A Case of Mistaken Identity, or Mistakes Every Step of the Way?

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(PART II)

After the verdict was announced in the case of Jean Charles de Menezes - a Brazilian electrician who was killed by the Metropolitan Police in London in the course of a botched counter-terrorism operation (when he was mistaken for a terrorist bomber) - it was declared that the police force was guilty of 19 "catastrophic errors" in the operation that led to his death. Given the considerable resources and energy that the police had invested in fighting the case, this was a scathing indictment of the Met.

The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Ian Blair, found himself fighting for his job. But in the true fashion of politicians and public figures today, Sir Ian issued a robust defence of his record, and flatly refused to go, despite calls for his resignation from some quarters. Although some measures taken by the Commissioner had undoubtedly been beneficial for the Metropolitan Police, and his powerful supporters included the Mayor of London, a motion of no-confidence in his leadership was passed by the London Assembly by a vote of 15 to 8. And as his critics have pointed out, because the police force was found guilty of so many errors, basically the buck could have reasonably been expected to stop with the head of the organisation.



Jean Charles de Menezes

As such, Sir Ian should have taken his punishment like a man. Instead, he appeared to mislead the public by declaring on the day of de Menezes' death that the Brazilian man had been "a suspect" when he was completely innocent. Although a report by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) accepted the Commissioner's assertion that he did not know a mistake had been made until 24 hours after the 7 shots were fired into de Menezes' head, it was hardly reassuring that the same report found Assistant Commissioner Andy Hayman had "misled" senior officers by "failing to tell them that the dead man was not a bomber"!

Sir Ian also made a point of praising the bravery of the police on the day of the shooting, saying officers were involved in a "race against time" and had been "doing their best" to handle the threat posed by the failed suicide bombers the previous day. Clearly, their best was not nearly good enough...

Furthermore, any number of questions regarding the performance of the police remain (even beyond the inconsistencies and errors identified by the trial judge) for example, why did the two officers who shot de Menezes both maintain, in statements made 36 hours after the shooting, that he was wearing a "bulky" denim jacket (implying that he may have been hiding a bomb underneath his clothing) when in fact he was wearing a very ordinary denim jacket? Why did 8 police officers give statements that the words "armed police" were shouted as a warning to de Menezes, when none of the 17 civilian witnesses heard those words? These statements sound suspiciously like a co-ordinated cover-up by the officers present at the scene.

Nor was this type of inexplicable behaviour limited to the lower end of the food chain. Questions remain about how the police control room commanders formed the firm belief that de Menezes had been positively identified as Hussain Osman, a fugitive suicide bomber, when none of the surveillance officers pursuing him had given that confirmation. Particularly since the jury at the trial heard that at no point in the 34 minutes between the 27-year-old electrician leaving his home and the moment when he was shot did the surveillance officers believe that they had formally identified him as Osman!