

March 2, 2006 - Slaughter Calls for Passage of Democratic Ethics and Rules Reforms at Ethics Hearing

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Rep. Slaughter Leads Democratic Push for Restoration of House Rules, Open Government

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, was today joined by her Democratic Colleagues in urging Republicans to consider and pass Democratic reforms to the House Rules process, in addition to a Democratic bill designed to eliminate many of the corrupt practices common in Congress.

The event marked the first time during the 109th Congress that an ethics-related hearing has taken place in a House committee. Democrats have been calling for Congressional ethics hearings since the beginning of 2005.

During her remarks, Rep. Slaughter warned the Committee against the Majority deflecting responsibility for Washington's pervasive culture of corruption solely onto lobbyists and special interest groups.

"So far, leading Republicans have chosen to focus their reform efforts only on lobbyists," she said. "But the simple truth is that lobbyists can only be as corrupt as we allow them to be. People like Jack Abramoff are just the symptom. The disease is here in this Congress."

Rep. Slaughter also advocated for reformed rules procedures in the House, and an end to the undemocratic processes Republican legislators have used to force their legislation through Congress while stifling Democratic alternatives.

"Nothing could be more important than ensuring the integrity of our political process," she said. "It is the foundation from which every law, every act, and every proclamation springs."

"When the guardians of the process in this House subvert it, they do so at the expense of our traditions and the integrity of our democracy." Rep. Slaughter said.

"While we are still waiting for any significant reform package to be proposed by the Republican majority, we do have a Democratic rules reform bill that I and my fellow Democratic members of this Committee announced yesterday," she continued.

"Our common sense reforms are designed to return accountability and transparency to the democratic process here in the House. They will crack down on the serial abuses of the conference process, which has become fertile ground for corruption."

The complete text of Rep. Slaughter's remarks at the hearing, as prepared, is included below.

BACKGROUND

The witnesses called by the Democratic members of the Committee included a number of individuals with expert knowledge of the Rules process in the House. They included: Karen Haas, the Clerk from the House of Representatives; James Bacchus of Greenberg Traurig; Fred Wertheimer of Democracy 21; Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institute; Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute; Paul Miller of the American League of Lobbyists; and James Thurber of American University.

Thus far, Democrats have authored all of the substantive ethics and rules reform bills to be considered by Congress.

On January 18th, the Democratic Leadership unveiled the Honest Government and Open Leadership Act, a bill designed to regulate the conduct of House Members and eliminate some of the most egregious ethical abuses that have been committed. The legislation bans gifts and meals from lobbyists, and strictly regulates Member travel on private jets. It also establishes a new Office of Public Integrity to help enforce these reforms.

On February 16, 2006, Rep. Slaughter and other Democratic Members of the House Rules Committee introduced H.Res. 686, a reform package to amend the rules of the House to restore transparency, accountability and oversight to the legislative process and make it more difficult for the majority party to steamroll over the rights of the minority.

Last week, in anticipation of today's Rules Committee hearing, Rep. Slaughter released a new report, "America for Sale: The Cost of Republican Corruption." The document is 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. To view the report in its entirety, [click here](#).

The complete text of Rep. Slaughter's remarks as prepared can be found below:

Good morning.

Thank you Mr. Chairman

I would also like to thank our esteemed witnesses for being here today. Their many years of public service and clear dedication to promoting higher ethical standards in government are invaluable to this nation, and I know that their expert testimony will be especially salient here today.

It is a time in the history of our Congress that troubles me greatly.

I honestly worry about what the future holds for this House and for our nation.

This has truly been an era of shame for this institution, one which has done harm to the American people.

Something is fundamentally wrong with our Congress - with the way it does business, and with the legislation it is passing.

Sadly, in the minds of our fellow Americans, the very word Congress has become synonymous with the word corruption.

More than 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson created a rules manual that has guided this House ever since.

The Jefferson manual created a process that would, if followed, ensure that reason and the pursuit of the public good would be the highest principals of this House, not the search for power and profit.

