

Europe sees the light in bulbs plan.

By Peter Wilson

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EUROPEAN leaders governing 490 million people have decided to follow the lead of Australia and replace old-fashioned light bulbs with more energy-efficient bulbs.

The leaders of the European Union's 27 member states agreed at an EU summit in Brussels to order European officials to "rapidly submit proposals" for phasing out the energy-wasting incandescent bulbs within two or three years.

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern joined German government officials in crediting the Australian Government with the initiative, confirming the influence of Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull's announcement last month that Australia would become the first country in the world to ban the old-style bulbs over the next three years.

"We are very impressed by the Australians and before we came to the summit, we had already been in touch with them," Mr Ahern said. "We support this scheme and hope to take it on."

A spokesman for Mr Ahern told The Australian yesterday that the Irish delegation had gone to Friday's summit already converted on the idea.

The light bulb changeover was not the most important decision to come out of the EU summit, which set a legally-binding pledge that by 2020, Europe's carbon emissions would be 20 per cent below those of 1990 and renewable sources like windmills would provide at least a fifth of Europe's electricity.

But the light bulb move won headlines across Europe as an achievable and easily understood reform.

Even more remarkably, it managed to temper Australia's international reputation as a climate-change laggard by casting Australia as a pioneer in battling greenhouse gas emissions.

The EU is expected to enforce the phasing-out of the old bulbs by issuing directives which force manufacturers to meet new energy standards.

The Brussels summit directed EU bureaucrats to draw up reforms for office and street lighting "to be adopted by 2008" and for incandescent bulbs and other forms of lighting in private homes by 2009.

British PM Tony Blair had already symbolically changed the bulb in the lamp outside his office at No10 Downing Street.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she, too, had made the switch at home, before adding a less-than-rousing personal endorsement. "They're not yet quite bright enough," she said.

Australia was not the first nation to promote the use of energy-saving light bulbs, or to consider legislation on the matter.

A California assemblyman announced in January that he would try to introduce a law banning incandescent bulbs in the largest US state, and a New Jersey legislator had urged his state to switch to fluorescent lighting in government buildings within three years.

Fidel Castro launched a drive in Cuba two years ago to replace older bulbs with "green" models but the aging dictator did not go so far as to ban the traditional bulbs.

Venezuela has made similar voluntary efforts since last November.

New Zealand is promising a similar ban, the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Nova Scotia are expected to follow suit and Chile last week launched a non-compulsory effort to switch to new bulbs.