

## Queue Assembly

I had a shocking experience the other day. I was phoning my mobile phone provider to sort out a problem. On the line I heard an automated voice. It told me that their lines were exceptionally busy and that there would be a delay. Then it told me that my business was important to them. Then it asked me if I was prepared to pay an extra 50p in order to get preferential treatment in the queue to have my call answered. I was appalled. I want to use this assembly to explain why. Because the next time you are stuck in a queue, whether to a morally repellent phone company or what seems an endless line in the lunch queue, or behind shoppers at a supermarket checkout, take a moment to think about what's going on. Yes, you're standing in a queue. Yes, it can be frustrating. Except that, when you look at it properly, it's also one of the best things in the world.

Think about how a queue works. You're in a place with other people who are all trying to do the same thing: get lunch; speak to someone or enjoy a film. Like you, these people have better things to do than queue. Many of them are probably stronger or faster; some may even be more intelligent than you. A fair number of them could easily beat you to your goal if you had to, say, arm-wrestle or have some other contest to determine who goes first.

Instead, here's what happens: You see people standing in formation while facing in the same direction; you locate the last person in the group; then you go and stand behind that person. That's your spot. Slowly and naturally, the line moves forward. At some point, you get what you want.

This process may not be fun, but it's fair. You can feel as frustrated as you like in a queue, but we would be doomed without them. Unless you're simultaneously the strongest, smartest, fastest and most universally capable human being on the planet, you should be thankful that queues exist and that, for the most part, people use them in ways that make life less miserable, not more. Looked at the right way, the queue is one of our most noble collective achievements.

Sadly, all is not well in the world of queues. It is not just phone companies that are encouraging queue jumping. Some theme parks do it too. Visitors can choose to pay more than the general-admission price to skip long queues at a park attraction once or for a lot more, can jump to the front of lines as many times as they want, all day long.

And there's more. Elite-club memberships provide a way for rich travelers to skip airline queues. And the same thing is an option at ski resorts and other leisure destinations. These offerings might sound appealing to you, especially if you have a lot of money to spare. But we're not simply talking about convenience here; we're talking about the undermining of one of civilization's greatest social achievements.

These skip-the-line passes are, very simply, profit-maximizing mechanisms that allow people with more money to avoid annoyances that less-wealthy individuals must put up with. They result in the opposite of what queues usually provide us: the certainty that people are ordered based on arrival time rather than some personal attribute. Even worse than returning us to some pre-queue state of nature wherein the strong and young can push past

the weak and the old, these line-cutting options enable those with more money to jump ahead of *everyone*.

The queue, as a concept and as an ordering principle, teaches many qualities. A queue teaches us patience, fairness and nondiscrimination. Effective queues are simple, efficient and provide a model of good sense. Queues can also foster solidarity and a sense of community. People in long queues tend to look out for one another. They won't let idiots push in front of others, and they'll usually save your spot if you have to ask. Queues are self-protecting. The line takes care of its own.

I don't know if I am doing a good job in persuading you to like standing in a queue, but remember this. Hating the act of waiting in line and hating the existence of lines are two different things. The former, of course, is completely reasonable — waiting in lines is boring and tedious and holds us back from doing that which we are waiting around to do. No one likes that.

Deep down, though, despite the frustration, we fully understand that waiting in queues is the right thing to do. No one likes the process, but, for the most part, we're all equal. Everyone has to wait in lines at some point. And this is why we are instinctively shocked when, for instance, we learn that a company offering tours to Disney World will reportedly include, for a price, a disabled tour guide — thus letting you and your family follow the guide to the much-shorter, handicapped-only lines. It's also why you're very likely to get a reaction if you try to jump the line in, say, the lunch queue. We will fight for the sanctity of that which we curse. The thinking goes: "If we all have to wait in this stupid line, so do you, mate."

At its core, the act of queue jumping is about power — the stuff of bullies and braggarts. So instead of bending the well-established rules of the line to benefit the interests of the wealthiest among us, we should make sure companies and people wait in lines as we always have — waiting our turn, standing in order, like reasonable people, the kind of person who cares about other people. Modern attempts at getting around the queue reflect something sad about society. In more ways than ever, people seem to be trying to jump the line and worm their way to the front — it seems that fairness — and fellow citizens — can be ignored. Single file or otherwise, we should not stand for that sort of thing.

So today and every day, let us assert our civilisation in the lunch queue and every other line we stand in. Good behaviour in a queue is the glue of society and the cornerstone of fairness. We are British, and we are acknowledged around the world as natural and determined queuers. And as noble British citizens, fair play, decency and the queue should be close to our national heart.

Queuing is a national characteristic and we should both defend it and celebrate it. And while we are on the subject, holding doors open for others and smiling as we pass each other are also important signs that we value those who work around us and that we take trouble to show kindness to each other. Let's make all these good things a focus for the weeks ahead.