

New revelations expose police, media cover-up

The Guardian and the de Menezes killing

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
22 August 2005

New leaks from official sources in Britain have added to the evidence already brought to light, proving that the official story of how Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes was gunned down was a pack of lies. In response, the liberal daily newspaper the *Guardian* has rushed to the defence of Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair, justifying the use of death squads and excusing a cover-up aimed at concealing how the police murdered an innocent man.

De Menezes was shot at Stockwell underground station on July 22. The police claimed that he had left the home of a suspected terrorist wearing an overcoat on a sunny day, arousing suspicions that he was concealing a bomb. They claimed that on entering the station the young worker had attempted to escape police, jumping a ticket barrier, before being overpowered and shot multiple times in the head, a tactic prescribed by new police procedures to prevent possible suicide attacks.

Numerous “eyewitness statements” were published in the press, testifying to these supposed facts and Sir Ian Blair made an official statement to the same effect.

The documents leaked by someone connected with the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) investigation into the shooting disproved every claim in this scenario. De Menezes had left his own home wearing a light jacket and had not run away. He did not even know that he was being followed. Rather, after sitting down on the train, he was grabbed, restrained and shot seven times in the head at point-blank range.

The leak sparked a major political crisis. Further revelations came thick and fast. It transpired that Blair had blocked the normally automatic convening of an IPCC inquiry for five days. Officers had been dispatched to Brazil in an attempt to secure the silence of the de Menezes family. It is also alleged that police had supplied misleading information to the pathologist investigating the cause of de Menezes death in order to support their version of events.

At the weekend, news reports of further leaks confirmed the police knew de Menezes represented “no immediate threat” when he was assassinated. Senior police sources told the *Observer* newspaper (the Sunday edition of the *Guardian*) that “members of the surveillance team who followed de Menezes into Stockwell underground station in London felt that he was not about to detonate a bomb, was not armed and was not acting suspiciously. It was only when they were joined by armed officers that his threat was deemed so great that he was shot seven times.

“Sources said that the surveillance officers wanted to detain de Menezes, but were told to hand over the operation to the firearms team,” according to the article published August 21.

A police source was quoted as saying, “Nothing he did gave the surveillance team the impression that he was carrying a device.”

These revelations confirm that someone at the highest level had taken the decision to implement a shoot-to-kill policy using the pretext provided by the July 7 terror bombings in London. When the opportunity presented itself to do so one day after another failed bomb attempt, de Menezes was the unfortunate victim.

But the immediate response of the *Guardian* to the revelations has been to question the motives of the source of the IPCC leak and to insist that matters should be allowed to take their proper course. An August 18 editorial stated: “There are always two questions that should be asked about any leaked document. One is what it contains. The other is what the leaker hopes to achieve.”

The *Guardian* was indifferent to what had been revealed and hostile only to the source of the leak. It stated that “it would have been better if the dramatic details of the Independent Police Complaints Commission’s investigation into the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes had not been leaked. They should have been allowed to emerge in the full report, based on all the evidence, which the IPCC is currently drawing up.... Those who want justice to be done, as opposed to those with other agendas, must be careful.”

This defence of the IPCC’s integrity is extraordinary. It comes after whitewashes by parliamentary bodies and judicial inquiries—whose bona fides were also supposed to guarantee an independent investigation—into the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the war against Iraq and the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly.

After these experiences, anyone concerned with democratic rights need not question the personal integrity of the IPCC’s members to oppose the notion that one should rely on the good graces of such a state body to establish justice. Moreover, given that a massive cover-up has been mounted over de Menezes’s death, any newspaper would welcome leaks from whatever quarter exposing the facts. The motive of whoever leaked the document is entirely secondary to the public’s right to know. This is particularly the case under conditions where estimates of when the IPCC will finally issue its report on de Menezes range from three months to two years.

But the *Guardian* went even further. The outrage over the exposures felt in Britain and Brazil naturally led to demands for Ian Blair to resign. This provoked its first defence of Blair, which was soon to lead on to a vicious attack on the de Menezes family and their supporters.

The newspaper insisted that “it is premature and demagogic to call for this or that person to resign or to be prosecuted.” This is a statement of stupefying arrogance and indifference to human life. The police bullets pumped into Jean Charles de Menezes were also “premature.” He was executed summarily without having a chance even to protest his innocence. The *Guardian* shows more concern that a police official might lose his job than that a young man lost his life.

This was a foretaste of things to come. On August 20, the

Guardian dismissed calls for Commissioner Blair's resignation as premature and "not substantiated either." Matters were being "fully investigated" and the facts would eventually be "laid before the public" by the IPCC. "At that stage, *competent authorities* [emphasis added] will decide if there are legal charges to answer and a meaningful public assessment can be made about wider issues—including Sir Ian's responsibilities."

