

Belgian prime minister smears filmmaker Ken Loach as “anti-Semitic”

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4 May 2018

Belgian premier Charles Michel calling British film director Ken Loach anti-Semitic is a vile slander.

The pro-austerity premier’s slur demonstrates how baseless charges of anti-Semitism are being used to attack any form of social protest or comment. Loach, one of the most celebrated directors in Europe, has been targeted as both an artist and a political figure.

The controversy arose after the Free University of Brussels (ULB) decided to award 81-year old director Loach an honorary doctorate. At a meeting at Belgium’s Grand Synagogue marking the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the State of Israel, Michel, who studied law at ULB, stated, “Our firmness must be total. No accommodation with anti-Semitism can be tolerated, whatever the form. That goes also for my alma mater.”

That Michel’s remark referred to Loach was confirmed by a statement from his office after the event to the paper *De Standaard*: “Michel’s statement may be read as a rejection of the honorary doctorate. The prime minister has studied the file and is of the opinion that the man has recently made controversial statements that justify the withdrawal of that honorary doctorate.”

The statement from Michel’s office sought to sidestep the evident act of censorship implied in the prime minister’s comment: “Obviously, the prime minister does not have to deal with academic freedom, the university does not need the permission of the prime minister in any way, but he does give his opinion. At the moment it does not seem appropriate to him to honour such a person.”

Loach, noting Michel’s law degree, urged the prime minister to assess the evidence and withdraw his statement. He asked whether Michel had considered the “many examples of Israel’s failure to respect international law.”

ULB reported that it had investigated the complaints and stood by the award. ULB Chancellor Yvon Englert said, “There is no anti-Semitism or revisionism for which to reproach Ken Loach.”

ULB restated that its award for the director reflected his “militant” films about social issues and the fight of workers and immigrants. Loach has twice won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes film festival.

The alleged anti-Semitism of Loach’s “controversial statements,” although not spelled out by Michel or his office, refers to his criticisms of the Israeli government, his longstanding defence of the Palestinians, and his recent call to “kick out” Blairite MPs who had used a demonstration against alleged anti-Semitism within the Labour Party as an opportunity to attack its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and his supporters.

The Jewish Socialists’ Group have written of the Labour Party that “a very small number of cases seem to be real instances of antisemitism.” But this unrepresentative phenomenon has been seized on as a pretext to attack the left.

Loach stands as a prime example of someone who has never been associated with anti-Semitism in any form. That he is being targeted is a grotesque confirmation of the right-wing character of the campaign.

Loach is 81 years old and has been a prominent artistic and political figure since the mid-1960s. He has never hidden his criticisms of Israel, or his defence of the Palestinians. It is this which has now been reframed in this disgusting slander.

Moshe Kantor, President of the European Jewish Congress, went further than Michel’s vague smear. He said ULB’s doctorate “can only be seen as an endorsement of someone who has played fast and loose with the historical record to the point of trivialising the Holocaust.”

Loach's offence was in fact to have appealed to historical record. In September a BBC reporter asked him about a Labour Party fringe meeting, which he had not attended, where the Holocaust was discussed. In his reply, Loach noted how the charges of anti-Semitism had escalated as a weapon against the Corbyn leadership, saying, "History is for all of us to discuss. All history is our common heritage to discuss and analyse. The founding of the State of Israel, for example, based on ethnic cleansing, is there for us to discuss... So don't try to subvert that by false stories of anti-Semitism."

The case against Loach has been constructed by manipulating quotations like this to suggest that he was approving of historical revisionism and Holocaust denial. Replying to a scurrilous attack by Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian*, Loach wrote that his remarks had been "twisted to suggest that I think it is acceptable to question the reality of the Holocaust. I do not. The Holocaust is as real a historical event as the World War itself and not to be challenged... I know the history of Holocaust denial, its place in far-right politics... To imply that I would have anything in common with them is contemptible. The consequences of such a smear are obvious to all: let the poison escape and it will be picked up on social media and reputations may be tarnished for ever. A brief phone call would have clarified my position."

In an angry press release responding to Michel, Loach noted that the *Guardian's* "malicious and unprincipled" decision not to publish his response in full had indeed allowed the poison "to spread unchallenged."

He reiterated his condemnation of any form of Holocaust denial, saying "all my life, I have sided with those who are persecuted and marginalized and depicting me as anti-Semitic simply because I am adding my voice to those who denounce the plight of the Palestinians is grotesque."

As he commented acerbically, "Those who try to smear me in this way know that I have always fought all racism, including antisemitism. I doubt everyone can say the same."

When a group of Blairite MPs used the Board of Deputies of British Jews' "Enough Is Enough" protest against alleged anti-Semitism in Labour to attack Corbyn's leadership, Loach called for them to be kicked out of the party. The *Jewish Chronicle* presented

this as Loach demanding MPs be expelled for demonstrating against anti-Semitism.

Loach's comments are rather different. "Unless we get Labour MPs who believe in that manifesto last year," he told a rally, "we [Labour] won't get in power."

His appeal was for loyalty to Labour: "If they've been going to the demonstration against [Corbyn] outside Westminster ... those are the ones we need to kick out."

Clarifying his statements about the deselection of Labour MPs, Loach was more conciliatory. He argued that reselection "should not be based on individual incidents... candidates should be selected for every election" and that "party members should be able to make a democratic choice."

As we have noted recently, Corbyn's supine response to the fraudulent anti-Semitism campaign "is again facilitating an attack by the right wing. And their appetite for political bloodletting is only whetted by his prostration."



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