LONDON - Britain may require individuals to limit the carbon dioxide they produce to combat global warming — and permit energy-savers to profit by selling their carbon allowances, the environment secretary said Wednesday.

David Miliband, a rising star in the governing Labour Party, argued that Britain needed to make fundamental changes to combat global warming. He said it was a bigger and more immediate problem than most people realized.

Miliband described the idea of personal carbon trading as a "compelling thought experiment" but said it would not happen in the short term.

He said officials are already considering so-called emissions trading programs for businesses and large public organizations.

But regulators must eventually tackle pollution by individuals, he said, who account for 44 percent of Britain's emissions chiefly through driving, flying, electricity use and home heating.

"Imagine a country where carbon becomes a new currency," Miliband said in a speech to the Audit Commission. He described a future where Britons "carry bank cards that store both pounds and carbon points."

Under such a plan, the government would allot every Briton points to "spend" when they use gas or electricity, he said. People who needed more could buy points from others who had points to spare.

Miliband did not suggest how much carbon each person would be allowed to create.

Tony Blair's government has long described climate change as a top priority, but has been criticized for not doing enough to confront it.

Miliband said the average British household produces 10 tons of carbon dioxide a year. While hybrid cars, more efficient boilers and the use of personal wind turbines and solar panels may help decrease that by as much as 30 percent, a carbon trading system could be the best way to encourage people to make bigger reductions, he said.

"It is easy to dismiss the idea as too complex administratively, too utopian or too much of a burden for citizens," he acknowledged. "Are there not simpler ways of achieving the same objective? ... And will it ever be politically acceptable?"

But he said a trading system could work and be more fair and effective than other means of encouraging people to reduce pollution.
Some countries have used larger-scale carbon trading to meet the carbon dioxide caps they must meet under the Kyoto treaty on global warming. These allow power plants and manufacturers that produce less than their share of pollution to sell carbon credits to companies that emit too much.

Miliband’s idea would apply the same concept to individuals.

Tony Juniper, British director of Friends of the Earth, said individual carbon trading could help fight climate change, but was too many years away. He said steps that could be taken more quickly included phasing out energy-wasting products and mandating cuts in emissions.