

Weblink 6:

On Monday night, the University of Sydney's Senate overturned the recent appointment of former NSW premier Nick Greiner as chair of the new Graduate School of Government's advisory board. I had petitioned the Senate that Greiner's role of chair of British American Tobacco (Australia) was an insult to the spirit of a 1982 Senate resolution that has since prevented any staff or students accepting any form of named endowment from a tobacco company.

The Chancellor, Justice Kim Santow, and Greiner argued that the appointment was irrelevant to his tobacco company role, implying it was possible to selectively endorse aspects of a person's contributions to the community while ignoring others. The mafia boss who puts \$1000 in the church plate each Sunday fools no one and tobacco industry leaders can hardly hide behind the same convenient Jeckyll and Hyde duplicity. Indeed, a 1995 BAT internal document set out plainly company expectations for its directors:

“Systematic contact should...be maintained with... key audiences whose goodwill and co-operation can help companies achieve their business objectives... Steps should be taken to ensure that non-executive directors are given the opportunity to play a full and appropriate role in relationships with government and other appropriate audiences. The objective of external relations activity is to ensure that the full support of key audiences is enlisted.”ⁱ

Greiner is of course not a mafia boss. What he does instead is draw on his political skills to enthusiastically govern a company whose success in selling more tobacco is followed by increases in horribly debilitating diseases like lung cancer and emphysema where the increasingly minimally educated victims struggle for their every breath for sometimes years. Illiterate smokers in BAT's burgeoning third world markets “choose” to smoke, runs the company line. The tobacco industry has repeatedly advanced the commercially ludicrous proposition that it does not wish to attract new smokers -- principally children. It is an “adult decision”. Meanwhile, a large series of 1998 Powerpoint presentations provided to me by a former BAT employee details explicitly named “youth” oriented promotions in Burmese nightspots and markets run at the same time BAT was running a global propaganda campaign emphasising that it strongly opposed youth smoking.

The tobacco industry has a 40 year documented track record of corrupting science for its own commercial gain and has cynically sought to engage with independent university researchers to perpetuate its policy position that controls on tobacco are premature because “more research was needed”. This is a hugely disreputable industry, responsible for unparalleled chronic disease throughout the world today -- 19,000 annual deaths in Australia alone. BAT's “market share” of these deaths is 8,170 deaths, some 24% of which occur in people aged less than 65 years.

While the University would be unlikely to accept a donation from the unconvicted Abu Bakar Bashir for religious studies or a chain of Thai brothels for a chair in erotic literature, no other industry has been singled out by the University and named as inappropriate to be associated with scholarship. The intent of the 1982 ruling was to send a highly symbolic message to the University and to the community that money from the tobacco industry was unacceptable, despite coming from a legal industry.

Some argue that “tobacco is a legal product”, the subtext being that one can thus avoid engagement with any ethical issues said to be relevant because if something is “legal”, then nothing more needs to be discussed. The same arguments were once presumably used about the entirely legal slave trade, the exploitation of children in mines and factories, and exhibiting the deformed for entertainment. Recourse to the “it’s legal” excuse for avoiding debate is an unworthy position for a great University to adopt.

Angry letters have poured into the Chancellor’s office from staff, students and alumni. Greiner chose to publicly denigrate his critics as “zealots” who “wasted 5 minutes of my time”. This self-absorbed arrogance reinforced an understanding of the episode to many in the University who were appalled by the inappropriateness of the appointment. The core values that motivated the adoption of the original 1982 Senate policy were ignored in Greiner’s appointment and the Senate is to be congratulated for re-stating them this week.

Simon Chapman is professor of public health at the University of Sydney. A selection of his research group’s papers on revelations from the industry’s internal documents can be found at <http://tobacco.health.usyd.edu.au/site/gateway/docs/research.htm#working>

ⁱ http://tobaccodocuments.org/bc_moh/21014.html