

How Government Waiting Rooms Can Drive Anyone to the Brink of Insanity

By Are We There Yet



Photo credit: The Capital Times archives

The room was sweltering. A single metal fan in the corner turned slowly, barely moving the air. My skirt stuck to me and my thighs slipped on the hard plastic chair, covered in sweat, the crack in the middle of the seat pinching my legs every time I moved.

To my left, to my right, in front of me and behind me, were endless rows of the same cracked, beige chairs, filled with people staring dully at a TV screen hanging from the ceiling.

Number 81 blinked on the screen. I looked at the crumpled piece of paper in my hand. Number 173. I sighed. Except for the crinkling of newspaper pages turning, or beeps from cell phones, my sigh was the only sound in the room.

I was in a government waiting room. For the right to continue driving my accident-free, paid-off, fully insured car, I was given the privilege of paying \$326.88 to the provincial government to

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renew my licence plates for another year. As it's non-negotiable, I went. "OK", I thought. "It's a bill. No big deal. It's not complicated, like applying for citizenship. Go, give them money, leave. In and out in 20 minutes."

How could I have forgotten? I've been in government offices in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, New York, Seattle, and all over Italy and France. I have even *worked* for the government. Their waiting rooms are all EXACTLY the same. There is inevitably a thin counter running along a wall, just slightly too high, so that you need to stand on your toes to see properly and push your papers through the slot. This makes you feel like you're back in elementary school, desperately looking up at the principal's desk, explaining why he shouldn't give you detention. Lining the counter are 20 bullet-proof, plexiglass windows. Scratched and dirty, you can barely see through them, let alone hear anything. Not that there is a lot of talking going on. Only three windows out of the 20 have someone working behind them. One thing is clear – the plexiglass wouldn't be there if they didn't need it. And they need it because they insist on driving people to the brink of insanity and murder.

Conversations usually run something like this:

"Why are you here?"

"I'm here to renew my insurance/get a health card/interview for citizenship."

"We don't do that here, we do that at window number seven, where there are 640,000 people in line."

"But the letter you sent me said to come to this address, at this window."

"I've never seen that type of letter before."

"It has your signature on it."

"Oh. You mean THAT letter. Let's see your papers. Your paperwork is incomplete. You'll need to come back with a statement from our office saying that you gave us all the correct documents."

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“But I’m giving you all the correct documents right now. I’ve checked off everything on the list you sent me. So now I can have my statement, right?”

“No. Here’s another list. You need to submit these other documents with your first list of documents. Come back when you have the completed paperwork, and then I’ll send you a letter saying when you can come back again and wait in line with your letter to get your statement so that you can officially submit your paperwork.”

“How long will that take?”

“Between six and eight months.”

“But my permit expires in two weeks. I didn’t come before because the letter you sent me only gave me an appointment for today, and I wasn’t allowed to change it.”

“I’m sorry, we’re closed for lunch. Come back when you’re better prepared.”

And the window slams shut.

It doesn’t matter what you look like, how you dress, if you’re totally confident and calm, by the time you leave a government waiting room, you, and everyone else, looks the same – exhausted, beaten, and shaking your head in shock and disbelief.

And so I waited my turn. I waited, staring at the TV screen with the numbers on it, as if somehow staring would make the numbers move faster. I waited while people who had been there for hours left to go to the bathroom, and when they got back, found out they had missed their turn. I decided I definitely did not need to go to the bathroom. At all. Ever. Or look at my phone, or read, or do anything that might make me miss that millisecond when my number flashed across the screen, and find myself at the back of the line.

I saw my number. I sprinted to the window before the number could change to the next one,

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while the security guard glared at me. Even though I had done nothing wrong, I was nervous.

“Why are you here?”

“I’ve come to renew my licence plates.”

“Let’s see your papers.”

Tremblingly, I pushed them through the slot. She looked at me, bored, and asked for the entire contents of my wallet, which I gave her. In any other circumstance, this would be called extortion.

Then, just like that, she asked for the payment, stamped my bill, and gave me a new set of documents.

I was done. Simple. Just like that. Suddenly everything seemed wonderful. All I needed to do next was renew my passport. It shouldn’t be that bad. Twenty minutes, in and out. After all, I already had all my papers.

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