

A MATTER OF IDENTITY

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The man shot dead at point-blank range on the Stockwell tube in London last Saturday was Jean Charles de Menezes. He was a Brazilian electrician with no links whatever to terrorism. London Metropolitan Police admitted this on Saturday night and said they were very sorry. So, no doubt, are his family and anyone who witnessed this public execution.

Thus far, the usual guardians of British civil liberties and human rights groups have been publicly forgiving, showing just how scared these stoics really are. The man with the gun didn't ask de Menezes for his identity papers before firing a handgun into his skull. He was shot because he overdressed on a warm day; because he ran away from men he noticed stalking him; because he ran and fell over and he might have had a bomb - some observers even saw one. But he didn't.

De Menezes was shot five times at point blank range because he was acting suspiciously and because a lawfully armed policeman was afraid he might be a terrorist.

Let us learn from this, as we debate wider anti-terrorist laws and identity cards in Australia. Let us pray that we know how not to seem suspicious if we get them. Our lives may depend on the choices of a spooked man with power, discretion, and a gun.

Who was Jean Charles de Menezes? Identities are like water; they flow. The young men who blew themselves apart in London on July 7 carried identity papers - the bits of daily plastic we use to claim entitlements, to cheap public transport, drive a car, access social services, use the gym, library or an ATM - which were found in the wreckage. Friends and neighbours knew them: family-oriented, loving, educated, social and sporty, ordinary British blokes. But that wasn't who they were on July 7.

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Official data is fallible: London's Metropolitan Police initially announced de Menezes was directly linked to the bombers on Friday, but he wasn't. The data has limited use. What matters is the identity ascribed to us by those who have the power to take it away.

We have only to look at the recent Department of Immigration scandals. Vivian Alvarez Solon had told immigration authorities who she was and that she had a visa: someone decided she was a beaten-up, illegal sex worker from the Philippines instead. Cornelia Rau told obvious lies about herself, but she had been officially reported missing by her family and was well known to local police and mental health services. Nobody troubled to find who she really was for nearly a year. An important identity was attributed to each of these women: alone, middle-aged, difficult and damaged, foreign.

Our guardians have enormous authority. Australian immigration authorities have been acting sans frontieres or human rights constraints for decades. And London's Metropolitan Police have the legal right to snoop, chase and shoot to kill terrorist suspects. Officers can make quick, personal judgements with potentially, as we now see, disastrous consequences. Under conditions of panic, political pressures or real emergency, if the culture is gung-ho, punitive, process rich or compassion-impooverished, corrupt or simply reactive, someone's identity may be determined by discretion, with extreme prejudice.

Then, personal values and assumptions have come into action. In Australia's recent immigration scandals, sex, disability and racial discrimination haven't been talked about much and should be. Rau and Alvarez Solon were different: obviously disturbed, friendless and ethnic women. Neither was young, companionable or acted as good women are supposed to. Rau lied constantly, behaved disruptively and was difficult to manage. Alvarez Solon was a helpless foreigner who annoyingly, consistently claimed that she had the right to be in Australia. Neither was taken seriously. Why? Well, men with great power, men in a hurry, men with a greater purpose don't bother to be

courteous or kind to such women, or anyone else who presents as afraid or angry, assertive or unco-operative.

Jean Charles de Menezes, aged 27, electrician, was shot dead because a fictional identity was ascribed to him: Islamist bomber. Rau and Alvarez Solon were ill-treated because their presentation of self, of who they really were, was not acceptable to officials, who could decide who they really were without being accountable for it. Rau claimed, recently, that those making immigration policy should be ethnic: perhaps she was making the point that they fail to understand the experience of otherness. Rau has since told us exactly who she thinks she is and why she lied - to protect that "self" from being erased and another imposed, the sick refugee from a group that had already rejected her.

Our true identities are the selves that direct and control each of our functions, motives and desires; the watchers who reflect on events in the outer and inner worlds - on the totality of our personal experiences and values and how we achieve our goals. De Menezes' death shows what happens when people are judged in suspicion and haste.

If we do not understand this, nor share common values about humanity; if we retreat to the certainty promised by tangible proofs of public identity and entrusting powers to guards, who are fallible, frightenable human beings - then the only protection of our self-possession is the intuition, intelligence and instincts of particular public servants. A beach umbrella in the face of a tsunami of terror.