

This past week marked the two year anniversary of former Representative Chris Bell's ethics complaint against Tom DeLay. And it is no coincidence that just a week shy of that two year mark, Mr. DeLay resigned his seat after almost 20 years in Congress and nearly a decade as Majority Leader.

Looking back, we can see that the Bell complaint has ushered in a difficult but necessary period for the House: an era of cleansing and change.

Mr. DeLay's departure is undoubtedly good for the health of our most cherished democratic institution, and the fact that ethics reform is even being discussed in Washington is a big step in the right direction.

But while we shouldn't underestimate the importance of these developments, it is important to remember that there is still much work to be done if we want to have a truly ethical Congress. The hardest work is yet to come. We are still facing an ethical crisis in the United States Congress.

None of the posturing, reforming or debating we have seen in this Congress on ethics will do anything to address the root-causes of corruption in the House: a fundamentally broken and abused legislative process.

The rules and procedures governing the House were consciously designed to maintain an open process in Congress, to set limits and provide protections for open and honest debate and to give Representatives a chance to know what they were voting on and to amend legislation where they felt appropriate.

But under Delay's stewardship they were regularly trampled with impunity. His legacy was to create a culture in Congress where influence peddling and bare-knuckled tactics were king, and not the merit of the bills being authored.

The result has been a remarkable wave of corruption unprecedented in modern history

And as a result, the list of Members entangled in Justice Department investigations seems to grow on a daily basis. And even though the now infamous House Ethics Committee is once again meeting (after being shut down by DeLay and the Republican Leadership for over a year), we have yet to see it actively engage in the task of upholding a high standard of ethics and integrity here in the House.

Instead, the current Ethics Committee seems content to let the Justice Department conduct criminal investigations into Members and remain in the background. By doing so, they are ensuring that a full two years after all this began; the only real standard for being a Member of the United States Congress is that you are not a convicted felon. I and my fellow Democrats find this wholly unacceptable.

That is why we have responded swiftly to the few incidents of corruption within our own Party, and even moved this week to expel a member from our caucus for unethical conduct. My colleagues and I have proposed tough, comprehensive ethics reform packages. And we have tirelessly fought for a rehabilitation of the House rules process and the return of the oversight provided by the Ethics Committee.

In stark contrast, House Republicans have thrown up numerous roadblocks to progress and have only passed one piece of ethics-oriented legislation since Tom DeLay left the leadership: the deceptively titled Lobbying Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006. The bill cleverly deflected blame away from Members of Congress, and tried to paint lobbyists as the source of all evil on Capitol Hill, while providing no real accountability for Congress..

I am sad to say that in his absence little has changed. That is because these tactics have become an integral part of the culture of this Congress and this leadership.

And until we see a fundamental change in the leadership and the culture of this institution, this will continue to be Tom DeLay's Congress...whether he is here or not.