

by Derek Morrison

*Journey over, flight now landed
But suffering time now expanded
2 long queues at border control
Dampens the travel-weary soul
1 snaking line offers human touch
A seductive other, technology's clutch
Gambling then on which is faster
Digital must surely be the master
Opting then for e-passport control
Down Alice's Wonderland rabbit hole
The Mad Tea Party made more sense
Even the saintly were growing tense
As more passengers joined the crowd
Government posters declare they're proud
But constipation struck the tortuous queue
Technology's false profit[phet] making tempers stew
And the queue got longer.*

*The border officer with a rictus smile
Forced calm in voice; walks the aisle
"It's really easy"; he demos the art
"Passport face downwards, show this part
Now step through the gate and face the glass
Facial recognition will let you pass"
But computer doesn't know you, or is way too slow
Crowd grows more restless, no sense of flow
One poor innocent chap could not get out
Confusion on face, what's this about?
"What's the point of all this?" One woman protested
Filled with rage at tax millions invested
A functionary jotted some comments down
But auto-bureaucracy still wore the crown*

And the queue got longer.

*The officer gave up and guides some up the line
For real people to process which suited us fine
Meanwhile, the other queue had shrunk to nil
But at e-passport control? They are there still.*

[To listen to this verse select below]

<http://www.cyberstanza.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/eConstipation.mp3>

Commentary

UK Governments of whatever political hue have a very poor record when it comes to commissioning and implementing major IT projects. The siren voices of the big IT companies salesmen have obviously been at work again with the ongoing attempts to automate border controls at UK airports. Theoretically, a digital passport (alias biometric or e-passport) should speed up the flow of UK citizens returning from other countries, but my experience at Gatwick Airport on 3 December 2015 is reflected in the above poem.

On a previous journey I returned via Heathrow Airport and was treated to the dubious pleasure of an iris scan – a technological solution that has [now been abandoned](#). This raises a question, however. Whatever happened to that data? In the deep (or shallow) recesses of the UK's GCHQ are a few bytes of storage allocated to my humble iris? Has my iris been shared with 'friendly' other governments? Could my iris ever be misused? Come to think of it the Malaysian government took my electronic fingerprints when I entered that country last year. I shudder to think what could happen if my iris and fingerprint bytes ever got together.

But back to Gatwick.

As I waited in the growing queue at Gatwick, I couldn't help reflecting that a human factors expert or usability specialist seems to have been lacking at the conception stage of this fiasco of a system. Instead of the [slow] technology being employed to process everyone at the front end of the queue the queuing time should instead become part of the automatic processing. Why should it be necessary to manually place a passport a certain way on a scanner plate when it has an NFC chip? Why do people have to enter an automatic stall

before facial recognition technology can be employed when they have just spent all that time in a queuing system designed to slow people down? If the facial recognition technology is not yet mature enough to be used at a distance and be faster than a human analyst/immigration officer then don't use it.

My advice is, therefore, if you have the choice of immigration queues to join, avoid the e-passport one like the plague. Join the one with human immigration officers, even if it initially appears longer. A major proportion of the human brain is devoted to visual processing and when linked to the speed of the decision making capabilities of an immigration officer then, on current form, human processing wins hands down.