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TOM TOM ENGLISH



The winds of change - predicting the future

VOCABULARY

**To bear a
resemblance =**
To look like something
in some ways

Mug's game =
A pointless or futile
activity. (British
English). A Mug is
someone who is easily
deceived.

**On the
threshold of =**
To be near the
beginning of something

Discussion questions

1. The writer was surprised by 3 things last year. Were you also surprised by them?
2. What news events surprised you last year? Why?
3. Do you remember the fall of the Berlin wall? Share your memories with the group. Was it a big event in Japan?
4. Make some predictions for the coming year. What do you think will be the big news stories? Why?

VOCABULARY

Draconian =
Extremely harsh, severe
or strict

To mislay =
To put something in an
incorrect place; to lose
something

To clamber =
To climb with difficulty

Bureaucratic =
Slow, difficult, with lots
of paperwork

For many years at around this time, when I was a columnist on a leading British newspaper, I would be asked to write an article predicting what was going to happen in the coming year. I would do my best, trying to work out from the few certainties - election dates, anniversaries etc- to give an idea what the year might look like. Of course over the following months so many other unexpected things would happen that my article **bore no resemblance** to the real year. So in the end I gave up. In our complex world, forecasting the future is a **mug's game**.

Who, this time last year, forecast that friendly-ish Russia would send its troops into Ukraine and seize Crimea? Who suggested that the extremists of Islamic State would capture the third biggest city in Iraq? And who predicted that the oil price would drop to \$60 a barrel, affecting the whole world?

Plenty of years contain unexpected events but one year shows the pointlessness of trying to forecast the future: 1989. Although no newspaper forecast it, by December 1988 the world was standing **on the threshold** of the greatest change since World War Two.

In 1989 Russia's iron grip over Eastern Europe would simply vanish. Nowadays we all think it was obvious that this was going to happen. The Soviet Union simply couldn't carry its enormous burdens any longer. But no-one thought the collapse would start so soon. And certainly not in a single evening.

Thursday 9 November 1989 seemed like any other day. We were aware that East Germany was starting to liberalise its **draconian** system, but the process seemed to be completely under control. That evening a big crowd of journalists attended a news conference by the main spokesman for the East German government, Gunther

Schabowski. He was a decent, honourable man, a strong advocate of reform and greater democracy. He talked for a while about the regime's new approach. Then there was a pause. He had **mislaid** the piece of paper with the government's main decision on it. Eventually he found it. "This will be interesting for you. Today it was decided to make it possible for all citizens to leave the country through the official border crossing-points. All citizens of the German Democratic Republic can now be issued with visas for the purposes of travel or visiting relatives in the West. This order is to take effect at once [unverzüglich]."

A correspondent from East German radio called out: "What exactly does unverzüglich mean in this context? Unthinkingly, Mr Schabowski said: "It means straightaway."

What the Central Committee had actually decided was that anyone wanting to visit the West could apply for an exit visa. It was intended to be a slow, carefully regulated **bureaucratic** process. But Mr Schabowski gave an entirely different impression.

East Berliners who were watching Mr Schabowski live on TV assumed he meant they could just head for the Wall and be allowed through to West Berlin. Straightaway.

Within 15 minutes big crowds were streaming towards the crossing-points. Since the guards at the Wall had no orders to shoot, they let them through. Soon people were **clambering** up on to the top of the Wall, dancing and laughing and kissing each other. The Wall hadn't literally fallen, it had simply ceased to matter.

The world had become a different place. And all because of a single four-syllable German word.