

Keep the champagne on ice for a few more days!

***** Post Script: Since this article was first posted on the website, it has been announced by a Downing Street spokesman that Mrs May will trigger Article 50 on Wednesday Week – March 29th. *****

Following Brexit developments since the memorable vote on 23rd June last year has been rather like watching paint dry. However, it does finally look like the long wait is over. The European Union (Notification of withdrawal) Bill has finally completed its passage through Parliament in its original form. The amendments proposed by the House of Lords were defeated in the Commons and now only Royal Assent is required.

Government sources have said that Mrs May will invoke Article 50 in the final week of March. A decision to do so straight away would be seen as playing into the hands of Dutch eurosceptic parties. A General Election is being held in the Netherlands tomorrow (March 15th) and Geert Wilders' *Partij voor de Vrijheid* has been topping many recent opinion polls. At a time when accusations are flying here, there and everywhere about foreign interference in domestic elections, Mrs May will not want to give the EU any reason to accuse her of such behaviour, given the negotiations will be delicate enough as things stand.

Mrs May needs to steer clear of 25th March for similar reasons. This date marks 60 years since the signing of the Treaty of Rome, which formally established what has become the European Union. Celebrations are planned in Rome to mark the event and although the beginning of the Brexit will inevitably have to be fairly close to the festivities, triggering Article 50 immediately before March 25th would not win us many friends. To celebrate the beginning of Brexit at a time when

EU-27 will be attempting to celebrate the European Union's achievements against a backdrop of rising euroscepticism across the Continent would not be very good manners. Let's face it, many of us who worked so hard to ensure our countrymen voted to leave the EU will surely want to crack open a bottle of champagne when the formal departure process begins. Let's keep it on ice for that bit longer. It won't do us any harm.

Domestic politics also have limited Mrs May's options. The SNP holds its Spring Conference in Aberdeen this coming weekend with Nicola Sturgeon threatening a second independence referendum following the Brexit vote. Mrs May has declared herself a strong supporter of "our precious union" and therefore wisely does not want to fan the flames of Scottish nationalism given that the result of a second referendum could be hard to call.

It is a relief, however, that the final obstacles in the way of triggering Article 50 have been surmounted. Then begins the hard graft. Unless both parties agree to an extension, we have to get a deal in two years which will enable our economy to function on day 1 of Brexit. There has been much posturing on the EU side, with talk of a big divorce settlement for the UK. It may turn out to be nothing more than a demand to honour our commitments to the end of the current seven-year EU budget cycle.

However, obstructive behaviour will benefit neither side. If no agreement has been reached two years after Article 50 is triggered, the Treaties no longer apply in our country and the UK and the EU would face a nightmare scenario in trying to relate to each other without any legal basis for so doing.

It is hard to imagine anyone wishing for such a calamity, but it is very apparent that our negotiators are going to have their work cut out to come up with a comprehensive settlement. Therefore, while we may be popping the champagne corks at some point before the end of March, it will be no more than a brief

moment of light relief before the beginning of what is going to be a long, hard slog.