

Who do you think you are kidding, Mr Juncker?

Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, delivered a speech to the European Parliament. on Monday March 12th .When he mentioned that the UK was going to leave the EU on March 29th 2019, some pro-withdrawal UK MEPs started cheering, which led Juncker to add “when you will regret your decision”. It is now over 18 months since the referendum and there is little evidence as yet of any serious voter regret. Why should things be any different in a year’s time? After all, some of us have spent years, if not decades, campaigning to regain our independence. We’re not going to have second thoughts.

The immediate post-Brexit may be painful at first, particularly if the current muddle in the Government’s Brexit strategy is not resolved, but Brexit is like an operation to remove a malignant tumour – not going through with it would be far worse and lead to certain death. The pain is a price worth paying. Mind you, there is no need for the pain to be any greater than necessary. We certainly do not want to find ourselves stuck in a transitional deal on the EU’s current proposed terms which would both cripple our fishing industry and make it very difficult ever to achieve a full and complete break. Reports that the Government and the EU are close to an agreement are thus a serious cause for concern.

Thankfully, transitional arrangements will only be signed off as part of an overall separation deal and we are still a long way from this being finalised. Our side is still struggling to move beyond soundbytes and wish lists. Michel Barnier urged Theresa May to speed up the Brexit negotiations and define her vision for the sort of future relationship she wishes our country to have with the EU. This does beg the question as to whether our team actually realises that the soundbytes and

wish lists are nothing more than that. Could it be that, in Mrs May's eyes, this actually is her vision?

Meanwhile, in spite of the lack of progress, the UK economy continues to defy the doom merchants. There is no question that predictions of economic meltdown before Brexit day have been proved totally and completely wrong. Even Philip Hammond, the Chancellor, was uncharacteristically upbeat in his 2018 spring statement. Annual GDP growth of 1.5% or less in the coming years is not wonderful but it's heaven compared with the nightmare scenario portrayed by George Osborne a couple of years back.

Mind you, economic forecasting at the moment is completely pointless until we know what the route to Brexit will look like. The better-than-expected performance of the UK economy to date does not in any way mean that we are guaranteed to sail out of the EU's escape hatch in a blaze of glory. M. Barnier is right – we really must come up with an exit plan that honours the mandate given by the British people on 23rd June 2016 and yet ensures that our businesses can continue to trade reasonably seamlessly with the EU if not on the same terms as before. So far, regrettably, there has been no sign of any coherent plan and the Brexit clock continues to tick. But regret our decision to leave? **NEVER.**

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