

Dec 7 2005 - Slaughter Demands Ethics Accountability in the House

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The Time for Reform is Now

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, called on fellow Members to recognize and take action to rectify the collapse of ethical conduct in the House. She chose to speak on this topic this morning because today's vote on an amendment to the 1978 Ethics in Government Act is the last time the House will address the subject of ethics this year.

There has not been a functioning ethics committee since the Republican majority initially attempted to eliminate its power. When they could not do that, they fired the qualified investigative staff and tried to deliberately politicize the Committee. While the Republicans were shamed into retreat on their ethics assault, the House has not had a working Ethics Committee all year. Only recently have Democrats been able to forge an agreement which could restart the Ethics Process in 2006.

Excerpts from Rep. Slaughter's remarks:

"The ethical conduct of Members of this body is on the minds of those in whose interest we claim to act - the American people. They are demanding that action be taken, and it is on their behalf that I speak now."

"Corruption scandals have mounted. Indictments and resignations have dominated the headlines. Member after Member of this body has been shown to have committed their votes not to the public interest, but to the special interests of those who seek the benefit of the few at the expense of the many."

"We still have no working ethics committee...We still have no ethics reform....after 12 months of scandal and deception, we have only silence."

"I say enough is enough. The time for accountability is now. The time for real reform is now. The time for change is now. Surely, America can do better than this."

Rep. Slaughter's Entire Remarks as Prepared:

M. Speaker,

This is a critically important piece of legislation that everyone in this House should support without reservation.

H.R. 4311, which amends the 1978 Ethics in Government Act, will make permanent an expiring provision which protects the safety of our nation's judges as well as the integrity of our judicial system.

I know that everyone here remembers the horrifying murders of a Chicago judge's family members this past summer. These crimes were committed by an individual who was angered by a ruling on his case. He went to his judge's home to confront her, and while there, shot her husband and mother in cold blood.

This bill before us will allow judges who have been threatened to withhold certain personal information from the public record - information, such as their home address, that has been used in the past for the most tragic of ends.

I want to emphasize that I strongly support this bill, and I commend the Chairman of the Judiciary Committee for bringing

it to the Floor today.

No one here wishes to avoid our responsibility to protect those men and women who form the bedrock of our legal system. Nor do any of us desire to in any way detract from the significance of this bill.

But M. Speaker, my conscience compels me to pause here and remind my friends on the other side of the aisle that we are discussing a reform to the Ethics in Government Act, a vitally important piece of legislation which, when it was passed, confirmed our national commitment to the creation and preservation of a government as good and as ethical as the people it serves.

I therefore cannot let this moment pass without speaking of what has become a standing source of shame for this body and for this nation: the collapse of ethical conduct within our House.

My friends, I have no choice but to speak of this topic here and now because this is the last time the House will address the subject of ethics this year. Ethics reform hasn't made the Republican Leadership's December agenda, just like it hasn't made the cut all year long.

But the ethical conduct of Members of this body is on the minds of those in whose interest we claim to act - the American people. They are demanding that action be taken, and it is on their behalf that I speak now.

The bill we will hopefully approve today is an example of the kind of legislation we should be passing here. It puts the well-being of the American people first. But the Majority ushered in this year by putting itself first, gutting the ethical standards imposed on Members of this body so that they could more easily take advantage of the people's trust and get away with it.

With a little time and distance, it is now painfully obvious to the American people why this Republican Leadership went to such great lengths to roll back the ethics rules of their conference, and of this House.

A prolonged and impassioned public outcry forced the Majority to abandon this blatant assault on ethics several months later, but the battle was far from over.

Even though the Republicans were shamed into retreat on their ethics assault, we haven't had a working Ethics Committee in the House all year. And we still don't today.

As you may recall, the Majority initially attempted to eliminate its power, and when it couldn't do that, it fired the qualified investigative staff and tried to deliberately politicize the Committee...and we have not had a working Ethics process since.

Only recently have Democrats been able to forge an agreement which could restart the Ethics Process this coming year, and for both his principled stand in defense of the rules of this body, and for his patience and commitment to restoring an ethics process in this House, the Ranking Member of the Ethics Committee deserves great praise.

But the real question still lingers.... what was the Majority hiding? Well, despite their best efforts, the truth has come forth, and every day seems to bring a new revelation which demonstrates the extent to which Republicans have abused their power.

Corruption scandals have mounted. Indictments and resignations have dominated the headlines. Member after Member of this body has been shown to have committed their votes not to the public interest, but to special interests...those who seek the benefit of the few at the expense of the many.

Critical decisions at federal agencies are being unethically manipulated by White House political operatives and the results of these decisions are having direct impact on the people of this nation.

Make no mistake about it...this White House, and this leadership have placed America up for Sale to the highest bidder, and it is the American people that are paying the price, while corrupt politicians and special interests reap the profits.

The citizens of this nation have watched it all...stunned, disillusioned, and increasingly angry:

- The Majority Leader of this House repeatedly admonished on ethical violations and now indicted for money laundering.

- A member resigning in shame and pleading guilty to bribery.

- New investigations by the Justice Department threatening to embroil many more of our colleagues in the growing stench of corruption surrounding Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

And as the public trust is battered and broken and potential ethics investigations pile up, the Ethics Committee Chairman, who fired an experienced investigative staff and supported changing the rules...He announces that he won't conduct additional investigations into serious allegations of corruption in this House by certain members...because we don't have the money.

Apparently, we cannot afford a real ethics process in this government- only more tax cuts for the rich.

From this Majority's Leadership, there has been no leadership.

The startling truth is that it has been almost 12 months since we have had a functioning ethics process in this House.

We still have no working ethics committee...We still have no ethics reform....after 12 months of scandal and deception, we have only silence.

This has become our national shame.

Well, I say....Enough is enough.

The time for accountability is now. The time for real reform is now. The time for change is now.

Surely M. Speaker, America can do better than this.