

Barrage Boosting

Sinclair Lewis' eponymous 1922 novel about George F. Babbitt, the peppiest realtor in the burgeoning Midwestern US city of Zenith, is often credited with popularizing the term 'booster'. On their lapels, he and zealous fellow members of the Zenith branch of the Boosters' Club wear buttons that read 'Boosters – Pep'. Whether you're mixing a cocktail or pursuing a business opportunity, it's all about putting some pep into it.

In a large lecture theatre in Bristol University's Department of Engineering, one recent evening (18 February 2014), Professor Roger Falconer certainly put plenty of pep into a well-attended talk on the Severn barrage. Professor of Water Management and the Director of Hydro-environmental Research Centre at Cardiff University, Falconer is a leading expert on Severn tidal power and prominent advocate of a Severn Barrage – the subject of project student [Alexander Portch's](#) research - the most recent proposal for which (Hafren Power) was turned down in June 2013 by the Energy and Climate Change Select Committee.

Falconer's lecture ('Recent Considerations for a Severn Barrage') was eagerly anticipated by Bristol-based project team members (three of us had just returned from an outing related to [Jill Payne's](#) project on Somerset's energy landscapes, which included a visit to the showroom in Bridgwater of EDF Energy, the company building two new reactors at Hinkley Point). We were not disappointed, and those seeking a lively and accessible introduction to the barrage controversy could not have asked for more.



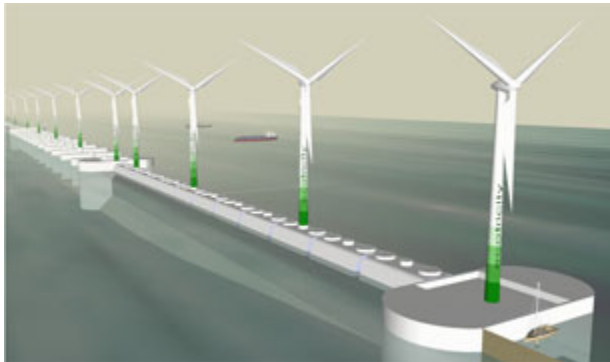
Artist's impression of the Severn Barrage

Source: [Wikimedia Commons/David Kerr](#)

Falconer firmly believes that the Severn estuary offers the ideal UK site for the large scale harnessing of tidal energy. His support for a two-way power generation proposal (as distinct from ebb tide generation only) was broadly contextualized within remorselessly rising global energy demand, the imperative to ditch dependence on fossil fuel, and with reference to ambitious EU targets for reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (by 80% by 2050) . He then ran through alternative options for harvesting the Severn's prodigious tidal power, such as a series of tidal lagoons, all of which he found wanting (alternative estuarine sites, such as the Mersey and Humber, also fall well short in his view). Not least, as a Welshman speaking in Bristol, he spoke to how a barrage would act as a magnet for regional economic growth, encouraging a westward shift of population from the overcrowded, water-stressed southeast.

Without mentioning salmon by name, Falconer admitted that the impact of a barrage on fish, especially migratory species, remained a major unresolved problem. And he quashed hopes that barrage construction would provide a magic bullet to keep at bay future inundation of the nearby Somerset Levels. Toward the end of his lecture, he conceded that he may not see a barrage built in his lifetime (he's in his early sixties). But he feels that the time and energy he has devoted to

boosting the project (most recently as a member of Hafren Power's regional board and expert panel) will all have been worthwhile if he has managed to bring the project a bit closer to reality.



Artist's impression of a Severn barrage (2008). Courtesy of [Ecotricity](#)

Falconer wrapped up his presentation with some footage of a bit of barrage promotion by the prominent environmentalist and writer, Jonathon Porritt. The former chair of the UK Ecology Party (forerunner of today's Green Party) and former director of Friends of the Earth UK is a staunch booster of renewable energy development. Perched on a rock at what looked like the northern, Welsh terminus (Lavernock Point, south of Cardiff) of many recent barrage proposals, Porritt argues that, in a world of climate change that must rapidly decarbonize its energy supply, the benefits of a barrage outweigh its costs. (I've not been able to establish the exact source of the footage, but it could have been taken from a 30-minute programme Porritt presented on proposals to barrage the Severn that aired on BBC Wales' 'Week In, Week Out' programme in October 2008, a time when he was chair of the Sustainable Development Commission, a government advisory body.) Porritt's support for a barrage also meshes with his criticism of nuclear power: one of the statistics Falconer cited was that a barrage could generate power equivalent to the output of four nuclear power stations.

As you can imagine, a forest of hands went up at the start of the question and answer session. Project team member [Marianna Dudley](#) got hers up early and asked about the fate of the charismatic Severn Bore. Falconer readily concurred that the Bore would effectively disappear if a barrage was built. I got mine up a bit too late and just missed out on being called on to pose the final question. What I had wanted to ask about was how, precisely, the barrage would create the fresh recreational and tourist opportunities he'd touted. What was going to compensate for the loss of the recreational and tourist resource represented by the Bore and the sport fisheries of the

Severn and its tributaries, the Usk and Wye? Luxury hotels on the banks of a placid, pellucid, lake-like inner estuary?

Though he opened his lecture by stressing that the beauty of tidal energy from an engineering standpoint was its complete and utter predictability, one area of barrage debate that Falconer's lecture did not address was aesthetics. *Babbitt* opens with a paean to the 'towers of Zenith', which 'aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office-buildings'. The breath-taking 'high modernist' aesthetic of dams, visible in places such as the Elan Valley of mid-Wales, Kielder in Northumberland and Hoover Dam on the border between Arizona and Nevada, can also be detected in artists' impressions of the barrage. Whether an appeal to the technological sublime in future barrage advocacy will win over sceptical hearts and minds remains to be seen.

Source: <http://powerwaterproject.net/?cat=3>