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Britain's secret plan for new global climate pact

BY TOM BALDWIN

TONY BLAIR is seeking to secure George Bush's backing for a new international treaty that would end America's isolation on global warming, *The Times* has learnt.

Downing Street last night confirmed that the Prime Minister had held "lengthy discussions" with Mr Bush about a fresh initiative that would bypass Washington's steadfast opposition to the Kyoto Protocol.

The deal, described by one source as "Kyoto-lite", would involve scientific agreement on the scale and nature of the threat, as well as an international programme to develop the technology needed for renewable energy and the reduction of carbon emissions.

However, disclosure of the proposal came as the Government admitted that it was on course to miss targets set out in successive Labour manifestos for cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent. Mr Blair, nonetheless, remains determined that international action on climate change will be one of the cornerstones of his chairmanship of the G8 next year.

He believes that the refusal by the US Administration to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which is due to come into force in February, has undermined the pledges of 39 other countries to reduce their output of carbon dioxide and other gases blamed for global warming.

The Government accepts there is little prospect of America, the world's biggest producer of greenhouse gases, agreeing to cut its emissions. Mr Bush claims that signing up to Kyoto would export US jobs to China and India, whose rapidly expanding economies are also contributing to global warming.

Aides acknowledge that a breakthrough on climate change would bolster the Government's green credentials before the next election, as well as provide Mr Blair with tangible proof that his alliance with Mr Bush on Iraq "has not been a one-way relationship".

Although the signals from Washington yesterday suggested that the White House remains deeply sceptical about the initiative, a Downing Street source said: "There is an awful lot of work going on in the background on this, it is being given the highest priority."

The Times has learnt that the Prime Minister had talks in No 10 on Tuesday last week with John McCain, the influential US Republican

senator, over how to broker an agreement. Stephen Byers, the former Cabinet minister and a close ally of Mr Blair, has made several trips to the US for discussions with other leading Republicans such as Senator Olympia Snowe, his co-chairman on the International Taskforce on Climate Change. Mr Byers said last night: "We are not in the business of giving George Bush a fig leaf on this issue. We want action from the US that makes a real difference."

Speaking in New York earlier this week, Mr Byers pointed out that American political opinion was shifting after the hurricane damage this autumn in Florida and Louisiana which cost billions of dollars in insurance payouts. "Pressure for (Mr Bush) to act is growing domestically . . . major companies like Boeing and DuPont are expressing concern," he said.

In a speech last autumn Mr Blair described climate change as the "world's greatest environmental challenge" and said that an agreement on the science "would provide the foundation for future action".

However, environmental groups yesterday scorned Mr Blair's ability to provide world leadership on climate change when the Government was unable to meet its own targets for cutting greenhouse gas emissions. Tony Juniper, the director of Friends of the Earth, said: "Time is running out. If the Climate Change Programme fails to make significant cuts in UK greenhouse gas emissions, the Prime Minister's ability to persuade other countries to take the issue seriously will be totally undermined."

In the Commons, Charles Kennedy said that Mr Blair "talks a good game" but was failing to deliver. "How do you expect the British public to have faith in your ambition to lead the industrialised world, including President Bush, in actually tackling the climate change issue successfully for once and for all?" he asked.

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