

THE Wife and I just returned from speaking at a forum on Singapore issues organised by Singaporean undergraduates at Brown University in Rhode Island.

I was initially concerned that the Brown forum would be a rerun of a similar event I'd been invited to speak at in Oxford several weeks ago.

'Wah lau,' I told the Wife. 'I hope we're not being pigeonholed as the acceptable face of dissent. If these kids want to hear real, serious debate, why don't they invite opposition politicians instead of clowns like us?'

As it turns out, the Brown kids did invite a real opposition politician, a heavyweight at that: Francis Seow, the former solicitor-general.

However, instead of feeling relief at being taken off the hook, I was disturbed when the organisers told us on arrival that not a single member of the establishment whom they'd invited would be turning up.

'Die, like that, ISD file sure very thick,' I told the Wife, who comforted me by saying, 'Aiyah, neh'mine. At least you'll no longer be the guy the kids' parents warned them about - at least not next to the guy our parents warned us about.'

Although we did spot a civil servant sitting incognito in the audience, the entire proceedings turned out to be less controversial than we'd feared.

Mr Seow did his thing, which, while tartly entertaining, didn't really contain any new information that one couldn't already find on the Net if one truly wanted.

In fact, Prof Chin Woon Ping, a former Singapore academic who now teaches at Dartmouth University, and the performer of Singapore's first ever R-rated play, *Details Cannot Body Wants*, was probably the edgiest of us all.

She combined her lecture on post-colonial theory and cultural hegemony with a video clip of a theatre performance in which she gradually strips down to her undies.

And the audience were certainly critical enough of all the panelists, us included, not to be considered passive receptacles. As with the Oxford forum, it was a heartening experience.

I was actually very impressed by the Brown kids - not just for the size of their cojones in inviting Mr Seow, but also for being the perfect hosts.

First of all, the event was open to everyone, not just Singaporeans, and without requiring any pre-registration of attendees.

And when the audience turnout was much larger than expected, having attracted Singaporean undergrads from other universities in the Northeast, they discussed buying extra food with their own money. (When they found they were short, their very touching response was, 'We all just don't eat lor'.)

They even opened their own dorm rooms to those who had no place to crash. As we Hokkiens would say, they knew how to 'cho lang' (be people).

I especially appreciated their opening their dinner event to everyone, and making it an informal buffet rather than some stuffy, stage-managed do.

This way, we panelists could really get to interact with the students.

With many of these forums, the information flow tends to be one-way: The kids pose questions and the panelists answer, and then everyone goes his separate way.

But really, we have a lot to learn from the participants too. We are merely repositories of our own experience, and hearing others' accounts enriches everybody's knowledge.

And so over curry and wine, the panelists mingled with the students, and got to know each other as people, not viewpoints.

In fact, politics rarely strayed into the various discussions. The panelists each entertained their own little circles and ours invariably drifted, as usually happens when young people get together, to the hallowed topic of BGR (boy-girl relationships).

We talked into the night of bad dates, what each sex looks for in the other, weird school uniform rules, whether it was biologically possible for men to breastfeed, what purpose male nipples serve, which school had the most 'sio' (hot) students, and why RGS girls always cheer at sports meets with very low, almost masculine voices (the subject of my next column, wait for it).

The kids became real people, not a demographic to be shaped or anguished over, or an audience to be cajoled.

The delightfulness of the evening, and the confidence, courage and comfort displayed by the kids, has reinforced my belief that we should jettison our silly obsession with putting artificial barriers between each other; whether it be a lectern or labels such as cosmopolitan/heartlander or elite/masses.

Forums and formality are inferior channels for exchange to food and a little friendliness.