

*Can the UK ever be sustainable?*

## Challenge Overview Sheet

Chairman: **Jo Confino – Guardian Newspaper Group**  
Panel members: **Sir Stuart Rose – Chairman Marks and Spencer Plc**  
**Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP – Shadow Leader of the House of Commons**  
**Andy Hobsbawm – Co-founder Green Thing**

*‘Our way of life is placing an increasing burden on the planet, but how realistic are visions of a sustainable future? With the UK aspiring to achieve more with less, who will help turn theory into practice? Discover the ways business, politics and the creative industries are working to help create a sustainable future for the UK.’ [www.21stCenturyChallenges.org](http://www.21stCenturyChallenges.org)*

**Jo Confino** opened the discussion with by saying that we can divide the issue of sustainability into three core areas: People, planet and environment. The UK’s current fixation with growth is losing sight of what is important and there is a general feeling that the world needs to get it together and act. No one is doing enough and consumers are now lagging behind business.

**Sir Stuart Rose** responded by outlining the role that can businesses play. 63 of the world’s largest entities are companies not countries. But can a sustainable business be profitable? In 2007 M&S launched Plan A with the aim of tackling 100 challenges by 2012. It cost £5m and none of that was passed to the consumer. Plan A has achieved eco-efficiencies in a number of key areas including using less fuel, reducing packaging and the creation of M&S Energy. The key to the success of Plan A was that suppliers benefited. Through innovation M&S has achieved sustainability through its transport, energy, packaging (all carrier bags are now 100% recycled) and clothes can be returned to Oxfam for reuse. But there is more to achieve. By 2030 the UK will need to produce 30% more food. Energy production will also need to increase to meet this demand. Businesses will need to collaborate and work with NGOs; and governments will need to work as enablers.

Can business afford not to be sustainable? There is no Plan B.

**Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP** began by stating that there are three types of capital; human, financial and environmental. As a throw away society that has a growing population we now need to rely on science and innovation to keep ahead of our habits. To date we have been able to produce food to keep ahead of population growth (Malthus) and it inventors such as

Norman Borlag had not developed the dwarf variety of wheat we would need a land area the size of Latin America to grow grain. We have the means to innovate our way to a sustainable future but politics in this recession will make this more difficult. Governments need to act and business needs to lead.

**Andy Hobsbawm** outlined that the change required is a change in the way in which we think 'From ought to do to want to do'. The real challenge is creativity as it can often be misdirected. People see sustainability as a life with less, having to give up things and make compromises. So how can you use creativity to encourage sustainability? Andy showed a series of videos which can be found on [www.dothegreenthing.com](http://www.dothegreenthing.com)

Examples such as a play pump, a children's merry-go-round which pumps water; or using biodegradable tents for music festivals which degrade after three days and plant seeds. It is not just about invention it is about adoption. We need a positive vision for a sustainable future.

### **A selection of Q&A from the discussion session**

**Q** – *If there were three changes that people could get involved with what would they be?*

**AH** – Values shift

**SR** – Use less - stop throwing food away – use it

**HB** – We need to generate our own energy and get away from NIMBYism; and government legislation needs to enable this.

**Q** – *What are your views on the fact that some issues are so important that they could be taken out of our hands and resolved by government?*

**AH** – Ultimately it is. It needs political will and courage. The government looks to citizens for approval and business to get things done.

**HB** – We are not at the point where government will enforce legislation. The relationship between government and voters is sensitive. For example if the government were to quadruple petrol prices tomorrow no one would vote for that. We are a global economy. The interdependence means our decisions have consequences elsewhere.

**AH** – We either recognise the relationship of the natural system and the economy or we cannot calculate the true cost.

**HB** – We cannot ignore the nature of change. If the hurdle is always out higher and higher it will not encourage people to act. We must acknowledge the progress that is being made. We need to encourage each other.

**Q** – *On the individual level what can we do to encourage people?*

**AH** – Substitute air travel. Think about the decisions that you make and then act. By acting you create change around you. When others start doing it there is a pressure to act.

**SR** – Governments need to introduce progressive legislation. People like a positive (rather than being told not to do something). The government needs to constantly reinforce what the issues are. We need people to be confident that we will find solutions.

**Q** – *Do we need to re-prioritise so planet comes before people and profit?*

**AH** – There are low growth, slow growth models being developed.

**JC** – No one has ever really said what is sustainable!

**Q** – *Ignorance is a huge factor. What presence is there in education?*

**AH** – There is a huge untapped capacity but the education curriculum is only presenting academic problems not real problems.

**Q** – *In changing people's behaviour it normally comes from an external source. It needs to come from government.*

**JC** – There will be some pain, how painful will it be?

**HB** – Seeing it is possible is the way to encourage people.

**SR** – Profit v planet. We are demonising business. Creation of wealth is a good thing. Create the new technologies.

**AH** – Massive instability and price spikes have the ability to change. An extreme external event may be needed