

State of disunion

There has been very little to report recently concerning the triggering of Article 50 and Brexit negotiations. Last week, David Davis, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, stated that it would be “improbable” that we would stay within the Single Market. The following day, a spokeswoman for the Prime Minister stated that Mr Davis was only “expressing his opinion.” Likewise, Boris Johnson’s enthusiasm for an Australian-style points system to manage immigration does not represent official government policy. The same spokesperson said, “There are various ways you can do that and it is something the government is looking at and will come forward with proposals”.

So apart from a statement from Mr Davis that the WTO route looks “unlikely”, we are none the wiser about Mrs May’s exit plans. Indeed, Mr Davis said that “the government will not give away its negotiating position”, although he stated on Monday that the talks may be “the most complicated negotiation of all time.”

One of the biggest surprises following June 23rd’s vote was the reaction of senior figures from the EU member states and its institutions. After the implication of the vote had sunk in, the message coming from Brussels was “get on with it and get out.” In other words, rather than begging us to reconsider, the powers-that-be wanted the UK to trigger Article 50 as soon as possible to prevent contagion and to make the period of uncertainty as short as possible.

A note of realism has crept in to more recent utterances from across the Channel, recognising that, with David Cameron refusing to allow the Civil Service any opportunity to plan a Brexit strategy before the vote, the UK would have to do a great deal of homework before being ready to trigger Article 50. However, the “get on with it” message was restated on

Monday by Guy Verhofstadt, the former Belgian Prime Minister who is likely to be the lead Brexit negotiator from the European Parliament.

"I want the UK to trigger Article 50 as soon as possible, so we can finalise these negotiations by 2019," he said. "I can't imagine we start the next legislative cycle without agreement over UK withdrawal."

In view of Mr Davis' statement about the complexity of Brexit negotiations, this may be a tad optimistic, but from the EU's point of view, with European Parliamentary elections due in 2019 and the next seven-year budget cycle due to begin in 2021, the desire to move on from Brexit is understandable.

On Thursday 14th, Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, delivered a "state of the union" address to the European Parliament. In the wake of Brexit, it was hardly going to be a particularly upbeat speech. "Our European Union is, at least in part, in an existential crisis," he said.

He went on to say that "never before have I seen such little common ground between our Member States. So few areas where they agree to work together." He has some justification. He and some other Western European leaders are keen to press on with further integration whereas there is very little support for further surrender of sovereignty among the former Soviet bloc countries. Their lack of enthusiasm for the EU's federalism was behind Juncker's comment that "We have to stop with the same old story that success is national, and failure European. Or our common project will not survive."

But what was his remedy? More Europe. What a surprise!! With the UK headed for the exit door, the loudest opponent to the establishment of an EU army has been removed. "It is time we had a single headquarters" for the EU's military missions, he said. "We should also move towards common military assets, in

some cases owned by the EU. And, of course, in full complementarity with NATO.”

Surprisingly, there was little mention of the UK referendum. “We are even faced with the unhappy prospect of a member leaving our ranks, ” he said. Just one sentence.

On Friday (16th) Mr Juncker will travel to Bratislava, Slovakia, to meet with the 27 heads of State. Mrs May will not be going. In view of the manifest differences of opinion within the leaders of the Member states over the refugee crisis and the path of future integration – not to mention the possibility that Greece could re-ignite the Eurozone’s woes, it is hard to imagine she will lose any sleep over the lack of an invitation.