UK Prime Minister Cameron attacks “culturally rewarding” cinema

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David Cameron’s comments last week on funding the British film industry exposed the venal philistinism of the social layer he represents.

Looking to the “incredible success of recent years,” he called for lottery funding to be directed towards more “commercially successful pictures which rival the quality and impact of the best international productions” rather than what he described as “culturally rewarding” films. He called for the British film industry to become more “dynamic and entrepreneurial” and a global brand.

British films are publicly funded through the distribution of money raised from the National Lottery. Until last year, the body responsible for this was the UK Film Council, created by Chris Smith in 2000 when he was Labour’s culture secretary. But late in 2009, Labour was already floating plans to merge some of the Film Council’s functions with the British Film Institute (BFI). The coalition simply scrapped the Film Council altogether in 2010 and transferred its funding responsibilities to the BFI.

Cameron made his comments ahead of a trip to Pinewood studios. After noting the “incalculable contribution to our culture” of British cinema, he said, “In 2012, when we set out bold ambitions for the future, when the eyes of the world will be on us, I think we should aim even higher, building on the incredible success of recent years”.

Cameron was talking in terms of blockbusters that could compete with big films coming out of Hollywood, but critics noted that some smaller-budget British features had done relatively well commercially. Director Ken Loach said, “If everybody knew what would be successful before it was made, there would be no problem”.

Chris Smith, now Lord Smith, has been chairing the film policy committee looking at financial aspects of the British film industry. It has been examining again questions of film funding and the dispersal of lottery funds. Cameron’s comments were widely seen as a curtain raiser to publication of the committee’s report. Many commentators have since expressed relief that the report’s findings were not quite as crass as Cameron’s remarks, but they operated within the same ideological framework.

When Smith unveiled his report on Monday, he too stated that it would not be possible to fund only hits, since commercial success cannot be safely predicted. Attempting to distinguish the committee’s position from Cameron’s blunt philistinism, he said its report “advocated support for the widest possible type of films, from the commercial to the arty.”

However, the committee has merely served up only a rather more sophisticated version of Cameron’s arguments, aiming to reduce the British film industry’s “overall dependence on public funding” and introduce financial incentives for commercial success. Producers of commercially successful films will not be expected to return the lottery money they received but will be able to reinvest it in future projects. “The principle of rewarding success is important,” said Smith, because “if [filmmakers] have done it once, they’re likely to do it again.”

Cameron’s comments were aimed squarely at what Loach has called a “monopoly of the multiplexes [showing] a very narrow range of films”. There is no longer, Loach noted, any broad network of independent cinemas. This creates additional problems in getting a

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film distributed on completion, a problem that has bedevilled British filmmakers in the recent period.

Smith's report discusses wider access to cinema, but he sees this as coming, in part, from support for film clubs and community centre screening facilities. Outside of this voluntary support network, Smith is recommending financial incentives to encourage collaboration between producers and distributors right from the start of a film's funding. The report was welcomed by the Film Distributors' Association.

Cameron's aspiration to compete with "the best international productions" also reveals the cultural impact he envisages for cinema. As his discrediting of the "culturally rewarding" makes plain, he sees filmmaking solely as a commercial activity. Art and culture are only cash assets.

Alongside the Hollywood blockbusters, Cameron can appeal to an ideologically charged spate of films that provide a nostalgic and airbrushed view of recent British history. Films like *The Queen*, *The King's Speech* and *The Iron Lady* have all been marked by a superficiality and glibness on historical and social questions in order to express sympathy with the British ruling class.

The trend has also been apparent in British television, where politics from the 1950s onwards have been mostly subjected to vapid costume drama treatment. There is a connection, as the BBC and Channel 4 are both significant contributors to British film funding. Smith's report sought to attract similar contributions from Sky and ITV.

Cameron identifies such social content with commercial success. *The King's Speech* was the highest grossing independent British film of all time, recouping some £250 million globally on a budget of £9 million. In press discussions of Cameron's comments, by contrast, the works of Mike Leigh have been consistently represented as non-commercial.

It is clear what type of films Cameron wants to see being made.

His remarks are part of an ongoing attack on cultural life in Britain, taking place in part through cutting funding and destroying existing organisational bodies. There is an irony here. The now-defunct Film Council funded some of the films—like *The King's Speech*—that have provided the model for Cameron's future of the British cinema.

This slashing assault on the arts comes at a time when artists are being forced to confront the complex realities of a world in crisis. In its final phase, the Film Council also funded films that tried to reflect something of the complexities of the world at large: Paddy Considine's *Tyrannosaur*, Lynne Ramsay's adaptation of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* and Steve McQueen's *Hunger*, among others.

Such a pattern of funding seems unlikely to last, given Cameron's comments. Smith's report, while insisting that cinema is an art form and that the government should not dictate which films the BFI funds, still spoke of the need to "bear the audience in mind". The report also advocates "market testing where appropriate"—adjusting unfinished films in line with test screenings.

This is a move away from Loach's suggested model, whereby funding "a lot of different, varied projects…some will be successful, some will be original, some will be creative, and you will get a very vibrant industry".

As one independent filmmaker told Channel 4, Cameron's comments, "just steamroll over the whole gamut of creativity and variety".

Filmmakers face growing difficulties in making films. It is harder and harder to secure funding of any kind. The BFI reports that film budgets have been falling steadily. The median film budget for a British film in 2010 was £1.2 million, compared with £2.9 million in 2003. The number of films made in Britain in 2010 was at its lowest level since 2003. Only 79 films were made in Britain in 2010, down from 87 the year before.

Under these conditions, the striving to engage with the realities of social conditions in some way and to express these artistically is both harder to achieve and more necessary than ever before.

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