



A Critical Look at Andrew Knight's Blog Post

Towards Genuine Epistemic Justice and Democratic Accountability in Government Policy Design

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Abstract

This essay critically examines Andrew Knight's celebratory blog post on the UK Civil Service's policy design pavilion at the London Design Biennale, exposing underlying issues of epistemic gatekeeping, performative openness, and insufficient fiduciary accountability. While Knight frames the event as a demonstration of democratic participation and transparency through public engagement, closer analysis reveals superficial inclusivity and curated epistemic control. Drawing from my recent scholarship—specifically 'Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design' (2025) and 'Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness' (2025)—I argue that without transparent epistemic criteria, clear accountability mechanisms, and authentic democratic co-creation, such policy initiatives risk becoming mere spectacles rather than meaningful democratic

exercises. To address these shortcomings, the essay proposes explicit solutions, including epistemic transparency, structured accountability frameworks, critical reflexivity, and genuine epistemic pluralism, offering a blueprint for achieving authentic democratic legitimacy in government policy design.

Keywords

epistemic justice, epistemic gatekeeping, fiduciary openness, democratic accountability, performative openness, policy design, public participation, epistemic transparency, critical reflexivity, democratic epistemology, co-creation, institutional accountability, epistemic pluralism, UK Civil Service, institutional reform, governance ethics, public sector innovation, knowledge equity, transparency, design thinking

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1. Introduction

In his recent blog post, ‘Taking policy design to a global public audience’ (7 July 2025), Andrew Knight celebrates the UK Civil Service’s successful pavilion at the London Design Biennale. Highlighting engagement with the public through ‘serious games’ and participatory workshops, Knight’s narrative frames policy design as an inclusive, transparent, and democratically accountable practice. However, beneath this positive depiction lie fundamental issues concerning epistemic gatekeeping, performative openness, and fiduciary accountability. This essay critically analyses these issues using my established scholarship, particularly ‘Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design’ (2025) and ‘Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness’ (2025), and proposes concrete solutions for genuine epistemic and democratic reform in government policy design.

2. Performative Openness and the Illusion of Inclusion

Knight presents the Civil Service’s Biennale pavilion as a groundbreaking instance of openness, highlighting interactive ‘serious games’ that allowed public participants to engage directly with policy challenges, notably climate action. Yet the nature and depth of this engagement remain unclear. As argued extensively in my work, ‘Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?’ (2025), public displays of participation frequently obscure deeper epistemic exclusions. Without clearly demonstrating how public participation meaningfully informs policy decisions, such events risk becoming performative exercises rather than genuinely inclusive processes.

In Knight’s description, the public’s role seems symbolic rather than substantive. Participation is highlighted positively, yet there is no explicit mechanism to translate participant insights into actual policy decisions. This absence of epistemic transparency fosters a perception of openness without real epistemic empowerment. Participants are thus given the illusion of influence, creating a veneer of democratic legitimacy without meaningful redistribution of epistemic power.

3. Epistemic Gatekeeping and Institutional Control

Central to Knight’s narrative is the curatorial role he himself played, selecting what and whom to include. While curation may be necessary in organising events, it inherently involves gatekeeping, selectively amplifying certain perspectives and implicitly excluding others. As extensively documented in ‘Epistemic Gatekeepers and

Epistemic Injustice by Design’ (2025), such gatekeeping is rarely epistemically neutral; rather, it often reproduces dominant institutional frameworks and marginalises alternative epistemologies.

Knight’s framing does not critically reflect on the epistemic biases embedded in curatorial decisions. The very act of curation indicates that the government controlled not only the event’s design but also its epistemic boundaries. Without transparency about the selection criteria, the pavilion risks perpetuating existing epistemic hierarchies rather than challenging them.

4. Fiduciary Accountability: Performative Responsibility?

Fiduciary openness, a cornerstone of democratic governance, demands clear transparency, accountability, and epistemic plurality in decision-making processes, as argued in ‘Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness’ (2025). Knight’s account, however, positions the Civil Service as inherently transparent and benevolent without evidence or critical reflection. Such portrayals of fiduciary responsibility, unaccompanied by robust accountability mechanisms, become performative rather than substantive.

