ST Saturday 8 Oct 2011 Page D 12
Youthink

Sense of being an outsider hits home

By Ow Yeong Wai Kit

IT HAS been a month since I began the semester at University College Dublin, near the city centre of the capital of Ireland.

On my first day, I was on my way to a lecture when a tall, red-haired boy stopped me and said in a thick Irish accent: "Konichiwa! Do you know karate?"

Naturally, I was taken aback for a moment, before I wisecracked: "Yeah. You want to be target practice?" Both of us laughed, and I went for class.

While it was just a joke, the incident left me thinking about ethnic stereotypes. I had not realised how much I would stand out as a member of a racial minority on campus, and indeed in the city.

Dublin is not as cosmopolitan as London or New York; while there are a few pockets of ethnic minorities here, the vast majority of the populace belong to the white Irish Catholic community. Residents, even in the city centre, may not be used to foreigners.

At the airport, for example, the first question security personnel asked was whether I could speak English, followed by questions about where I was from.

This isn't to say that the Irish are in any way xenophobic. Almost all of the Irish people I've met have been nothing but friendly, courteous, and always willing to lend a helping hand.

If I stop locals to ask for directions, they often give me a long explanation of how to get to my destination. If I bump into commuters on the bus, they say "sorry" at once. And if I'm entering a building and I hold the door open for the person behind me, he or she never fails to thank me with a genuine smile.

I'm not sure if young Singaporeans would behave as well!

Nevertheless, I'm always conscious of being an outsider in Irish society. Whether it's not getting the joke when Irish friends make a pun based on the Irish Gaelic language, or being pointed out in class when lecturers talk about international students, there's a slight unease involved in knowing that, simply put, I don't belong.

This sense of foreignness isn't a big deal, given that I'm merely a temporary resident in the city, but what about those who live their entire lives as ethnic, linguistic or political minorities anywhere in the world? Some tough questions can be asked of ourselves in Singapore.

How many times have ethnic Chinese Singaporean young people spoken in Mandarin without considering the presence of Malay or Indian friends?

Or what about our treatment of non-citizens – do we extend to them not just the same degree of respect and courtesy that all people deserve, but also acceptance, so that they do not feel set apart?

Members of a majority rarely know what it's like to be on the other side of the fence; I am now finding that out during my stay in Dublin. Perhaps it would do young Singaporeans a world of good if they had the opportunity to be stopped by a tall Irish boy, asking them if they knew karate.

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