Immigration bottlenecks are becoming the bane of the business traveller worldwide. To discover how the problem could be alleviated, Harry Hopkins interviewed the UK’s Chief Inspector of Immigration, Peter Tomkins.

Airline operators worldwide are pressing their immigration authorities for priority treatment of first- and business-class passengers, especially at peak times. The overall pressure on immigration services at these peak arrival times, however, is a problem which may have to be solved first.

Priority handling of business passengers would probably involve direct payment for extra staff, but precedents exist in paying for extra policing and for special customs arrangements. Some form of capitation could be added to a fare, as is done for security in most instances.

The UK immigration authorities are very interested in “pre-clearance” of passengers on dense routes—especially flights originating in the United States. A bilateral agreement would be sought, involving UK inward clearance of aircraft passengers at the overseas airport of departure, using staff detached there. Although this would necessitate changing the layout of immigration control and customs facilities, its benefits could outweigh the disruption. Like duty-free shopping at destination, it presents both fundamental attractions and difficulties.

Pre-clearance is already in effect into the United States from Canada, and is also being discussed for departures from Shannon, in Eire, with the Irish authorities. If, in the long term, this were possible into the UK from Europe, then European and UK nationals would be cleared in at the same desks. The feasibility of doing this is under consideration.

What of the future organisation of immigration control and the use of modern technology? A year’s trial was carried out at Heathrow two years ago on prototype equipment for machine-readable passports. This could do away with landing cards if such passports were in general use. The practicality of desk keyboards was also investigated. A further trial is planned to take place in the autumn at seaports. Keyboards are already in full-time use at some airports in the United States and Australia, for example.

Where keyboards are to be used both for the input of statistical data from landing cards and accessing the “suspect index”, the question of human effort is still to be resolved. Other problems identified in the UK trial included the time that it takes even a fast computer to match the anglicisation of foreign names. The UK favours the interactive touch-screen CRT rather than a keyboard for inputs, especially when searching the suspect index.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (Icao) had been considering the machine-readable passport until a couple of years ago, with a committee of specialists (mainly from Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the United States) pursuing an international specification. The committee is reconvening this summer. In the meantime the International Standards Organisation has come up with its own specification, and this is now being used for all US passports.

The UK view is that this is just a little before its time, but that there is something to be gained in learning the lessons of the American experience. “They are a long way from full machine readability,” says Peter Tomkins, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Immigration. On present timing, a common-format European passport could be in use by the end of the decade. The UK has no indication so far that the other European states share its intention to have the document machine-readable by then.

You must be sure that you and the machine are talking about the same person”, stresses assistant chief immigration inspector John de Llanos, who, together with colleague Graham Treadwell, is in charge of long-haul terminals at Heathrow. The strategic use of computers has already proved very useful, but their tactical use leaves questions to be answered. The immigration officer still has to check the passport photograph, and there is a risk that using a keyboard may detract from the two things which tell the immigration officer most about the person before him: what he observes and what he hears. These are essential skills.

An immigration officer’s selection and training in the UK is directed at personal qualities: observation and quick decision, backed by personal integrity and lack of prejudice. An officer must have a “feel” for faces and answers, when it comes to questioning a passenger. “And we are experts on ticketing,” says Tomkins. This has become more important now that numerous long-distance arrivals route through other European airports on special discount fares.

Like a doctor, concentration on the “diagnosis” and avoidance of personal involvement with the “patient” is essential. Selection of applicants in the UK is from two sources: direct entry from a university, particularly of those with language abilities, and by transfer from within the civil service of individuals with related experience.

The United Kingdom is exceptional among states in that it administers entry control through a separate Government agency, and not by the use of frontier police or in combination with customs, as in most other countries. It regulates the admission of people under law approved by Parliament. Being an island, the UK is also exceptional in having relied until now mostly on “peripheral control”, rather than by subsequent detection of those who have entered illegally.

The island viewpoint may be difficult to