

MR NELSON MANDELA'S SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF THE ELDERS

WEDNESDAY, 18 JULY 2007

In today's world, many of the problems we face are global in nature. These include climate change, pandemics such as aids, malaria and TB. And of course, that entirely human created affliction: violent conflict.

The structures we have to deal with these problems are often tied down by political, economic or geographical constraints.

As institutions of government grapple – often unequally - with challenges they face, the efforts of a small, dedicated group of leaders, working objectively and without any vested personal interest in the outcome, can help resolve what often seems like intractable problems.

We have the makings of such a group. Some of them are here, others could regrettably not attend. Using their collective experience, their moral courage and their ability to rise above the parochial concerns of nation, race and creed, they can help make our planet a more peaceful, healthy and equitable place to live.

Let us call them Global Elders, not because of their age, but because of their individual and collective wisdom.

This group derives its strength not from political, economic or military power, but from the independence and integrity of those who are here.

They do not have careers to build, elections to win, constituencies to please. They can talk to anyone they please, and are free to follow paths they deem right, even if hugely unpopular.

It is now several years since Richard Branson and Peter Gabriel came to me with their idea for The Elders. Since then I have watched the concept grow, gain structure and strength, and become a real, viable, and pragmatic initiative.

I believe that, with their experience and their energies, and their profound commitment to building a better world, The Elders can become a fiercely independent and robust force for good, tackling complex and intractable issues, especially those that are not popular.

However, I know that this group will not become arbitrary and arrogant, and that it will seek advice from expert organisations and work cooperatively with them. What's more, they will not take the easy, short term route, but support long-term, sustainable approaches that address the root causes of the problems they tackle.

They are I know, committed to working with local and indigenous knowledge; to listening and bringing together antagonists and protagonists; to working with anyone who is motivated to resolve a problem. They can help foster and introduce innovative ideas and little known solutions to connect those who have real practical needs with those who have something to give.

Through their friends in business, they can mobilise up to date technology, and raise not only awareness of forgotten issues, but also help locate the resources to address them.

But whatever techniques they use, I believe that in the end it is kindness and generous accommodation that are the catalysts for real change. I know these esteemed friends of mine are capable of doing all these things.

And I expect that, if my friend the Archbishop has anything to do with it, they will insist on assuming the essential interdependence of all human-kind. We call this the spirit of Ubuntu - that profound African sense that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings.

I am confident that the Elders can become a real role model – leading, guiding and supporting all sorts of initiatives, both their own and those of many others.

The Elders can speak freely and boldly, working both publicly and behind the scenes on whatever actions need to be taken.

They will reach out to those who most need their help. It is those who have the least and who therefore suffer the most. It is those who are rarely heard. This group of Elders can represent them and make sure they are not ignored.

I am also certain that that they will support courage where there is fear, foster agreement where there is conflict and inspire hope where there is despair.

This initiative cannot have come at a more appropriate time. It brings together an extraordinary collection of people, with the skills and resources to undertake what we know is an enormous task.

I am proud to be here at this launch of what is known as The Global Elders. As I have said before, I am trying to take my retirement seriously, and I will unfortunately not be able to participate in the really exciting part of their work, analyzing problems, seeking solutions, searching out partners.

But I wish them well, and hope they succeed in bringing light to some of the darkness that afflicts our world, and new energy to areas where others have become weary because of the endless conflict.

I thank you.