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MUSEUM DEBATE ASKS SHOULD WE APOLOGISE FOR THE PAST?

Next week, leading speakers in history, politics and ethics will join a live debate at the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum in Bristol to argue whether it is right to apologise for the actions of the past. Open to the public as part of the region's *Festival of Ideas*, the keynote event will take place on 10th May 2006 at 7pm.

Professor A C Grayling will chair the debate, addressing the controversial issues arising from major historical events such as slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust and war crimes. The audience will be invited to put their questions and opinions to the panel, and to vote in a special poll on the issue of whether Bristol should formally apologise for its role in the transatlantic slave trade, as Liverpool City Council did unreservedly in 1999.

The panel includes speakers from a range of arts, media and academic backgrounds:

- Chair: Professor A C Grayling - Leading philosopher, prolific writer, academic and broadcaster
- Lord Hugh Thomas - Leading historian, author and former diplomat
- Ekow Eshun - Artistic Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
- Isabel Hilton - Broadcaster, writer, journalist and Editor of *Open Democracy*
- Richard Dowden - Director of the Royal African Society and journalist
- Professor Stephen Howe - Lecturer in History and Cultures of Colonialism at Bristol University and author of *Ireland and Empire* and *Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagined Homes*
- Toyin Agbetu - Founder of the pro-African equality body, the Ligali Organisation
- Dr Mike Phillips - Writer, producer, journalist and co-author of the book and BBC series *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*

The event falls in the wake of the recent decision of the Church of England to apologise for its role in the slave trade. Controversy over Bristol's own slave trade links has also recently been reignited in relation to suggested new names for its main shopping area and continues to cause deep divisions within the city. The issue is particularly resonant in the lead-up to next year's 200th anniversary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade. The national advisory group for the bi-centenary is being chaired by Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott.

The Museum has plans to commemorate the anniversary with a major new exhibition. Museum Director Dr Gareth Griffiths welcomes what will be the first in a year-long programme of public events that anticipate the 2007 exhibition. "We are committed to acknowledging this crucial episode in history by openly engaging in public debate about the issues surrounding the anniversary".

Advance booking for The Apology Debate is recommended. Tickets are £6 each (or £4.50 for concessions). To book call 01179 25 4980 or email bookings@empiremuseum.co.uk The debate runs from 7pm to 9pm, with doors opening at 6.00pm.

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Notes to Editor:

The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum is the only Museum in the world to present the 500 year history of the British empire and to examine the legacy of Britain's colonial history on modern, multicultural Britain. The Museum opened in September 2002 and was short-listed in 2004 for the title of 'European Museum of the Year'. Its current special exhibition 'Pow Wow', about England's Tudor attempts to colonise America, has been nominated for the 2005 Museums and Heritage Awards for Excellence.

The Festival of Ideas 2006 brings together over 70 leading writers and commentators. In 16 days of discussion and debate, writers and commentators address the question of progress, ask should we apologise for the past, examine the nature of heroism, discuss what Bristol and the region should do about Darwin 2009, assess the role of Muslims in the west and identify what makes a creative time. Leading novelists and non-fiction writers such as Margaret Atwood, Andrea Levy and Sebastian Junger talk about their new work. Visit: www.ideasfestival.co.uk for further details.

The Abolition of Slavery Exhibition 2007

Working in partnership with local community groups, the £1million exhibition is scheduled to break new ground by focusing on the legacy of the slave trade and its abolition. It is also designed to show how black and white activists alike campaigned to abolish the trade in human beings, contributing to what became the world's first major mass political movement.

The Trade and the passing of the 1807 Abolition Act has had enormous consequences for Bristol, Britain and the rest of the world:

- Between 1450 and 1850 over 10 million Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean – with another 10 million perishing in the process of capture.
- British ships carried over 3 million Africans to slavery in the Americas between 1662 and 1807.
- Over 2000 slave voyages left Bristol alone between 1698 and 1807, by which time over 60% of the city's trade was directly related to slavery.

Britain's official involvement in the transatlantic slave trade was ended in 1807 after years of protest by the Abolitionist movement.

The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum

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