

March 30, 2006 - Slaughter Addresses "Corrosive Ethics Crisis"

Slaughter Addresses "Corrosive Ethics Crisis" During Third Rules Committee Ethics Reform Hearing
Highlights Democratic Proposals, Questions Republican Commitment to Real Change

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today addressed the House Ethics Committee during the body's third hearing on Congressional ethics reform.

"The ethical crisis confronting us in this House is truly corrosive," Rep. Slaughter said. "It has become the subtext for every issue we face in Washington - and Americans are suffering as a result."

"Our Congress now operates without any oversight of the ethical quality of its Members, even though serious ethical violations have become commonplace here," Rep. Slaughter said. "Our Ethics Committee has gone the way of our House Rules: it has become expendable."

"Democrats unveiled their Honest Leadership and Open Government Act months ago," the Congresswoman continued. "We have proposed ensuring conference reports are more closely examined before being voted on, preventing multi-million dollar expenditures from being passed under suspension of the Rules, and guaranteeing that government contracts are issued to the most competent contractors, not just to the best-connected."

"In their reform plans, my Republican colleagues haven't addressed any of these issues."

"We have also heard a great deal of late about the role of lobbyists in Washington," she said. "But our Founders never would have imagined that this Congress would prove so eager to cater to these special interests. Lobbyists, after all, can only knock on the door. Members are the ones who have to open it."

"I have no choice but to question the commitment of this Majority to producing real change," Rep. Slaughter concluded.

The Committee hosted a broad and wide-ranging discussion of House ethics reform, featuring testimony from numerous prominent Members of the House. Topics discussed included reforms to the House Rules process, Rep. Slaughter and Rep. Brian Baird's STOCK Act, which bans insider trading in Congress, and new proposed regulations affecting the ways in which Members interact with lobbyists.

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

Thank you, Chairman Dreier, for calling this third Rules Committee ethics hearing.

I want to also thank the numerous Members who have joined us to offer their insights on what is one of the most central challenges confronting us today.

It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of what we are discussing. When we debate the state of ethics in this Congress, what we are really talking about is the very heart of our democracy.

And today, we are forced to ask ourselves whether this body has any real commitment left to the preservation of government by and for the people.

The ethical crisis confronting us in this House is truly corrosive. It has become the subtext for every issue we face in Washington - and Americans are suffering as a result.

Our Founders knew that if an open, democratic process prevailed here, the legislation we authored would be responsive to the public good.

But having served as Ranking Member on this Committee for over a year, I have no choice but to state that these Rules have been broken, twisted, or simply ignored, time and again.

The democratic process within the halls of Congress has been forgotten, replaced by the desire to see partisan legislation pass at all costs. Corrupted bills benefiting the few rather than the many have been the result.

Similarly, our Congress now operates without any oversight of the ethical quality of its Members, even though serious ethical violations have become commonplace here.

Our Ethics Committee has gone the way of our House Rules: it has become expendable.

We have also heard a great deal of late about the role of lobbyists in Washington. Defenders of this industry claim that because of the First Amendment, the practice is, and always will be, constitutionally protected.

But what did our Founders mean when they enshrined "the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances?"

They certainly never intended to condone a system in which private lobbying firms, wielding vast sums of money, spend their days shaping our nation's legislation - and do so to a degree the average citizen can't even dream of.

And more importantly, our Founders never would have imagined that this Congress would prove so eager to cater to these special interests. Lobbyists, after all, can only knock on the door. Members are the ones who have to open it.

In the weeks and months ahead, we need to halt this body's slide away from its most fundamental principals.

We need to drain the swamp.

But while we have heard much talk about reform-minded legislation, I have no choice but to question the commitment of this Majority to producing real change.

Democrats unveiled their Honest Leadership and Open Government Act months ago. It has always included numerous provisions designed to open our system up, make it more transparent and accountable, and guarantee that bills are dealt with in a fair, responsible, and democratic way.

For example, we have proposed ensuring conference reports are more closely examined before being voted on, preventing multi-million dollar expenditures from being passed under suspension of the Rules, and guaranteeing that government contracts are issued to the most competent contractors, not just to the best-connected.

In their reform plans, my Republican colleagues haven't addressed any of these issues.

My fellow Democrats and I on the Rules Committee have also authored broad Rules reform packages that will protect the democratic process in our House.

There are no comparable Republican bills on the table.

Members of the Majority have instead focused almost exclusively on the need to change the ways in which lobbyists relate to Members of Congress.

I would again remind them that lobbyists can only be as corrupt as Members allow them to be. But even here, we have to question how tough the proposed Republican lobbying legislation really is.

Not two weeks ago, an article in the Washington Post reported that, faced with new restrictions, lobbyists, and I quote, "say they have already found scores of new ways to buy the attention of lawmakers."

The article went on to say that they will now be working, quote, "through fundraising, charitable activities and industry-sponsored seminars" to get their way.

Will this really be the result of the lobbying reform carried out by this House? Will we do nothing more besides shifting the meetings of lobbyists and receptive legislators from one back room to another?

I look forward to discussing House Rules reforms with Members of the House.

I'm also anxious to outline some of the future steps we will take to restore ethical conduct to this House.

For example, Congressman Baird will be here, and I know he will want to detail the STOCK Act I authored with him.

Our bill will close a gaping hole in the law which allows members, staff, and so-called "political intelligence" firms to exploit sensitive, non-public information in Congress in order to profit in the markets.

In any company in America, that would be called Insider Trading. It should be the same here in Congress as well

I'm confident Rep. Baird will explain to us why this legislation is so important.

The American people shouldn't have to concern themselves with the integrity of the officeholders that represent them - it should be a given.

In fact, they shouldn't even consider that our government would ever be anything less, and in that sense, this Congress has truly failed them.

We're here today to return to them what they are owed.