

March 1 2006 - Major Rules/Congressional Ethics Press Conference:

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Democrats Announce Rules Reform Package on Eve of First Ethics Reform Rules Hearings

Rep. Slaughter Touts Reforms as Means of Stamping out Corruption

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today joined her fellow Democratic Rules Committee members at a major press conference announcing a critical House Rules reform package designed to eliminate many of the most damaging and unethical abuses now commonplace in Congress.

The Democrats announced their reform proposal on the eve of the first and only serious hearings on ethics in the House to take place before the full Rules Committee in the 109th Congress. The reforms are designed to increase accountability, transparency and fiscal responsibility into a broken legislative process.

The reforms are aimed to force accountability and transparency into the areas of the legislative process where the Republican leadership most often violates the rules and employs corrupt tactics. The reform proposal, together with the Democrats Honest Leadership and Open Government Act, constitute the only serious, sweeping reform packages that have been filed to date which address the rampant Republican culture of corruption crippling Congress. To date, no serious reform package has been put forward by the Republican leadership.

This common sense reform package will crackdown on sneaky backroom legislating, require votes on last minute changes to legislation, allow members to actually read the bills they are voting on, crackdown on arm twisting and influence peddling on the House floor, end conflict of interest job negotiations, impose fiscal accountability on the process, and require the leadership to consider ideas from both sides of the aisle when debating legislation.

At the conference, Rep. Slaughter also discussed her new report, *America for Sale: The Cost of Republican Corruption*, the most comprehensive account to date of the ways in which the democratic process and the public good have been undermined by corrupt Republican legislators, and the impact that corruption has had on the American people (available at www.louise.house.gov)

Rep. Slaughter's comments at the event, as prepared as well as a summary of the Democratic rules reform package can be found below:

Thanks for coming out today.

I always tell people that they can forget what they learned in school about how a bill becomes a law - in today's Washington, it just doesn't happen that way any more.

Unfortunately, people aren't aware of the inner workings of our government.

And yet, nothing impacts the lives of Americans more than the integrity of our political process.

It is the unseen force that protects the values of our society, levels the playing field, and ensures the rights of our citizens.

It defines our democracy itself.

But this Republican Leadership has tossed out the rules written by Thomas Jefferson under which we have operated for two hundred years.

They tossed it out in favor of strong arm tactics, lobbyist written legislation, chronic abuses of the rules, and a win at all costs mentality.

The result has been a devastating wave of corruption that has crippled Washington.

And the costs to the American people have been immense.

Just last week, I released a report documenting how much every single American has been hurt by the systemic corruption of our Republican Congress.

That report is called America for Sale, because that's where we are today: our nation has been put up for sale to the highest bidder.

It is critical to understand that the problems in the people's House go far beyond the well publicized acts of individual corruption we have heard about.

The rules of our Congress, of our democratic political process, have been abandoned by the Majority, and we need to get them back.

Now, the Republicans will try hard to point fingers at the lobbyists, but we all know that the lobbyists are just symptom.

The disease is right here in the capitol.

It is important to remember that as bad as some lobbyists may be - they can only be as corrupt as this Republican Leadership allows them to be.

That is why this reform package that we are presenting today addresses the most egregious and most undemocratic processes which have been embraced and promoted by this Majority.

It has 14 major points in it. I'm not going to address all of them right now - my fellow Rules Committee members will speak about some of them in greater detail. But let me give you a feel for what we are talking about, and what we are determined to achieve.

These reforms are aimed to force accountability and transparency into the areas of the legislative process where the Republican leadership most often violates the rules and employs corrupt tactics.

Specifically, our common sense reform package will crackdown on sneaky backroom legislating and allow Members to strike those last minute changes and additions from the legislation.

Much of our reform package focuses on the conference process, which in recent years has become synonymous with corruption.

All too often, after bills have already been passed by the House and Senate, the Republicans sit with lobbyists and

rewrite our laws while Democrats and the American people are left waiting outside the door.

Our package will also allow members to actually read the bills they are voting on and crackdown on arm twisting and influence peddling on the House floor.

Our reforms will end conflict of interest job negotiations.

After all Members of Congress shouldn't be negotiating sweetheart job deals while they are negotiating legislation on behalf of the American people.

