The end-game of Brexit: achieving victory from the jaws of defeat?

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EU negotiations are, it seems, entering the final phase. Within the next week we should have a much clearer view on what the final deal will consist of. Given that it's taken some two and a half years to get to this stage following the referendum vote in June 2016, there is a good chance that the majority of the public are sick and tired of being bombarded with a lexicon associated Brexit. It is strongly believed that the average person is clueless about what are customs arrangements, Canada (or Norway) models, WTO rules and 'backstop' plans to resolve the impasse of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Though there is a compelling argument that whatever deal with the UK and EU is eventually agreed should be put before the general public in a referendum, there is an opposing view that it's all too complicated and, having taken the decision to leave, it is up to professional politicians to sort out the detail. In effect, the great majority of the British public has become increasingly exasperated at a process that was supposed to be straightforward. As Brenda from Bristol might exclaim, "Not another referendum?" and, perhaps, "just do it!"

Whatever the eventual outcome of Brexit, there can be few very who envisaged the bile and emotion that has accompanied the debate. However, there is an increasingly persuasive argument that despite what has been said about Theresa May, she has actually played a blinder in getting to a point that was obvious from the outset; leaving the EU but, for the sake of business, keeping as closely aligned to it as possible. The so called 'BRINO solution', Brexit in name only.

The reality is that the public were never ever going to be given a say in Brexit. Having taken the decision to conduct a referendum on the EU, no politician leader would want to unleash that tiger a second time. It's just too dangerous and likely to make a divided country even more so.

Theresa May has, like previous Tory prime ministers, most particularly John Major, discovered that the most dangerous enemies are those who come from within the party. The anti-EU brigade within the Tory party have spent their entire careers being dedicated to, as they see it, wrestling back sovereignty from Brussels. It should not be forgotten that David Cameron called the referendum in the naïve belief that the outcome would be to remain and, accordingly, could silence those who, in 2013, one of his close allies described as "swivel-eyed loons"

Theresa May has been aware that isolating this group as much as possible was essential to creating as benign environment as possible for a deal that would be effectively neutral for business. Her mistake, and what may result in her being replaced as leader, was to call an election in the belief that a bigger party would make it easier to deal with the Brexiteers. Hindsight, as we can all attest, is a wonderful thing. Nonetheless, though we appear to be at a stage that informed commentators suggested from the outset was the most likely outcome, there is still the small matter of getting agreed. This will be the tough bit.

Writing in the *Irish Times* earlier this week, seminal commentator Fintan O'Toole believes that Theresa May's situation has resonance with Roman Emperor Caligula. Though Caligula tends to be remembered for his brutality and tyranny as well as his sadism, perversion and lavish spending, he possessed sufficient acumen to know when some fights were not worth the effort. As O'Toole describes, one such example was recorded by the historian Suetonius. He wrote that in 40AD Caligula assembled armies and supplies "on an unprecedented scale" and marched towards the French coast with, it was assumed, the intention to cross the English Channel to what was then Britannia.

Strangely, as Suetonius relates, despite being prepared for the crossing, Caligula suddenly announced that his troops should gather seashells and the putative invasion was forgotten. Instead he instructed that Rome should "prepare a triumph more lavish than any hitherto known". As O'Toole believes, though this was taken as evidence that Caligula was becoming increasingly mad, "the world would be a better place if all glory-hunting megalomaniacs instructed their soldiers, instead of carrying out futile massacres, to collect shells on the beach."

Indeed, as O'Toole continues, since last December it has been obvious that the eventual outcome of the negotiations concerning Brexit would be the one that seems to have emerged; "what May signed up to – and so did her government, including Boris Johnson and David Davis" What this amounts to he believes, "is a miserably anti-climactic ending to what was supposed to be an epic of national liberation: the UK will remain tied to the EU for a "temporary" period that will end on the Twelfth of Never."

As O'Toole contends, what May needs to do is to "take the Caligula option" in which she gathers "whatever seashells can be rescued from the debacle, claim them as tribute from Michel Barnier, award all the leading Brexiteers victory crowns, and declare a triumph more lavish than any hitherto known." For good measure he suggests that if she plays it well it can be a "Dunkirk moment" in which she is able to claim a glorious victory from what is effectively a retreat.

For those of us who are fascinated by the politics that have accompanied the process of Brexit, this is certainly a defining moment. If May fails the consequences of a no-deal are unimaginably bad, regardless of what advocates of a hard Brexit suggest is possible. The compromise deal that has emerged is one that at least inflicts minimal damage on the UK economy. For all of our sakes, and the prosperity of future generations, we must hope that she succeeds. However, whatever deal (or not) that does emerge, it's highly likely that she will succumb to an eventual fate at the hand of enemies within her own party that is allegorically, if not literally, similar to Caligula's end.