Knight’s blog post offers no details on oversight or accountability structures for curatorial or policy-making decisions. The mere public visibility of the pavilion is insufficient to guarantee fiduciary accountability. Without explicit mechanisms ensuring transparency and institutional accountability, claims of fiduciary openness remain hollow.

5. Serious Games and Democratic Epistemology

Knight places considerable emphasis on ‘serious games’ as a method for democratically exploring policy challenges. The theoretical premise—that structured play can foster open dialogue—is commendable. However, without explicit structures ensuring public inputs shape institutional decisions, these games risk epistemic tokenism. Participants might express diverse views, but without mechanisms guaranteeing genuine policy influence, such exercises amount to democratic simulation rather than genuine democratic epistemology.

Drawing from my thesis (‘Is Artificial Intelligence Really Undermining Democracy?’, 2025), the principles of epistemic transparency and procedural fairness demand that participation be clearly linked to policy decisions. Knight’s narrative provides no assurance of such links, undermining claims of democratic legitimacy.

6. Lack of Critical Reflexivity

A striking shortcoming of Knight’s narrative is its absence of critical reflexivity. The post exclusively portrays the pavilion as a success, avoiding reflection on any potential epistemic, democratic, or fiduciary shortcomings. Essential questions remain unaddressed:

- Who determined inclusion/exclusion criteria?
- Which alternative or critical perspectives were excluded?
- What accountability mechanisms exist for decisions taken based on public engagement?

This absence of critical reflection diminishes the epistemic and democratic credibility of the exercise.

7. Proposed Solutions: Towards Genuine Epistemic Justice and Democratic Accountability

Recognising the above critiques, government policy design events must explicitly adopt practices aligned with epistemic justice and fiduciary accountability. The following actionable recommendations can help achieve genuine democratic legitimacy:

a) Explicit Epistemic Transparency

Clearly define and publicly disclose criteria governing participant selection, workshop structure, and epistemic inputs. Transparency about decision-making processes ensures accountability and reduces epistemic exclusion.

b) Mechanisms for Genuine Epistemic Influence

Institute formal feedback loops where participant input explicitly shapes subsequent policy actions. Demonstrating a direct link between participation and policy outcomes avoids performative openness and fosters genuine democratic legitimacy.

c) Fiduciary Accountability Structures

Establish transparent oversight mechanisms, independent reviews, and reporting frameworks that ensure institutional accountability. Explicit fiduciary structures provide evidence-based legitimacy, countering performative responsibility.

d) Critical Reflexivity

Mandate reflective evaluation after events, explicitly identifying epistemic exclusions, biases, and shortcomings. Publicly disclosing this reflexive process demonstrates a commitment to epistemic justice rather than institutional self-congratulation.

e) Democratic Co-Creation

Shift from curated participation to democratic co-creation, allowing public participants to influence not only policy outcomes but also the framing of policy questions and methodologies themselves. Such co-creation embodies genuine democratic epistemology.

8. Conclusion

Andrew Knight's celebration of the Civil Service's pavilion at the London Design Biennale illustrates a broader trend within institutional policy design: presenting policy processes as epistemically open and democratically accountable without providing concrete evidence or structures to substantiate these claims. The risk is clear: performative openness masks entrenched epistemic gatekeeping, undermining the legitimacy and accountability essential to democratic governance.

To avoid this risk, explicit, transparent, and accountable structures must accompany policy design initiatives. True openness is neither performative nor superficial—it is demonstrably linked to epistemic justice, fiduciary accountability, and democratic legitimacy. Only through explicit commitments to epistemic transparency, accountability mechanisms, critical reflexivity, and democratic co-creation can policy design genuinely empower citizens and embody the democratic values it claims to uphold.

Thus, while Knight’s initiative marks an encouraging public-facing step, significant structural reforms remain necessary. By embracing these recommendations, government policy design can transcend performative participation, genuinely realising its democratic and epistemic potential.

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