We are also going to impose a measure of fiscal accountability on the legislative process and make it harder to sneak through big spending bills under suspension of the rules.

In addition, our proposal will require a minimum safeguard of protection to ensure that democracy and debate are not snuffed out in the halls of congress.

We will require the leadership to consider ideas from both sides of the aisle when debating legislation- something that all

of you know very rarely happens today. In this congress alone, 85% of the rules we have are either closed or restricted.

That means that the voices of tens of millions of Americans, almost half this country, are being regularly shut out of the legislative process.

I also want to remind everyone here that we will be discussing these ideas tomorrow in the Rules Committee during a hearing on this very subject.

One year ago this month, My Democratic colleagues and I wrote to Chairman Dreier about the urgent need to hold Rules hearings on our growing ethics crisis here in Congress.

It has taken a very long time. But after a long year of scandal, it seems as though the Majority has finally buckled to overwhelming pressures and has finally agreed to have one...although they still haven't given us any significant reform legislation.

This reform proposal, together with the Democrats Honest Leadership and Open Government Act, constitute the only serious, sweeping reform packages that have been filed to date which address the rampant Republican culture of corruption crippling Congress.

And let me make one more point: these rules reforms are critical, and we need to pass them immediately.

But what we also need is for the members of this Congress to commit once and for all to follow the rules of this body.

Republicans have made a business out of suspending the rules that we already have. Now, we are shining the light on their actions.

From now on, if anyone in this body wants to break the rules, it our intention to make them have to do it with the lights on, in front of the whole country.

A summary of the Democratic rules reform package can be found below:

109th Congress Rules Reform Package Summary

H.Res. 686

-Rule Changes Affecting Conference Reports: In the 109th Congress...Conference equals Corruption

Crackdown on Sneaky Back Room Legislating:

1) Require that the rule providing for consideration of any conference report must contain an itemized list of any provisions in the conference report that are in violation of scope.

This rule could not be waived against the conference report (unless a separate rule was approved prior to the conference rule that waived the scope reporting requirement).

2) Provide that whenever a conference report has scope violations, it is in order for a Member to raise a point of order against the rule and get an automatic debate and vote to determine whether the House will consider the rule for the conference report.

This would be similar to the consideration point of order that is available in the instance of an unfunded mandate (sections 424, 425 and 426 of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974). Any Member could raise a point of order against the conference rule on a scope violation. The question would be on whether or not to consider the offending conference report. Raising the point of order would provide for an automatic 20-minutes of debate followed by a vote. A prevailing "no" vote would block consideration of the conference report. A "yes" vote would allow the conference report to go forward.

3) Add a new House rule (similar to that for unfunded mandates- Clause 11, Rule XVIII) that would make it always in

order, unless specifically prohibited in the rule, to offer a motion to strike items that are beyond the scope of a conference.

This provision would allow any House Member to offer a motion to strike any language in a conference report that violates the scope of the conference, that is, anything included in the conference report that was not contained in either the House or Senate passed versions of the bill. The motion to strike would automatically be in order unless the language in the rule specifically prevents it.

4) Whenever 3-day layover is waived against a conference report, it is in order for the Minority Leader or a designee to raise a point of order against the rule to determine whether the House will consider the conference report.

This process would also be similar to the consideration point of order that is available in the instance of an unfunded mandate (sections 424, 425 and 426 of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974). Only the Minority Leader or a designee could raise the point of order against consideration of any conference report that violates the 3-day layover requirement. The question would be on whether or not to consider the offending conference report. Raising the point of order would provide for an automatic 20 minutes of debate followed by a vote. A prevailing "no" vote would block consideration of the conference report. A "yes" vote would allow the conference report to go forward.

5) Create a new Majority/Minority leader point of order that can be raised against a conference report where the integrity of the conference is in question.

The violations would include, but not be limited to, serious scope violations; changes to the conference report after the conferees had reached a final agreement (including additions or deletions); and instances where the minority was not allowed to fully participate in the conference committee process. The point of order to consider the conference would be available to the Majority or Minority Leader if that individual, in good faith, has substantial reason to believe that the

events surrounding the conference committee meeting and/or conference report were in serious violation of House rules.

