

18 April 2019

## The Killing of a Brazilian by the Met



**Dr Peter Collecott CMG** (Co-Chairman) was the British Ambassador to Brazil from 2004 to 2008. Since then he has advised multinationals, governments and NGOs on business, political and sustainable development issues.

\*\*\*\*\*

*On 7 July 2005 suicide bombers killed 52 people on the London Underground and a London bus. Two weeks later, on 21 July, the Metropolitan Police foiled a plot by suicide bombers to attack main railway stations. The day after that, as the police were still searching for the failed bombers, a Met Armed Response Team followed a young Brazilian onto an underground train at Stockwell Tube station, and shot him, fearing he was about to set off an explosion. In fact, Jean Charles de Menezes was going about his peaceful business, and was killed in error. This had the potential to set off a crisis in relations between the UK and Brazil. Peter Collecott was the British Ambassador in Brazil at the time and had to manage the crisis politically, publicly and with the family of the Brazilian killed. Here he attempts to draw lessons from this unusual and totally unexpected crisis.*

### **API: What were your first thoughts on hearing that a Brazilian had been shot in London?**

We were all following events in London over those weeks with great concern. We were relieved that the 21 July bombers had been foiled, but concerned that they had not been caught. The first we knew was that a man had been shot at Stockwell station. We did not know that he was a Brazilian, nor whether he was a bomber or not. I heard that news the next morning, a Saturday, on the BBC World Service. I was shocked and saddened, thinking it highly unlikely that a young Brazilian was a terrorist, and wondering what had led the Police team to believe that. The next thing that happened was a telephone call from the Brazilian Foreign Minister, Celso Amorim, expressing the understandable shock and anger of the Brazilian people and Government. However, the call was not acrimonious; I promised to find out all I could, and to keep him informed.

### **API: How well prepared were you and your team?**

We were well-prepared for emergencies in general. We had disaster plans, which had been exercised; and the staff of the Embassy and the various Consulates General in Brazil, plus our team of Honorary Consuls, all knew that in any emergency they would be expected to pull together as a team, probably work long hours, and to be very flexible. However, we usually imagined an emergency as a terrorist or other security threat to the Embassy itself, or an emergency requiring consular assistance in a remote area of Brazil – not something happening to a Brazilian in the UK at the hands of the UK authorities.

**Access. Engagement. Resolution.**

***API: What took you by surprise?***

As noted, we were taken by surprise at the nature of the “emergency”. Given that it was the death of an innocent Brazilian at the hands of the British police, it was no surprise that there was huge coverage of the incident in the Brazilian media – print and TV; and that soon we had a substantial demonstration outside the Embassy in Brasilia.

***API: What went right?***

Firstly, the reaction of all our staff, including the Brazilian locally engaged staff. They must have had mixed emotions; but their loyalty and teamwork were exemplary. For instance, the crisis struck when our Press Officer was on maternity leave. Luckily, we had filled her position (temporarily) with a young, but very capable, Brazilian, who handled the press, both British and Brazilian, with great professionalism.

Secondly, having over the first weekend increased our security measures at the Embassy and Consulates General, and at the houses of UK-based staff, we did not just hunker down. On the Monday morning I went straight out to speak to the demonstrators and the accompanying journalists outside the Embassy, and found that they were not hostile, and responded well to a demonstration of sorrow from the British Ambassador.

Thirdly, the visit to the parents of Jean Charles Menezes in rural Minas Gerais, a Brazilian state. The Met had rapidly decided to send Deputy Assistant Commissioner John Yates to Brazil to apologise to the Menezes parents, and to assure them that they would be receiving compensation for their son’s death. The visit was logistically difficult, not least because of the accompanying well-armed officers from the Brazilian Federal Police who were concerned for our safety – unnecessarily, as it turned out.

The initial meeting, in the office of the local Mayor, was extraordinary enough. Although clearly still in shock, the Menezes parents, and their remaining son, were grateful for our expressions of regret, and said that they bore no grudge against the Met or the British people. They carried themselves with great dignity and composure.

More remarkably still, as we were leaving, the Mayor invited all of us – the family, John Yates, those from the Embassy, and the accompanying Federal Police – to a barbeque lunch at his farm on the outskirts of the town. After we had eaten well, in Brazilian fashion, John Yates and I sought out the parents to take our leave. Neither of us imagined this would be easy. However, Sra Menezes tearfully embraced each of us, as if somehow we represented her son lost in the UK. We went on our way severely humbled and very touched.

Finally, through the actions of the Met and the maturity of the response from the parents and Brazilians generally, we were able to avoid significant damage to our bilateral relations. President Lula paid a highly successful State Visit to the UK the next summer.

***API. What did not go so right?***

We struggled for some while with the more accusatory attitude of cousins of Jean Charles de Menezes living in the UK, who did not take their lead from the immediate family. We also struggled initially with establishing a cooperative relationship with the Independent Police

Complaints Commission who investigated the shooting, but were reluctant to let us keep the Brazilian authorities fully informed.

***API. When it was all over, what lessons stayed with you?***

Firstly, you must prepare in advance; but you need also to be prepared for the unexpected by being flexible.

Secondly, a leader must lead from the front, and set the tone of an operation. Others will then respond.

Thirdly, crisis management is a team effort; and teams pull together best when there is both good preparation and good morale.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Access. Engagement. Resolution.**

The Ambassador Partnership LLP is a **unique specialist** partnership of former Ambassadors with unrivalled networks of influence in almost 100 countries. We provide discreet services to resolve your international problems and to improve your capacity to operate effectively wherever you need to.

We are **dispute resolution** specialists and **political risk** experts.

To discuss how we can help you to manage your political risk please call:

**Tracey Stewart**

Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

[tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com](mailto:tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com)

[www.ambassadorllp.com](http://www.ambassadorllp.com)