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British Parliament, the Slave Trade and Public History

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From May to September 2007 the magnificent Westminster Hall (the medieval building attached to the Palace of Westminster) will host an exhibition, "The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament, and the People." The story behind the parliamentary decision to host this exhibition in a building rarely used in the past for such events, and the complex process which saw a simple idea develop into a major undertaking, throws revealing light on the British sense of history.

If the Act of 1807 was one of the most important Acts passed by Parliament, what are we to say about how those Acts, numbering one hundred at the last count, passed before 1807 assisted the slave trade? Between 1660 and 1807 there was a profusion of legislation which passed through Parliament with little dissent, and which was designed to facilitate the slave trade. How, then, should Parliament think about (and commemorate) its role, not merely as an abolitionist legislature, but as a critical institution in shaping and directing the British slave trade? 1807-2007 offers an

extraordinary opportunity not simply to revisit the slave trade and abolition, but to assess British history in a wider sense.

As the political and public momentum builds towards 2007, the commemorations of 1807 (of which Parliament's is just the most prominent) have (unconsciously) set in train important intellectual and political forces which are likely to have long term changes in British historical awareness. This presentation will address these issues.