

Tax exile Depardieu defends stance

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Gérard Depardieu, one of France's best-known actors, has chastised his country's Socialist prime minister for insulting remarks over his decision to move to tax-friendly Belgium and said that he's turning in his passport.

A letter, which the weekly *Le Journal du Dimanche* said was penned by Depardieu, quickly propelled him into the spotlight, not for his acclaimed acting skills but for raising the sensitive issue of tax exiles as France looks to fill state coffers with a stiff tax on the rich.

"We no longer have the same country. I'm a true European, a citizen of the world," Depardieu wrote in the open letter. He said his 2012 tax bill - 85 per cent of his revenue - is fully paid.

Depardieu, who turns 64 this month, said he has worked since the age of 14, first as a printer, and that in the last 45 years he has paid €145 million in taxes.

"I hand over my passport to you and my social security card, which I have never used," the letter said, referring to prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault.

Last week, Mr Ayrault called Depardieu "pathetic" and "unpatriotic" for the actor's decision to move to Nechin, a Belgian village barely a mile across the border from Lille in northern France. Nechin has drawn other high-earning French residents.

The letter drew quick reaction but little sympathy.

Culture minister Aurelie Filippetti said she was "scandalised" by Depardieu's decision to turn in his passport. "French citizenship, it's an honour," she said on BFM-TV. "It is rights and duties, too, among them to be able to pay taxes."

President Francois Hollande plans to levy a 75 per cent tax on revenue over €1 million to reduce France's budget deficit and debt. "Gérard Depardieu is deserting the battle in the war against the crisis," Ms Filippetti said.

David Assouline, a spokesman for the governing Socialist Party, said of the actor: "He's playing his worst role."

But Depardieu said in the letter that he is leaving his country because the government "considers that success, creation, talent ... should be sanctioned."

Others have crossed the border before Depardieu, notably the man billed as France's richest, Bernard Arnault, chief of the luxury goods and fashion giant LVMH and worth an estimated €41 billion. He is seeking Belgian citizenship.

Depardieu he has made more than 150 films and is internationally acclaimed, including an Academy Award nomination for his portrayal of Cyrano de Bergerac in the 1990 film by the same name.

In an upcoming film to be directed by Abel Ferrara, Depardieu will portray former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who fell from power on claims by a New York hotel maid of sexual assault. Charges were dropped and a civil settlement was reached.

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