Are we the sum of all our parts – or just those bits that people like? That’s the question that lies at the heart of the controversy surrounding the appointment of Nick Greiner as Chairman of the Advisory Council of Sydney University’s new Graduate School of Government. The new school is reported to be the personal project of the Sydney University Chancellor, Justice Kim Santow – so we can be sure that it will be considered to be a ‘flagship’ initiative of the University.

The trouble is that Nick Greiner is also a tobacco boss. Indeed, he is THE tobacco boss in Australia – serving as Chairman of the Board of British American Tobacco’s (BAT) Australian Division. This fact has caused a storm of protest from anti-tobacco campaigners who claim that Greiner’s appointment violates the spirit of a longstanding Sydney University ban on University staff and students ‘dancing with the tobacco devil’.

Those supporting Greiner’s appointment do so on the basis that the former NSW Premier has an established interest in and commitment to the challenge of reinforcing the quality of public administration. Indeed, they claim that Greiner’s championship of the tobacco industry is completely irrelevant. While it might be true that the Chancellor and his advisers gave absolutely no weight to the fact of Nick Greiner’s role as a tobacco tsar, it is interesting to ask if, perhaps, this ought to have been a relevant consideration.

The attempt to ‘quarantine’ undesirable features of a person’s past or present activities is fraught with difficulty. It seems to be based on the idea that human beings can be split into separate selves – with the dividing lines defined according to the attributes of different roles. Those who operate according to this principle seem to think that the person who teaches Sunday School on the weekend is fundamentally different from the person who sells pornography between Monday and Friday.

While recognising that we all play different roles in life – and that each of these roles has its own internal requirements – I cannot accept this curious view of ‘divided’ selves. Healthy individuals are fully ‘integrated’ – able to operate across functional boundaries while sustaining a sense of themselves as a whole person. Indeed, each individual reveals something of him or her self as a result of the choices we make about the roles that we are prepared to play.

Greiner is, of course, the sum of many parts. He is a son, a husband, a father, a former premier and (amongst other things) … he is Chairman of BAT. His choice of this role tells us something about Nick Greiner the man. After all, he is blessed with opportunity and could have pursued other options. Those who seek to ‘quarantine’ aspects of his identity do him no service – for he is diminished by this process.

Once we recognise this and do Greiner the justice of assessing him as a whole, then we find that there is no avoiding the ‘tobacco question’. There are some individuals and organisations that are either positively inclined toward the tobacco industry. Others are merely best described as ‘indifferent’. Finally, there are people who are (like me) positively opposed to an industry that has a record of profoundly unethical conduct,
engaged in for the sake of flogging an almost uniquely harmful product. Companies like BAT claim that they only market to adults who are free to choose to smoke. The unhappy truth is that many of those taking up smoking in developing countries are barely literate – and many others who already smoke, in developed countries, have their choices constrained by addiction.

However, what most of us think about the tobacco industry is more or less irrelevant in this matter. Rather, the thing that counts is what Sydney University thinks about tobacco. It remains open to the University of Sydney to declare to the world that it has considered the issue of tobacco and following deliberation has concluded that it is unwilling to discriminate against any company operating legally within Australia. It might go further and accept the argument of the tobacco companies that they are simply providing goods designed for consumption by adult smokers. If that is the stance that the University of Sydney wishes to embrace, then (for the sake of consistency) it should probably overturn its ban on students and staff accepting funds from the tobacco companies.

The University might then consider Mr Greiner’s candidacy – as a whole – and still choose him to Chair the Advisory Council for the Graduate School of Government. This would be far preferable to the current state of affairs as the University would have made at least an open and honest decision – bearing the full weight of what it does rather than trying to ‘lighten the load’ at the expense of Mr Greiner’s integrity.

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