The *Guardian* then went on the attack, claiming that "the current level of preoccupation in some quarters with the iniquity of the De Menezes shooting is beginning to verge on the obsessive, is in danger of becoming politicised and increasingly lacks an appropriate sense of context."

The editorial essentially maintained that the police were guilty only of wrongly identifying de Menezes as a terrorist. But the unnecessary killing of a man already under restraint was entirely justified by the continuing threat of terrorism. "If they had been right, they might have been heroes," the newspaper proclaimed.

Blair "does not have the luxury of only being concerned about the tragic Brazilian. Justice is being done, not perfectly and not without false starts, but done nevertheless. In such circumstances, it is a misjudgment, and perhaps even a mischief, to demand Mr. Blair's head. It smacks of politically motivated interference."

Rejecting the mounting evidence of a cover-up, the editorial concluded that "it would be inhuman and would lack common sense to pretend that negligence or something more sinister were the only possible explanations" for de Menezes's death. "But the public understands, even if some people seem sometimes to forget, that we—and, on our behalf, the police—are faced by murderous fanatics."

The *Guardian* only repeats the claim by Prime Minister Tony Blair that essential democratic rights must now be swept away if terrorism is to be defeated. This, together with an unquestioning defence of the machinery of the state, is the essential message it seeks to promote.

Despite leading with the news that police have said de Menezes posed no danger before he was shot, the *Observer* also defended Blair and the police. Its only concern is that the exposures of official lies will undermine the standing of the police: "For whatever reason, lies and misinformation about the actions, demeanour and even character of Mr. de Menezes were allowed to circulate. Judgments were hasty, clarifications too slow.... What is at stake is more than one man's integrity: the killing by police of an innocent commuter goes to the heart of British democracy."

This statement is absolutely correct. The state execution of an innocent man, the official adoption of a shoot-to-kill policy and the raft of other repressive measures being brought in under the guise of fighting terrorism represent a far graver threat to democratic rights and the interests of working people than a handful of terrorists ever could.

Far from opposing this threat, both the *Observer* and the *Guardian* offer up a rationale for police state measures and insist that people remain politically passive in the face of this offensive. Their injunction is that the police must be given the benefit of the doubt, something that was never granted to de Menezes.

The *Observer* merely calls for cosmetic changes to how draconian policing measures are presented to the public. The police force must have a "figurehead trusted by officers and public alike," Blair must "change his style radically" and learn to "trust the public" by explaining "exactly what powers the police now have".

Readers should recall that in the immediate aftermath of the de Menezes shooting, the *Guardian* wrote that the "biggest mistake the police made was not the most obvious one of shooting the wrong

man.... The biggest mistake was not to properly prepare the public for the sustained campaign of violence facing the country.... More should have been done to prepare the public for the forceful response needed to protect them."

This attempt to stifle opposition to the criminal actions of the state beneath a blanket of sanctimonious nonsense about "allowing justice to take its course" continues to be the newspaper's primary concern.

The *Guardian* is the acknowledged mouthpiece of liberalism in Britain. For generations, progressive-minded sections of the middle class have looked to its pages for news and informed comment. To do so today is a hopeless quest.

The newspaper has become little more than a mouthpiece of the Blair government. Its editorial line has defended every political crime perpetrated by the government—most notably in the war against Iraq. Now, even its expressed concern for democratic rights has been thrown out the window.

How is such a dramatic shift to be explained?

The *Guardian* does not articulate the concerns of the majority of those who make up its readership. It speaks for a narrow and privileged social stratum—heavily concentrated in the most prosperous areas of the capital.

This layer, while it may on occasion call for a degree of moderation to be shown, is essentially reconciled to the attacks on the social conditions of the working class carried out by Blair since 1997 because it has benefited directly from them. Its social situation has improved in direct proportion to the impoverishment of millions of working people, including many long-time readers of the newspaper in education and the caring professions.

In the past, the *Guardian*'s professed concerns for democratic rights and progressive social policies had a material base. It expressed an understanding that continued social peace and political stability required that the worst excesses of the profit system were ameliorated.

Today, such measures are no longer possible. Every aspect of economic and social policy is dictated by the interests of a financial oligarchy and its hangers-on in the rarified environs of the upper middle class. They can only grow rich by impoverishing those below them. And this is not possible without abrogating essential democratic rights in order to prevent the development of oppositional movements.

It is this social order, rather than any abstract liberal principles, that the *Guardian* defends and why it must justify repression—and not only when confronting Islamic fundamentalists. It is an essential truth of contemporary political life that the task of defending democratic rights is the responsibility of the working class, which must organise itself independently of the ruling elite and its pseudo-liberal apologists.



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