

# John Pring of Disability News Service on Museum of Austerity exhibition

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**Dennis Moore**  
18 December 2023

John Pring is a journalist and editor of the Disability News Service (DNS). Pring has reported on disability issues in the UK for nearly 25 years.

The website explains that Pring “launched DNS in April 2009 to address the absence of in-depth reporting in both the specialist and mainstream media on issues that affect the lives of disabled people. The news service focuses on issues such as discrimination equality, independent living, benefits, poverty, activism and campaigning and human rights, but also covers employment, transport, education, housing, crime, and arts, culture and sport.”

Pring brings his expertise to bear as Specialist Advisor & Co-Editor in a ground-breaking installation, Museum of Austerity (MoA), which recently opened at the HOME arts complex in Manchester and will tour at other venues in the UK next spring.

WSWS reporter Dennis Moore interviewed Pring about the Museum of Austerity, his involvement and the issues it raises.

**Dennis Moore (DM):**

What motivated you to want to bring these individual stories out to the public in this format?

**John Pring (JP)**

Sacha Wares first approached me to work on this project more than three years ago. She told me about a new project that would use state-of-the-art mixed reality technology to bring back to life the last moments of some of those whose deaths were linked to the austerity era, and particularly to the failings of the

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Sacha knew that it was the perfect medium to tell some of these awful stories, which I had been reporting on for nearly a decade by that time. She wanted to find a new way to hear the voices of those who were left behind, but also to bring back those who died through this technology. The idea was that it would have such a visceral impact that it would leave no audience member unmoved, and I think that’s what Sacha and the amazing team who have worked on *MoA* have achieved.

It’s about the harm caused by years of austerity this harm has been described by Dr. China Mills, who I’ve worked with on a couple of research projects, as “slow bureaucratic violence”, because the harm is not caused instantly, it happens slowly, often over many months, or even years. It’s also about the terrible human cost of decisions taken at the heart of government.

**DM:**

I read that it was not that easy to get the exhibition put on in other venues?

**JP:**

It has been frustrating that it is taking so long to find venues willing to host such an openly political piece, particularly because I think it is so urgent that more people see it. But I’m not the best person to ask about this, because I come from a background of journalism rather than the theatre. But it’s probably not just because of the politics. *MoA* is a bleak piece—it has been described as stark and unflinching. It probably needs a leap of faith to believe that people will come to

watch it. But from the reactions of those who have seen it so far, we know it's powerful, thanks to Sacha, and all the incredible creative and technical talents who have been involved.

**DM:**

Walking around the exhibition listening to each of these tragic stories, would you say that the experiences of benefit claimants with disabilities in a wider sense are more prevalent than is generally reported? Is this just the tip of the iceberg?

**JP:**

Absolutely. I usually say that the DWP is responsible for hundreds, and probably thousands, of deaths. The reason I start with hundreds is that there is research that linked DWP's actions with about 600 suicides between 2010 and 2013, and there has so far been no other cast-iron evidence we can point to beyond that, other than the grim trail of one death after another that has been revealed over the last decade.

It surprises me that so little attention is paid to the evidence that does come out. Often it is only the most appalling horrors—such as Errol Graham starving to death, and the other tragedies we've represented in *MoA*—that grab the media's interest. But every week I hear from disabled people about the slow, grinding, torturous impact that the disability benefits system has on them, often over months or even years. It's that slow violence again. It's one of the great scandals of 21st century UK society (with its roots in the early 1990s) and it's happening pretty much in clear sight. The deaths are linked to the widespread disablism in our society, and then the failure to report properly on this scandal is also linked to that same disablism.

**DM:**

Many people have described the current benefit system as being draconian in its attitude to claimants, leaving them at serious risk of destitution and financial hardship.

**JP:**

Draconian is the mildest word I would use. The grim, awful truth--and I write about this in my book, *The Department*, which will be published next summer by Pluto Press--is that hundreds, probably thousands, of disabled people have been failed by our country's social security system in their moments of greatest need, and that politicians, senior civil servants and private sector contractors averted their eyes and let it

happen again and again and again. It's no less than a horror story.



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