The strong arm tactics and regular abuse of House rules and traditions employed by the Majority, and the devastating legislative outcomes those acts have conspired to produce, can lead only to one conclusion:

The wise process laid down by Thomas Jefferson is under attack.

The rules have changed.

Lobbyists are now writing the bills. Jefferson's fair and open process of deliberation, the hallmark of our democracy, has been replaced by secret backroom deals, arm-twisting, and influence peddling.

In today's Congress, Committee chairmen negotiate major legislation at the same time they are negotiating sweetheart job deals with special interests.

And as the business of this government has been regularly put up for sale to the highest bidder, the Democrats have been locked out the room where the decisions are made, and as a result, millions of Americans have been shut out of their own political process.

As all of this has come into the public eye, Members of the Majority have joined long-standing Democratic calls for change and reform.

But so far, leading Republicans have chosen to focus their reform efforts only on lobbyists.

I would warn my colleagues: future steps toward reform can't just head back toward K-Street.

Because the simple truth is that lobbyists can only be as corrupt as we in this congress allow them to be.

Corrupt lobbyists like Jack Abramoff are just the symptom; the disease is here in this Congress.

And so the responsibility to change falls squarely on our shoulders.

What we need to admit is that when a lobbyist buys influence in exchange for gifts or donations, a Member of Congress allowed it to happen.

And when a lobbyist writes legislation to benefit an industry instead of ordinary people, a Member of Congress invited them into the room.

And that when the guardians of our political process allow these things to occur, they are doing it at the expense of our traditions and the integrity of the democracy they profess to serve.

Congress writes the laws of this country. Congress makes the rules that govern what Members can and can't do.

Congress decides to either punish transgressions - or allow them to pass by unnoticed.

We are calling upon you, our expert witnesses, to help us do the job correctly. I want to mention a few specific subjects that I am especially eager to ask you about during our time together.

While we are still waiting for any significant reform package to be proposed by the Republican majority, we do have a Democratic rules reform bill that I and my fellow Democratic members of this Committee announced yesterday.

Our common sense reforms are designed to return accountability and transparency to the democratic process here in the House.

They will crack down on the serial abuses of the conference process, which has become fertile ground for corruption.

We want to require conferees to vote on last minute and dead of night changes to conference reports, and to guarantee members 24 hours to actually read the bills they are voting on.

We are asking this majority to crackdown on arm twisting and influence peddling on the House floor, and end conflict of interest job negotiations.

Democrats also seek to impose fiscal accountability on the legislative process by requiring a vote to increase the debt limit.

And we want to prevent major spending bills from being passed under suspension of the rules.

I am anxious to hear what our witnesses have to say about these Democratic reforms.

If you support our efforts, I will urge my Republican colleagues to join us in passing these common-sense measures.

More than a month ago, Democrats presented the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act, HR 4682.

This is a broader bill designed to regulate the conduct of members of this body and eliminate some of the most egregious ethical abuses we have witnessed.

It will ban gifts and meals from lobbyists, and strictly regulate member travel on private jets. It will also establish a new office of public integrity to help enforce these reforms, and will shut down the infamous K-Street project.

I look forward to learning from our experts if we are on the right track. And if we are, I again urge my friends on the other side of the aisle to help pass these Democratic reforms and eliminate the disease of corruption so clearly weakening our Congress.

I also hope that our expert witnesses can add detail to our understanding of exactly how the K street-project works and explain why and how it was created in the first place, and who has benefited from it.

But more than just exploring history, we need to fully explore solutions...the solutions I have already mentioned, as well as other ideas you may have for us here today.

After all, nothing could be more important than ensuring the integrity of our political process.

It is the foundation from which every law, every act, and every proclamation springs.

It should be the strength of our ideas, and not merely the strength of our numbers, that determines which laws this body chooses to enact.

To be sure, this Congress owes the American people a better government than the one we have today.

And we had better take the steps to really reform this Congress, or risk permanently weakening the very democracy that defines us as a people.

It is my hope that we can usher in a new day here - a day in which nothing is hidden, because we have nothing to hide.

