

Let's not be beastly about Aaronovitch

By Michael Rosen

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I'm writing to you today on behalf of SOTWOI (ELS). The initials stand for Supporters Of The War On Iraq (Ex-Lefties Section), a group with some very prominent members. You'll remember that John Reid was once in the Communist Party, Christopher Hitchens and Stephen Byers used to describe themselves as International Socialists and David Aaronovitch is used to describing himself.

I wonder if you could spare a thought this week for these people as they struggle with their present difficulties. You'll remember that they made enormous sacrifices to help all those waverers out there who wondered if sending British troops into Iraq was a good idea. Aaronovitch had to cope with being paid several hundred pounds a week to tell us in his Guardian column that as a result of his support for the war, some of his best friends had stopped talking to him.

Christopher Hitchens had to go on TV and accept appearance fees over and over again to explain why he supported the invasion. John Reid even had to be a cabinet minister.

But now, with one or two items of news that are just that teeny bit tricky, these brave people are up against it. Not that they haven't been there before. You'll remember how they warned us that Saddam Hussein and his underlings could at any moment bomb our neighbourhoods and eat our babies.

This was because his pockets were stuffed full of WMDs which, because he had stopped being our pet Arab, he would let off at the drop of a hat. That was why, to counter that, we had to let our WMDs off at the drop of a hat instead.

Now, you know very well that when they dug Saddam out of that hole in the ground that was a disappointment for SOTWOI (ELS) as he didn't have anything in his pockets.

Can you imagine the pain this has put these people through? The shame, the ridicule, the ex best friends of Aaronovitch now wanting to talk to him again so that they could laugh at him? No matter, they've toughed it out. See how quick-footed they were to come up with plan B.

This states, "It was never really about WMDs. It was about something more fundamental

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– it was about niceness.” Basically, it's this: “We're nice and the Arabs aren't. By killing Iraqis, we make Arabs nicer.” Now, even this position has been hard for SOTWOI (ELS) to hold on to. It's been tough for them.

What worries them is, if we're the ones supposed to be bringing niceness, then what are we doing being horrid to Iraqi prisoners? Aaronovitch was very brave, I thought, pointing out in the Observer this week that the Iraqis should just get on and be glad that we're nowhere near as horrid as Saddam.

So there's something to cheer up the ungrateful ones being imprisoned, beaten up and killed. But think how difficult it's been for people like him to forget how British armies, police forces and prison guards have been killing, torturing and beating up prisoners for hundreds of years.

Think how hard it's been for them to forget the video footage of British bobbies not noticing a man dying on the floor of their police station, the death of Joy Gardner, or the shoot-to-kill policy in Northern Ireland.

So please remember the people of SOTWOI (ELS), especially as it looks as if they've got another hard time ahead: trying to figure out whether “Saddam loyalists” are fanatics, thugs, bandits, gangsters, fundamentalists and murderers or ideal leadership material in the “new Iraq”.

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