Comment

Net zero is freezing pensioners to death

This will be the year bottom falls out of green energy and Miliband finds himself out in the cold

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I know this is not a very cheerful message for the new year but I'm afraid we can't just ignore a grim reality. As the temperature drops to -11C, cold weather — aka the silent killer — will be dispatching many older people to an early grave.

Winter deaths have been running at a 30-year high, according to Age Scotland. Now, with the loss of the winter fuel payment (WFP) for all but the very poorest, combined with a raging flu epidemic and a failing NHS, those numbers will inevitably increase as the mercury falls.

And no, the Scottish government has not restored the £300 winter payment. John Swinney has said he will try to mitigate the means test in 2026, in time for the next Scottish election, which is not much help for those right now wrestling with the choice of heating or eating. The Scottish government doesn't lack cash — it has just had a record block grant settlement from Westminster. A cynic might suspect that the delay in restoring the payment is so that the UK government will get the blame for this winter's crisis.

One million Scottish pensioners have lost the fuel payment this year; a quarter of Scots were in fuel poverty last year; and 22,000 old people died during winter, many from avoidable causes aggravated by cold weather. In 2017 Labour calculated that means-testing winter fuel payments could cause 4,000 deaths across the UK. No one knows how many of these would be Scots because the SNP government failed to conduct an impact assessment of the withdrawal of WFP.

The Scottish NHS, for its part, says pensioners should keep their thermostats at 21°C, which is out of the question for most since it would lead to bills of £250 per month. Energy prices were supposed to have fallen back to pre-pandemic levels by now, but of course, they haven't. Bills today are still 41 per cent higher than before the energy crisis, according to the House of Commons Library.

What happened to all that cheap green energy? We may be world leaders in building offshore wind farms but the bills just go up and up. This is partly because of green subsidies and the fact that we increasingly import our energy from abroad. Renewables companies always blame the price of gas, which sets the benchmark for world energy prices. Yet they never explain why, if it's set by gas, the electricity price here is so much higher.

The reality is covert subsidies play a large part. Contracts for difference, designed to encourage wind farm developers by guaranteeing their profits, are a kind of subsidy, even if paid by consumers in their energy bills. At any rate, all that cheap renewable energy that we were promised a decade ago never materialised, just like all those green jobs that Alex Salmond promised in 2010. Donald Trump may not have helped matters by calling for the UK government to halt the closure of the North Sea and to "scrap those windmills". Wind turbines should ultimately deliver better energy security and lower bills because we have a lot of wind. But Trump is not entirely wrong. Half our gas still comes from the North Sea, and much of the petrol in our cars came from our oil — though not for much longer now that Grangemouth, Scotland's only significant petrochemical refinery, is to close.

North Sea oil is running out, as everyone knows, but it makes little sense from an energy security point of view to close it prematurely, as the UK government is doing by banning exploration —especially since the energy we import from America and Norway is less clean and more expensive. Ministers should make a 2025 resolution not to keep saying that green energy is cheaper unless they want the mother of all blowouts from angry consumers.

Ed Miliband, the net zero secretary, intends to intensify the drive to scrap millions of gas boilers, just as the Scottish government shelved plans to do the same. The 2021 Green Party-inspired Heat in Buildings strategy to scrap a million Scottish gas boilers by 2030 at a cost of £33 billion was quietly dropped in 2023. However, like Miliband, the SNP government is still betting the house on heat pumps to cut emissions, even though they are expensive and probably unsuitable for most of the million or so draughty tenement flats.

Even for energy-efficient buildings they are expensive because they run on electricity, which is four times more expensive per kWh than gas, according to Nesta, the government-funded science and technology body. Eco engineers like Green Fox Energy are advising the Scottish government that the Heat in Buildings Bill should make clear that air-source heat pumps need the addition of solar panels to make them affordable.

What has all this has to do with granny freezing? Well, a close friend of mine's octogenarian parents recently asked our biggest energy company to advise them on replacing their gas boiler. The agent tried to persuade them that a heat pump system, at £15,000, could be cheaper with grants. However, he didn't take into account the increased cost of using electricity instead of gas, or the £40,000 cost of insulating their prewar house.

Such mis-selling is undermining public confidence in net zero. People are tired of greenwash and ever-increasing energy bills. If you want my prediction for the new year, it's that 2025 will be the year the bottom falls out of the green energy market, and Miliband finds himself out in the cold — like Scottish pensioners. And unless he changes tune, Swinney will be out there with him.

