

Ken Loach responds angrily to Belgian PM in antisemitism row

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British film director asks if Charles Michel had examined the evidence before accusing him of anti-Jewish comments.

Ken Loach has responded with fury at a hastily convened press conference to a suggestion by the Belgian prime minister that a leading university was wrong to honour him following complaints that it had overlooked allegations of antisemitism.

An hour before the 81-year-old British director received his honorary degree from the free university of Brussels (ULB) on Thursday, he told reporters he could not allow Charles Michel's comments to go unanswered.

Loach said he was shocked to have to make a statement, adding that he understood that Michel, Belgium's PM since 2011, had read law at the ULB.

"Is the law so badly taught here? Or did he not pass his exam?" Loach said. "A good lawyer must examine the evidence before coming to a conclusion. Mr Michel, look at the evidence."

On the previous evening, during a speech at Brussels Grand Synagogue to mark the 70th anniversary of Israel's foundation, Michel had surprised his audience by commenting on the row over Loach's planned honour, which local Jewish organisations have been lobbying to have withdrawn in recent weeks.

Michel told his audience: "No accommodation with antisemitism can be tolerated, whatever its form. And that also goes for my own alma mater."

A spokesman for the prime minister's office later told the Belgian newspaper *De Standaard*: "Michel's statement may be read as a rejection of the honorary doctorate. The prime minister has studied the file and believes that [Loach] has recently made controversial statements that justify the withdrawal of that honorary doctorate.

"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 has faced heavy criticism in recent weeks over claims he has given cover to antisemitic views. He has had to defend himself from claims that he failed to condemn Holocaust denial during an interview with the BBC.

The celebrated director, whose works include *Cathy Come Home* and *I, Daniel Blake*, has been further criticised for his calls for the expulsion of Labour MPs who took part in a recent protest in Westminster against antisemitism in the party. Loach claimed that those involved had been seeking

to undermine their leader, Jeremy Corbyn.

Speaking at the ULB's Solbusch campus, Loach said: "I noticed that Charles Michel made this outing at a meeting celebrating the 70th anniversary of Israel.

"Mr Michel is a lawyer, did he wonder about Israel's failure to comply with international law? Has he asked the question of colonisation of the Palestinian territories? Has he asked the question of unarmed Palestinian civilians killed by the Israeli army? Has he asked the question of refugees living under the protection of the United Nations? There are so many examples of Israel's failure to respect international law."

Such have the protests been against Loach's award that the ULB's rector, Yvon Englert, had sought a statement from Loach earlier in the week.

In his subsequent statement, Loach described the attacks against him as malicious. "To portray myself as antisemitic simply because I add my voice to those who denounce the plight of Palestinians is grotesque," he said.

Englert said in response that he was satisfied there was no evidence of any antisemitism, despite the concerns voiced by five Jewish organisations who claimed the Palme d'Or winner had illustrated both an "obsessive hatred of Israel" and voiced "more than doubtful statements" about the Holocaust.

Englert said: "The ULB does not flirt with antisemitism. There is no antisemitism or Holocaust denial by Ken Loach. To remove from him the title of doctor honoris causa would have been paradoxical."

In a BBC interview at the end of September last year, Loach was asked if Holocaust denial, as had reportedly occurred at a fringe Labour party conference that week, was acceptable.

Loach responded: "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 antisemitism."

He later claimed that his comments had been twisted and that his answer and the question had overlapped. "Exaggerated or false charges of antisemitism have coincided with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader," Loach wrote.

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P.S.

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