

The border problem at Pearson airport

By RANA FLORIDA OPINION RICHARD FLORIDA OPINION
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Canada prides itself on its reputation as an open, tolerant and caring place. Especially at our border, where the image of Justin Trudeau greeting refugees turned away from the United States was seen around the world. But, over the dozen years that we have lived in Toronto, we have regularly encountered problems when coming back home to Canada at Pearson Airport.

We are not comparing ourselves to refugees, and our problems pale in comparison to theirs. Still, we have grown to fear returning to a city we love because we are regularly shunted into another area or room for some sort of secondary border security or customs check.



Rana and Richard Florida and their daughters visiting Disney World in Orlando. (FLORIDA FAMILY PHOTO)

A couple of years ago we were returning home from a Christmas holiday in the States with our new puppy. When we presented her required health papers, we were sent straight to secondary inspection. There, the customs officer asked: "Where is it from?" When we told him that the pup was a Christmas present, he accused us of trying to "smuggle a designer breed into the country." He spent 90 minutes looking up pricing information on our dog's breed, before instructing us to pay a duty on her.

Another time, a border agent pulled us aside as we exited the Nexus line and said we had to report for a secondary inspection. When we simply asked her why, she responded: "Only Canadian citizens can freely enter and exit the country." She made us feel like we were second-class people in country we have taken as our adopted home where both our children were born.

Declaring baby food: go straight to secondary inspection. Waiting for our bags at baggage claim: report for a secondary review. Travelling with a banana for our kids: pulled in for secondary inspection, held for over an hour, and we were told we could be fined \$10,000 per piece of fruit.

Any time we come through Pearson with the same dog, which has already been vetted numerous times for health documents, we are shuttled in for a secondary review, while in every other airport we have travelled with her — in the United States, Europe, and through Billy Bishop Island Airport — they quickly review her papers at the main customs station and shuttle us straight through.

Travelling home from a summer holiday in Europe where one of our girls came down with a fever and strep throat, we had arranged to go straight from the airport to urgent care before they closed for the evening. As any frequent traveller through Pearson knows, the airport's Nexus machines are regularly down and often finicky and have trouble registering eye scans. That means a visit to the border control agent. Though Rana was travelling with a valid U.S. passport, a Canadian residency card, and her Nexus trusted traveller card, she was ordered into a separate room for an additional scrutiny.

Facing a queue of more than 50 people, she pleaded with the agent to just look at her passport and residency card so we could take our daughter to the doctor. The agent offered "to call a paramedic." When Rana asked if the paramedic could prescribe the needed antibiotics the agent responded, "no," and called in a duty officer. Fortunately, the duty officer, seeing the panicked look on a mother's face, moved quickly.

The problem, he said, was that something appeared wrong with the way Rana's passport was linked to her Nexus card — a problem that she has never encountered before, and with a card she had just used without incident in the United States. Wouldn't it have been easier all around for the original border agent to just say: "Welcome home, just make sure to stop by the Nexus office next time to check out your card."

Our family has travelled the world, from European capitals to Dubai, Jordan and Israel, South Korea and China. We have never been singled out for extra security or customs checks in any of them. It has never happened to us in any other city in Canada, or at Billy Bishop Island Airport in Toronto, or exiting Toronto for the U.S. Just constantly when coming home through Pearson Airport.

Bring up the topic at a dinner party and any frequent traveller who crosses the border at Pearson will have similar stories.

This is about much more than bruised egos and hurt feelings. It makes people think twice about travelling through Toronto, while adding little to nothing for our border security. It hurts our city and our country's image and costs real money in lost business, lost tourism, and lost airfares. These costs surely far exceed any revenue from the occasional customs violator who is made to pay a legitimate duty. The anxiety we now feel when returning home is the only thing that has made us think about moving back to the States.

The border situation at Pearson is terribly out of sync with Canada's global image. What better way to reflect who we truly are than by having the friendliest and most welcoming border in the world.

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