

The land of 1,000 welcomes?

Dermot Sreenan

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Prior to the World Cup, supporters of the Irish football team were supplied with brochures which they were meant to pass on to people when they got to the States. This was a drive by Board Failte (Tourist Board) to encourage more tourism from America.

For years Ireland has been portrayed as an unspoiled island with a beautiful coast, mountains and lakes. The hospitality of the people is renowned but sadly it is not reflected in the state's current immigration policy. If you end up in Ireland looking for more than a holiday you'll quickly find out how the Irish State operates. People who have sought political asylum in Ireland have met with little joy.

In 1990 a Chinese Student, Ji Yao Lau arrived in Ireland seeking political asylum. He quickly ended up in Mountjoy Jail. This man was fleeing the Chinese authorities after the Tienanmen Square Massacre in Beijing. He was ruled ineligible for bail as he had committed no offence! He wasn't released for six months. This is not the kind of hospitality one reads about in the tourist guides. Eventually he left for another country where his case for asylum might get a sympathetic hearing. This case is not an isolated one.

The Nationality & Citizenship Act of 1986 lays down a number of situations in which the Minister for Justice can exercise discretion and waive normal rules. This discretionary power also covers the granting or more likely the refusal of citizenship to refugees. Although the present Minister for Justice, Maire Geoghean Quinn, denies allegations of racism in the policy, the facts would seem to speak for themselves.

On the 1991 figures, of the 9,400 people granted Irish Citizenship not one of them was from either Africa or Asia. When a person is refused citizenship they are not even given a reason or informed on what grounds they have been refused. The whole operation is shrouded in the excuse of "national security".

However the Government is prepared to set out its stall to the world of commerce with catchy slogans like "passport for sale/investment". The rules surrounding Citizenship of Ireland and its availability appear to change according to your bank balance. The Government recently was embarrassed by the revealing of its 'Citizenship for Investment Scheme'. The basic outline is that if you are a businessperson and are prepared to invest a cool £1 million in Ireland then you can apply and receive your Irish Passport in the post.

According to a consultancy firm which advises the wealthy about applications for Irish Citizenship "An investor of Chinese origin or from the Sub-continent is not acceptable. An investor

of Middle East origins might be acceptable provided he/she was already legally resident in a developed country.” It is hardly surprising to see that the racism remains no matter how big the bank balance.

The rules are written and rewritten by the ruling class to suit their needs. Investment in a faltering economy suits them but not giving refuge to people who are fleeing their own governments. The rulers have to get on with the business of ruling and people do not appear high on the priority list. It is ironic that in a country which has forced millions of its people abroad to seek work that we cannot grant the right to stay in our land to all those who seek it. Anarchists say refuge should be a basic human right. Therefore it should be granted to those who seek it.

It is now very clear that Ireland is the ‘island of a thousand welcomes’ only if you have a million pounds. That’s a fairly high price per welcome wherever you come from.

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