THE TIMES
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Natasha Radmehr Notebook

Looking like something the cat dragged in

So long, Jocelyn Wildenstein, a woman most of us only knew because of her fierce commitment to the surgeon's scalpel. I remember being fascinated by her as a kid. In the early days of the internet there was a website — I forget its name but it was the kind made by a bored teen using GeoCities — that rounded up examples of plastic surgery gone too far. A digital freak show in the pre-clickbait era, before freakery became standard internet currency. I'd scroll through each face in astonishment, wondering if what they saw in the mirror matched the curious arrangement of pixels on my screen. The Bogdanoff twins. Michael Jackson. Pete Burns. Jocelyn. All wearing masks that couldn't come off.

Wildenstein wanted to resemble a wild cat. We all ridiculed her for it. Mental health was rarely acknowledged back in the Nineties and, to be fair, she did look absurd. Taut feline eyes, golden mane, a leonine smile sandwiched between puffy cheeks and a cartoonish, bolted-on chin. She was dubbed the Bride of Wildenstein and became a byword for bad surgery.

Would she have garnered as many gawps if she had come to renown a few decades later? I doubt it. She would most certainly have gone viral, especially given her back story. But her face doesn't have the same shock value in 2025. These days we're as likely to see a diluted version of it sitting across from us on the train as we are on the red carpet. The startled brows. The fat, high cheeks. Madonna has the look and so too does a young guy from my hometown who now self-injects his fillers after several salons refused to administer further treatments. Wildenstein lived much of her life as a freak but died at a time when seemingly everybody, like her, wants to be a cat.

You cheeky monkey

Except Robbie Williams, of course, who favours chimpanzees. My husband and I were two of four people at a cinema screening of *Better Man* last weekend and — bloody hell — it deserved a much bigger audience than that. I'm agnostic about Robbie's music (though it did soundtrack my first kiss at a school dance: he was loving *Angels*, I was loving a Lanark Young Farmer) but it's been punched up spectacularly for this biopic. In any case, the music is secondary to his story, told with crystalline honesty. It's about fame, addiction and working-class ambition and was one of the best films we watched in 2024.

Fever dreams

A late addition to this year's resolutions but one that will resonate with many, judging by the latest flu figures from Public Health Scotland: Get. The. Bloody. Flu. Jab. I know even the vaccinated are falling prey to it but I've spent the past few days laid up with my second bout of flu in as many months and can't bear the thought of it returning. My face is the colour of Farrow & Ball Elephant's Breath and that's probably an apt description of my general aroma right now too. I've been shivery and feverish and at one point thought I was hallucinating until I was informed that Marti Pellow genuinely was on TV reciting poetry.

Life's too short

Amid all the furore about Sir Keir Starmer skipping a three-hour queue for a toboggan ride in Madeira, we have failed to acknowledge the real scandal: everybody else was prepared to queue for that length of time to sit on a sledge for ten minutes. Nothing is worth queueing that long for. Life is too precious. And this will return to haunt me when my child reaches theme park age.

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THUNDERER

End tribalism to fix health and social care in Scotland

John Sturrock

To address fully the challenges in the provision of health and social care in Scotland we may need a paradigm shift — in other words, a fundamental change in our way of thinking about how we deliver both.

To paraphrase Einstein, it may not be possible to solve our problems with the same thinking used when the NHS was set up in the 1940s.

To achieve such a shift is not easy. It may mean examining some of the very foundations of how things are done and challenging the basic precepts upon which present thinking is based. That doesn't necessarily involve throwing everything out of the window but it does mean having the courage to ask important questions and to look at things in a way we may perhaps not have done before. This also requires humility and an admission that we do not have or know all the answers.

Perhaps only then can we embark properly on a process of exploring change. We might conclude that a top-down solution cannot be imposed, that central control is not the way forward, that things are too complex, uncertain and multifaceted for a one-size-fits-all approach. That may mean enabling people in different settings and localities to make decisions. This carries the risk that some decisions may turn out to be wrong. It is a balance: we learn from what doesn't work as well as what does.

New thinking would require collaboration in practice not just theory. It could mean a shift from what some may see as a transactional, incentive-driven, reward/punishment model, in which individuals sometimes feel like cogs in a wheel, to one founded on strong, respectful relationships.

It might entail a move from targets, possibly unachievable, to greater trust and empowerment, perhaps acknowledging the illusion of centralised competence and permitting fallibility and vulnerability in the quest for vision, innovation and creative leadership. Financial resources may be limited; imagination and ideas are not.

Fear cannot be the driver. We can encourage a culture of taking responsibility, not avoiding blame. Point-scoring, hyperbolic language, the narcissism of small differences — all of these can undermine. Setting aside some well-established interests for the sake of the common good may be necessary. We need to work together, enabling people to thrive and feel valued, recognising the interdependence, mutuality and reciprocity upon which a properly functioning health and social care system depends.

Easy to say ... achieving this may be a national imperative.

John Sturrock KC is a mediator