

# The parallel universe next door

For anyone wanting to take the EU's temperature, the annual "State of the Union" address by the President of the European Commission is always a helpful speech to study. Anyone wanting to read the full 6,130 words of Jean-Claude Juncker's lengthy talk can do so [here](#).

However, most of us will only want a brief summary. As far as Brexit is concerned, Juncker had very little to say. He called it "a very sad and tragic moment," adding "We will always regret it." The text of the speech does not include the phrase "and you will regret it soon", although this extract from the speech shows that he clearly said these words (in French) and also added that Brexit isn't the future of Europe.

Will we regret it? On the basis of the rest of the speech, I think not. Open Europe, hardly a bastion of withdrawalism in pre-referendum days says that the speech is "likely to test the limits of what EU citizens or even EU leaders might support. Juncker admitted that 2016 was "a year that shook our very foundations" – in other words, a crisis. What is the classic EU solution for any crisis? More Europe, and yes, this is exactly what he is proposing:- an increase in qualified majority voting – or to put it another way, the removal of national vetoes – in foreign policy decisions and in matters of taxation, a European Finance minister and elections for the European Parliament featuring trans-national rather than national lists. Treaty change is "inevitable" at some point, he added, but in the meanwhile, use should be made of the so-called "passerelle" clauses in the existing treaties which allow qualified majority voting to be extended without treaty amendment. Juncker does not want a two-speed Europe, but by stating that the Parliament of the Eurozone is the European Parliament, he is forcing non-Eurozone countries either to

join the Single Currency or accept second class status.

It is hardly surprising that Pieter Cleppe of Open Europe says that “This was not a great speech for those hoping the European Commission would see Brexit as the moment to take stock and reconnect with those across Europe who feel that the EU has over-reached.” Reaction from the UK has been more scathing. Diane James, formerly a UKIP MEP but now sitting as an independent, wrote a scathing article for *City AM* which pours scorn on the upbeat assessment of the EU’s current state by Mr Juncker. “ I can sum up the “state of the Union” in one word: dismal.” She points out that 66 per cent of Europeans stated in a recent survey that they were dissatisfied by the direction being taken by Brussels. The EU may be putting pressure on us to try to stop Brexit, or at least to water it down, but many citizens in EU-27 are hardly happy bunnies and Juncker’s speech will have done nothing to make them feel better. The powers-that-be in Brussels seem to be living in a parallel universe from most ordinary people.

Nigel Farage was even more scathing in his response to Juncker’s speech when addressing the European Parliament. “All I can say is Thank God we’re leaving,” he said. Lord Stoddart, a former President of CIB, was equally dismissive, calling Juncker’s vision of the EU as a “nightmare”.

Indeed. Juncker’s speech will have reminded many of us of exactly why we campaigned for years – indeed, in some cases, decades – to extricate our country from the EU. Given that there are still many tensions between the member states simmering beneath the surface, Juncker’s speech has, if anything, made it more likely that another country may well follow us out of the door.