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**GLOSSARY / Let's stop bowing to the inevitable**

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WE HAVE become, it seems, an exceptionally fatalistic society. Triggered by some of the reports of the Hebron murders (much talk of 'inevitable reprisals' and 'inevitable protests'), I asked the Independent's library to search the computer database for the last 100 uses of 'inevitable', a word that has become almost indispensable to the working journalist.

On reflection, I thought I might be overdoing it by asking for so many, but when the print-out emerged it revealed that the computer had to go back only five days to reach that tally, and that was on a database that excluded all broadcast media and most of the popular press, both of which are addicted to the word. I didn't bother asking for 'inevitably'.

Reading all these examples in rapid succession evokes a depressing picture of the world as a place beleaguered by insoluble conflict and pain without remedy, a sense that there has been a great collapse of human resolution. Of the 100 instances, only five formed part of a negative construction ('it is not inevitable' etc), while the rest effectively capitulated to everything from tragedy to mere nuisance1 .

There were 'inevitable job losses', 'inevitable storms', 'inevitable corruption' and, inevitably, 'inevitable delays'. Just once someone 'refused to accept the inevitable', but that was evidence that he was an idiot rather than a sign of courage in the face of adversity.

Others 'bowed to the inevitable'. (How did they bow? Gracefully.) In Moscow 'paying protection money to the mafia seems almost as inevitable as the snow', while closer to home sweeteners were recognised as 'an inevitable part of the arms trade'.

In the same week 'pressures to increase (troops in Bosnia)' were seen as inevitable, someone declared that 'the unification of the Serb state is inevitable' and a journalist endured the 'inevitable hour-long delay' before Naomi Campbell turned up for an interview. The word can mean anything from 'we're all doomed' to 'Oh no, not again]', travelling by way of 'I very much want this to happen, and - who knows? If I predict it confidently enough, it might.'

Almost none of the usages trawled up in the net conveyed any notion of the word's proper meaning. In the Reith Lectures, Marina Warner talked about how certain myths make 'women's tasks seem natural, timeless, somehow inevitable', an acknowledgement of the coercive force of modern usage, while a remark in the Times about 'the inevitable Gorecki' will strike a melancholy chord with any listeners who have flicked from Radio 3 to Classic FM trying to avoid the gloomy Pole.

For the most part it is just a cliche that has lost all proper solidity. It has a long history (the OED's first citation is from 1430) and its early appearances are often religious, all weighty with moral seriousness. When God explains, in Paradise Lost, that 'the day thou eat'st thereof - inevitably thou shalt die', the word trembles with the consequences. Inevitably. Don't bother reading the small print2 for a loophole, because it isn't there.

These days, in contrast, the word is almost always used about things that are humanly evitable (the word does exist, incidentally, though the OED's last citation is for 1836). It is certainly very likely that Arabs will kill Jews in reprisal for the Hebron attack, but to say that it is 'inevitable' is a tiny surrender of sorts, an acceptance of the world as it is.

It may similarly be predictable that Jewish settlers will kill more Arabs, but to say that it is 'inevitable' sloppily turns prediction into fact. This is the source, I think, of its appeal - the word gives a spurious authority to speculation and protects the commentator against something journalists fear almost more than inaccuracy - that is, a charge of naivety.

Perhaps it doesn't really matter - in most cases it is just an idiom, after all - but I wonder whether those endless repetitions of 'inevitable', about everything from train cancellations to murder, don't eventually wear away at our resistance, as water wears away a stone.