



A voice from teenage Britain

Four years ago my mum repainted our flat. If you peel off the paint above our telly you'll find a message from me aged 13: "My name is Neela, I listen to the Chilis and Lauren Hill. This is my pledge to make a difference."

Every generation challenges the establishment, and this was my oath of optimism. Young people worldwide share this belief that change is possible as delegates and world leaders meet for the second Earth summit.

Here it will be decided if it's in our interest to make and keep this world habitable. You'd think the decision was easy, but for many "our interest" means "our financial interest". Apparently, breathable air won't benefit Bush's economy. Does war? Power to the pretzel. Combat terrorism until you're blue in the face, Mr Bush, we'll still perish in our own waste. We should really teach our presidents the "science bit".

But Bush won't get away with it. Firstly: survival of the richest isn't sustainable. A deteriorating environment never sticks to economic boundaries. Secondly: there's a generation here who want and need progress.

The way we live now isn't working: 1.1 billion people without clean water doesn't work; withholding medication for Aids and wrecking the environment doesn't work; selfishness doesn't work. What will work is if you, as world leaders, take on the responsibility of your title. Everyone has to cooperate. Development and sustainability must progress hand in hand; similarly, you cannot relieve debt with one hand and continue strangling a country with the other.

If you need encouragement to do your job then evidence of youth support is immense. One small example is the work of the Woodcraft Folk: a youth organisation encouraging education for social change. We will be attending the summit, taking the voice of young people, through young people, to Johannesburg.

About 4,000 people aged between six and 20, from 30 different countries, attended our international camp last year. Democratically, without much disagreement, and in full knowledge of world events, we drew up a declaration for

the summit. Following workshops and discussions it took us one afternoon. But by no means underestimate our understanding of the subject matter. Nine articles cover issues including food production, conflict resolution and multinational sponsorship of public institutions. This declaration has been signed by thousands of people, and 40 politicians have pledged support, including John Prescott.

In Johannesburg you, as world leaders, will have more time than us. But if you lack the drive and ambition to take practical action, please remember us — the generation who'll have to live with your incompetence.

We have a voice and it's loud and determined. So do the 28 million with HIV/Aids in Africa who also cannot be ignored. But both, in the face of large corporations and greed, are marginalised. Following UN preparations for Johannesburg, Margaret Beckett, the environment secretary, said: "We ran out of time". This is not a good precedent for our planet's future. You must start listening.

Step into my shoes, Mr Blair. I have ambition, imagination and, at 17, access to more information than you had at my age. I have the experience of trying to create a sustainable life, because that is what my generation must achieve. You have money, authority and think-tanks, but you lack this experience. However, you and your fellow leaders can address global inequalities.

We must face these problems collectively. Here's the deal: I'll wash out the baked-bean tin and put it in the green box outside my flat, and next week you change the world's mindset on how we tackle poverty, global warming and everything else. Surprise me. Don't make a mockery of our future. Take a risk: change the world. Please, make it possible for us to be famous — to join the immortals of history, and yet leave no trace, because in a strange way that is precisely what we strive for: sustainable footprints.

One last question: if you don't make real changes, will this Earth summit be a memorial for all the children who continue to die of Aids, malaria, diarrhoea and malnutrition? www.woodcraft.com

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