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Britain Drafts Laws to Slash Carbon Emissions

By ALAN COWELL

As nations and politicians in many parts of Europe compete to burnish their green credentials, Britain on Tuesday became the first national government to propose binding laws enforcing a steep cut in carbon emissions, in this case a 60 percent decrease by 2050.

If approved, the draft Climate Change Bill could affect many Britons in many ways. Officials might be summoned to appear before judges for failing to meet targets, households could be pressed to switch to low-energy light bulbs and install home insulation, and manufacturers could be asked to build TV sets without standby modes that consume energy when the devices are not in use.

Indeed, in a land enamored of cars, the internal combustion engine and regular low-cost flights to sunnier climes, some of the measures could be unpopular with voters even as they inspire politicians' acclaim.

"This bill is an international landmark," the environment minister, David Miliband, told reporters. "It is the first time any country has set itself legally binding carbon targets. It is an environmental contract for future generations."

Although the global warming caused by Britain is considered modest, the nation has striven to put itself at the forefront of efforts to address what Prime Minister Tony Blair on Tuesday called "the biggest long-term threat facing our world." The British draft law was announced only days after the European Union committed itself to a 20 percent cut in carbon emissions by 2020, but Britain went far beyond that target, setting for itself a reduction of 26 to 32 percent in the same time frame.

British politicians insist that the draft law may become the harbinger of what Mr. Blair, in a meeting with teenagers at his 10 Downing Street office on Tuesday, labeled a revolution in Britons' approach to how they drive, heat their homes, run their businesses and schedule vacation flights. The draft law also foresaw a carbon trading system and the creation of five-year "carbon budgets" planned 15 years ahead to enable businesses and individuals to shape their behavior to a greener Britain.

A committee would be established to make annual assessments of the government's progress, or lack of it.

"A government that fails to meet the requirement under the bill to live within its environmental means will be subject to a judicial review," Mr. Miliband said. "It will be for the courts to decide what sanctions to apply."

Government leaders are planning to enact the law by next year, one year ahead of the next national election, likely in 2009. "This is a revolutionary step in confronting climate change," Mr. Blair said. "It sets an example to the rest of the world."

Climate change is expected to be a central issue in national elections, likely to be fought by the conservative leader, David Cameron, and Gordon Brown, the chancellor of the exchequer, who is expected to take over from Mr. Blair as Labor Party leader and prime minister sometime this summer.

On Monday, both Mr. Cameron and Mr. Brown offered claims to environmental virtue. Mr. Cameron, who laid claim to the green mantle last year when he was photographed on a dog sled in the Arctic and cycled to his office, was shown in news clips on Monday digging to plant a tree.

But in the sound bite stakes, Mr. Blair trumped both Mr. Brown and Mr. Cameron, appearing in a satellite hookup with the California governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, to extol the virtues of fighting global warming on the evening news.

Mr. Brown, for his part, gave a speech outlining incentives for householders to curb energy use. "I'm greener than you," the conservative Daily Mail said in a headline over photographs of both politicians. Mr. Cameron has taken what some columnists describe as a risky step by suggesting new taxes on airline travel, possibly alienating some 400,000 Britons with second homes outside the country who fly regularly -- often on low-cost airlines -- to visit their properties. The conservative leader is also pressing for annual, not five-year, targets for reduced carbon emissions.

The government proposal fell short of demands by some environmental groups for an 80 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2050.

Both the British and European proposals lay out schedules for reducing so-called greenhouse gases far beyond the expirations of the Kyoto Protocol, which the United States has signed but President Bush has rejected. China and India, with their booming economies, are also primary polluters, but Mr. Miliband, the British environment minister, said the new British law would give Britain authority to persuade other lands to follow its lead.

But there were dissenting voices. In Tuesday's Evening Standard, a columnist, Nirpal Dhaliwal, said there was "more than a whiff of colonial condescension about British politicians' attitudes to developing world industrialization."

He said Britain's share of global carbon emissions was very low -- around 2 percent -- while China was building a new coal-burning power station every two weeks. "We could decide to live in the Stone Age burning nothing, and it would have virtually no impact on the overall problem of global warming," he wrote.

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