Once again, the process would mirror the point of order that is referenced in the previous provision (#2 & #4). The question would be on whether or not to consider the offending conference report. Raising the point of order against the conference rule would provide for an automatic 20 minutes of debate followed by a vote. A prevailing "no" vote would block consideration of the conference report. A "yes" vote would allow the conference report to go forward.

If You Change it, Vote on It

6) Require a roll-call vote, in an open meeting, on the final version of a conference report.

-Rules Which Implement Accountability, Transparency and Fiscal Responsibility

Allow Members to Actually Read the Bills They Pass

7) Use actual time (24-hours as opposed to one legislative day) rather than simply one legislative day to determine how soon a rule can be called up on the House Floor after it is reported from the Rules Committee.

Require that any rule providing for consideration of any measure cannot be called up for at least 24 hours after it is

reported from the Rules Committee (rather than allowing it to come up on the next legislative day). The Rules Committee has on several occasions met at 7:00 a.m. on one legislative day to report a rule that is brought to the Floor as early as 10:00 am on the same calendar, but next legislative day giving Members only three hours to read both the rule and the underlying bill before they are considered and voted on.

The Hammer Rule: Crackdown on Arm-twisting and Influence Peddling on the House Floor

8) Require, for any recorded vote that is held open beyond 30-minutes, that the Speaker publish in the Congressional Record a log of the voting activity that occurs after that 30-minute time frame.

The log would show which Members voted after that time and which Members changed their votes during that period. While this would not stop the Republican Leadership's practice of holding votes open while arm twisting members, it would provide an official record of which Members are changing their votes under such pressure. It will also show how many Members actually vote for the first time after the 30-minutes time frame.

The Tauzin Rule: End Conflict of Interest Job Negotiations

9) Prohibit any sitting Member of Congress from negotiating future employment with any organization or individual that has a direct interest in legislation referred to any committee on which that Member serves (this language is identical to language that was part of the Democratic motion to commit on the 109th Congress opening day rules package).

In the 108th Congress, at least two high ranking Republicans negotiated lucrative jobs in the very fields that were within the immediate jurisdiction of committees on which they sat.

Impose Fiscal Accountability for Taxpayer Dollars:

10) Add a new House rule that prohibits any legislation that authorizes or appropriates over \$100 million from being considered under suspension of the rules.

Under suspension of the rules, all House rules are waived, debate is limited to 40-minutes, there is no opportunity for amendment and no motion to recommit. Although suspension bills require a 2/3rds majority for passage and generally are widely supported, we believe that any measure, no matter how meritorious, that spends \$100 million of taxpayer dollars should be considered under the regular process. It is interesting to note that in previous Congresses, the Republican conference rules included this provision but it was dropped from their most recent rules.

11) Require that Members of the House vote directly on increasing the federal debt limit.

Repeal House Rule XXVII, which provides that a vote on the budget resolution provides for an automatic increase in the debt ceiling. The public debt is growing every second of every day and is all ready a staggering \$8.25 trillion. Members should be given the opportunity for a straight, up or down vote on raising the federal debt limit. Republicans howled about this provision when they were in the minority, repealed it when they first took control of the House, and then promptly reinstated it when their members wanted to avoid taking tough votes on further increasing our already escalating national debt.

The Dreier Rule: Stifling Debate Means Stifling Democracy

12) During consideration of the rule, immediately before moving the previous question, the minority will be given the ability to offer one amendment to the rule.

This rule change would allow the minority to offer a real opportunity to change the rule and not just through the previous question vote which is portrayed by the Republicans as a "procedural vote" to give cover to their members even when the potential amendment is one that they would otherwise support.

Furthermore, this language was one of the recommendations made in Final Report of the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress-December 1993, of which now Rules Chairman Dreier was the vice chairman in the 103rd Congress when he was in the minority.

Require Leadership to Consider Ideas from Both Parties

13) Require the Speaker, to the extent practicable to allow an equal number of suspension bills for minority and majority party.

Democrats represent more than 46 % of the membership of this House. They should have an equal opportunity to offer non-controversial legislation under this process.

14) Prohibit the Speaker/Chair from entertaining a unanimous consent agreement that alters a rule unless the text of the unanimous consent agreement has been available for a minimum of 24 hours.

On those rare occasions when the Rules Committee actually does report an open rule, it is unfair to change that rule unless Members are given ample notice of that change and the opportunity to object.