

March 9, 2006 - Rep. Slaughter Addresses Second Rules Committee Ethics Hearing

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Travel and Gift Rules Are the Focus of the Days' Testimony

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today addressed a special Rules Committee hearing on ethics in Congress. The hearing was the second the Committee has had on the subject, and featured commentary from a distinguished panel concerning the rules that should govern gifts and Member travel.

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

Good morning.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, once again, for this second hearing.

I want to thank our panel of witnesses for being here today. They bring with them years of study and reflection on the subject of Congressional ethics, and I know that their expert testimony will help us to move this Congress forward.

I said last week that this was a time in the history of this body that troubled me greatly, that it was a time in which the words corruption and Congress had come to be one and the same in the minds of so many of the citizens we serve.

More than two centuries ago, one of our nation's greatest statesmen - Thomas Jefferson - laid out Rules for this body that promoted a political process defined not by corruption, but by reason and the pursuit of the public good.

We now know that our Congress has deviated from this wise path.

We need to find our way back.

Influential lobbyists, along with their receptive Congressional clients, have shut millions of Americans out of a political process that they were meant to control. Sadly, I feel that they have undermined democracy itself here in Congress.

And in doing so, they have abandoned the traditions and fundamental principals of this great body, and of our nation.

The results have been dire. We have seen a long series of bills that have not had the public interest in mind. They have benefited well-connected corporations and special interests, but not the men, women, and children who count on this

Congress to address their needs.

We need to usher in a new day here, and a new way of doing the people's business.

Today, we will discuss an important means of doing just that.

In seeking to control the votes of Members, and to gain access to the back rooms where legislation is authored, many lobbyists and private organizations have provided Members with trips and gifts free of charge.

It is clear that these practices have become far too pervasive, and that the opinions of far too many Members have been improperly conditioned by them.

What we need are common-sense rules and standards, vigilantly enforced, that will prevent such influence-peddling from continuing.

But we need to tread carefully. We do not, under any circumstances, want to force Members to adhere to a set of rules that will unnecessarily separate them from the world outside these halls.

Members of Congress need to be able to travel. They need to be able to see the world, to experience on-the-ground realities at home and abroad so that they may better understand the impacts of their decisions.

In the same way, none of us want to institute a gift ban that will irrationally prevent a Member from interacting with his or her constituents, or result in violations at every turn.

What we need is to find a balance between these two extremes: a set of rules that will allow Members to be actively engaged with the world, and yet not permit them to be drawn away from it - and their responsibilities - by unethical influence-seekers.

I and my fellow Democrats have put forward a plan that will, we hope, help to achieve this goal - and we would love to hear your appraisal of our ideas.

We are also looking forward to working with our friends in the Majority to find a bi-partisan solution to this problem. I am confident that the ideas you, our witnesses, present today will help us to do that.

Mr. Chairman, nothing is more important than ensuring the integrity of our political process.

As I said last week, it is the very foundation from which every law, every act, and every proclamation springs. If the process is broken, then our legislation will be also - and people will suffer as a result.

This body should be moved by the strength of our ideas, not just by the strength of our numbers, or the size of the bank accounts wielded by special interests.

We owe the American people a better government than the one we have today. We owe them the democracy that we teach our children to believe in, and that defines us as a people.

I look forward to the testimony we will hear today, and to a brighter future for our Congress.