

There is nothing wrong with Britain playing Mr Nasty – negotiating Brexit will require tough talk



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Britain must embrace its new, nasty brand. As we enter negotiations with the EU, everything is going to be on the table. We are no longer partners in a project to create a harmonious Europe. We are a nation state bargaining for our people's self-interest. We want the world to love us for our tea and decency. But on this occasion we're going to have to fight – and if that means acting nasty to convince as nasty, so be it.

I know, I know – that's a very simplistic narrative. In fact, Britain has always been regarded as an irritant on the continent. We begged to get into the Common Market. Once in, we said we weren't all in, just halfway in. Now we say we want out. The Europeans must think we're mad, especially since [Theresa May tied the future security of Europe to a good trade deal with Britain](#). But the Government has not gone Looney Tunes Right-wing and nor is it really being nasty. It is simply stating the facts.

One fact is that the EU is not negotiating with a regular European state. This isn't "so long Portugal and thanks for all the fish". Britain has one of the best intelligence services in the world; we have nuclear weapons; we are at the heart of Nato. This is part of the context to these talks and it would be odd if the UK did not mention it. One reason why we've been running the fifth largest defence budget in the world is so that we can purchase clout.

Is this outrageous? No. It is rational. It was equally rational of [Spain to insist that any decisions about Gibraltar that come up in the Brexit talks should be run by Madrid](#). Spain wants Gibraltar, just as the Argentinians want the Falklands. That's an expression of national self-interest, that's understood.

But it's also rational of Britain to point out that the [Gibraltarians voted by 99 per cent in 2002 to reject joint sovereignty with Spain](#). And it is equally rational to add that the UK has a commitment to maintaining Gibraltar's status that is, implicitly, backed by force of arms.

If you're not prepared to use arms to defend an overseas territory, your claim on it weakens. We had no capability and no intention of defending Hong Kong, so we returned it to China. But Gibraltar is different. We have the means to defend its integrity.

We won't have to use those means, by the way. There will be no war – as [Number 10 reassured the world on Monday](#). We will not have to release our army of highly trained macaques on the unsuspecting Spanish. This is all talk, most of it silly. Spain would quite like Gibraltar but not that much. The satirists remind us that Spain is a member of Nato, so if we were to declare war on Spain we'd be technically be declaring war on ourselves, which opens up the possibility of a civil war in the UK between Leave and Remain that has been rumbling for months on Twitter.

Who would win a fight between Nigel Farage and moral philosopher AC Grayling? Grayling, I fancy. He has the hair of a Yugoslav partisan.

The militant wing of Remain welcomes every minor spat with the EU, every sign that it might spank our naughty bottoms, with masochistic delight. They've changed. They used to worship the EU as a beneficent god. Now they worship it as a sweet meteor of death – crashing into Sunderland to punish us for our sins.

And this evolution of their theology has, oddly, made them sound a lot like the Leavers they dislike. The fanatics among the Remainers and Leavers both see the average Brit as a Basil Fawlty spoiling for a fight with Johnny foreigner. They both regard the Europeans as plotting Britain's destruction. Most importantly, they have both bought into the Brexit talks as a binary of "us" vs "them", Britain vs Europe. The crazier Remainers sometimes sound like they take the side of "them" rather than "us."

One thing the referendum has done is put to rest the notion that Britain is a comfortably European state. As I said, we've been a thorn in the side of Europe since we joined the Common Market – always the ones to opt out or demand our money back. And now that we are negotiating withdrawal, we contribute to a shift in international relations that makes life tougher still for Brussels. Since 1945, there has been a move towards global institutions and regional partnerships. That won't stop, but Britain leaving the EU is a corrective. We are reasserting our identity as a nation state. That means we have to act like one. And that means leveraging our strengths and putting our interests first.

Expect the EU to do the same. We are not negotiating with the Quakers; they are just as capable of being nasty. Remember what they did to Greece, a country that dared to defy its fiscal rules? They reduced a great nation state to an indentured servant. Well, they won't do that to us. This is Britain. You don't push Britain around.

