, BBC 4 and BBC Radio 3 - if it continues with the free TV licences."

MPs from the Conservatives stated that the BBC had agreed to concessions on broadband roll-out commitments and with the licence fee rising with inflation, they had a fair deal. Additionally, MPs questioned the BBC on some of their high wages and over budget set costs. Former culture secretary John Whittingdale (Con) also questioned if free TV licences were a fundamental pillar of the welfare state.

### **Conclusion**

The debate concluded with Parliamentary under-secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Michael Ellis, saying that the government were committed to tackling loneliness and had launched a £400,000 digital inclusion innovation fund in September 2018. He made clear that the BBC had yet to announce the results from the consultation on the future of the TV licence, further reiterating that the BBC was independent from government and that it had been agreed in 2015 that responsibility for the concession would be passed to the BBC from 2020.

The motion was formally passed, but is not binding on the government.

### **Further Information**

[1] HM Government (2019) Parliamentary transcribes

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-05-08/debates/6FE9E590-B299-471A-BAAD-A50946D5841D/TVLicencesForOver-75S>

[2] HM Government (2019) Parliamentary supporters

<https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/52541/tv-licences-for-over75s>

**National Pensioners Convention  
Marchmont Community Centre  
62 Marchmont Street  
WC1N 1AB  
London  
www.npcuk.org**