Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

Great to be here tonight – and for once to replace our focus on triple A by a focus on triple B: Britain, Belgium and Beer.

And the University of Leuven, whose EU alumni are here today, me being one of them, is a good place to start my tale on Britain, Belgium and beer.

It was Leuven University that, in the spring of 1622, sent a letter to Hugo de Groot - Grotius - inviting him to take up a position there.

Grotius, the great scholar and statesman, had fallen out of favour with the authorities in the Northern Provinces. He had been on the wrong side of the religious debate and found himself imprisoned. Two weeks before he received the letter from Leuven, he escaped from that prison, famously hiding in one of the massive cases that brought books to and from his prison cell.

And - sad to say for Leuven - Grotius did not stay there but moved further south, to Paris.
But his real love affair, as we all know, was with Britain. That was where his new hope lay. At a time when the whole continent was ravaged by religious intolerance and strife, Britain stood aside as an island of peace and open mindedness.

His whole life Grotius would continue to have his eyes set on London, to plead for British engagement with Europe, and to hope for British leadership in the fight for tolerance.

To some extent you could call the legal work for which he is renowned a spin-off from that effort: if we could re-establish religion and society - even war and peace - on a rational basis and through objective debate, good things would follow, he argued.

He was right, but he was also naïve. Britain and its King James I did not provide leadership. They remained in splendid isolation, leaving Europe to fight for and against itself.

Only to find out a few decades later that isolation was not as splendid as it had seemed at first.

* * *

Today, at a time when Europe is once again turbulent and tempestuous - though in a less bloody manner! - Britain is again struggling to find the right posture.
Are we in or are we out?
Do we opt in or can we opt out?
Are we independent or interdependent?

That should not surprise us - or even scare us:
The EU is changing rapidly and fundamentally, and people have the
democratic right to question those changes, to ask where they're going
and to decide for themselves if they want to go along for the ride.

Again, rational arguments and objective debate will do us more good than
excessive rectitude and rhetoric.

And again, many in Europe count on leadership from Britain, not
disengagement.

They count on the British to make the right decision in the end - a
decision that is right for Britain and right for Europe. Because isolation
would not only change Britain - for worse, if you ask me - it would also
change and damage Europe.

I know Prime Minister Cameron is a fan of The Smiths. So am I. But
Europe’s message to Britain today sounds more like that other eighties
group, The Communards:

Don’t leave me this way!!

*   *   *
Dear friends,

Throughout the ages, it was not just philosophers that were smuggled across European borders.

And now we enter the 2nd topic that brings us together tonight.

I was told that in the 1960s, when British Pale Ale was all the rage in Belgium, a Flemish brewery sent one of their employees to the UK to try to find out the secret formula.

He came back with the special yeast that Pale Ale was brewed with, convinced that they could copy and improve the recipe.

But something went wrong.

Apparently the yeast had reacted to the humid air on the boat back from Hull. The fermentation had continued. And the classic Pale Ale they were expecting turned out to be much stronger... Stronger, but also devilishly good.

So they called it Duvel.

The rest is history. The family-run company that produces Duvel is now active in over 50 countries, half of its production is exported and two years ago the manager, Michel Moortgat, was named Manager of the Year.
Se non è vero, è ben trovato.

Because the implications for all of us are clear:

Britain is good for business;
Britain is good for Belgians;
and beer is good for all of us.

Brussels politics may be, for some, what we call *inbuvable*, but Belgian beer is quite the opposite.

So despite the political turbulence between Brussels and Britain: I suggest we drink to that!

And nothing else matters. (That’s Mettalica.)