

January 4, 2007 - Slaughter Delivers Opening Day Speech on New Democratic Ethics Package

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Slaughter Delivers Opening Day Speech on New Democratic Ethics Package

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Chairwoman of the House Rules Committee, today delivered an opening day speech on the House floor introducing the new Democratic Rules and ethics reform package (H. Res 6).

"The culture of the last Congress came to be defined by a phrase now common to Americans throughout the country: it was a culture of corruption," Rep. Slaughter said.

"The American people stated loud and clear that they were ready for a new culture to take hold in Washington: a culture of commitment. That is what my fellow Democrats and I are pledging to bring to this body today: a commitment to the citizens who elected us, a commitment to their needs, a commitment to their security, and a commitment to their future."

"I am tired of having to tell my grandchildren that what they learn in school about the ideals and practices of our democracy isn't true any more," Rep. Slaughter said.

"This body was created to serve as a battleground of ideas - not of checkbooks, or back-room deals, or deceptions. It was created to serve the people of the United States."

"It is long past time that this House started living up to those ideas and practices, and that it started putting honesty, integrity, transparency, and accountability ahead of everything else."

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

M. Speaker, I consider it to be an honor to have the chance to address our House on the first day of the 110th Congress. That is what serving as a Representative in this body is - an honor.

There are only 435 Members of Congress, chosen from a population of 300 million. Our neighbors send us here to represent their interests and defend their needs in Washington.

What they give us is their trust, and the precious opportunity to improve the lives of millions here in America and, in many cases, around the world. I can't think of why anyone would want to squander that opportunity, M. Speaker. And yet, this body's previous leadership seemed too often to do just that.

It should come as no surprise that just a few short weeks ago, a national poll found that only 11 percent of American voters gave the outgoing Congress either a good or excellent review. What was worse, fully 74 percent thought that most of us here are more focused on advancing our careers than we are on helping our fellow citizens.

M. Speaker, the history of the last several years has borne those opinions out. On the first day of the 109th Congress, we debated a new Rules package, just as we are doing today. My fellow Democrats and I spoke out against that Republican package from the beginning, because we saw what it represented: a retreat from ethical conduct, and an abandonment of our real responsibilities.

It rendered the Ethics Committee powerless to meaningfully enforce the ethical standards of this House. And while its most egregious elements were abandoned, it did its job, helping to pave the way to a Congress where unethical conduct would soon find a new home.

By the time Democratic leaders from both the House and Senate joined me to unveil our Honest Leadership and Open Government Act one year ago, a great deal of damage had already been done.

We had already seen a Medicare bill that sold out America's seniors to the bottom lines of drug companies.

We had seen an energy bill that did nothing to make our nation's energy supply more stable, but that made the balance books of billion-dollar corporations solid as a rock - even though the CEO's of some of those companies admitted they didn't need any more help.

We had seen our homeland defenses imperiled and a war effort undermined by huge contracts given not to the best and the brightest, but to the most well-connected. Real, meaningful oversight of those contracts never seemed to be on the agenda.

And in one of the most embarrassing series of revelations in our nation's recent history, we had seen top legislators bought and sold their allegiance traded for gifts, trips, and parties - all worth so much less than the faith the American people had freely given to them - and which they had, by the end, lost.

But as I said at the time, the lobbyists who gave those gifts, and paid for those trips, and hosted those parties - those lobbyists could only knock on the doors of this chamber. Members of Congress were the ones inside, and it was the leaders of this body who chose to let them in.

The culture of the last Congress came to be defined by a phrase now common to Americans throughout the country: it was a culture of corruption.

Two months ago, the American people decided they had paid dearly enough for that kind of leadership. They had sacrificed enough peace of mind, lost enough hope, had their well-being imperiled far too many times.

They stated loud and clear that they were ready for a new culture to take hold in Washington: a culture of commitment. That is what my fellow Democrats and I are pledging to bring to this body today: a commitment to the citizens who elected us, a commitment to their needs, a commitment to their security, and a commitment to their future.

It may seem like a tall order, but we are already well on our way. We have a new set of leaders here, Democrats who understand the value of the trust that has been placed in them. Together, we are going to usher in nothing less than a new way of doing business in this House.

While the necessary cultural shift is already under way, a new legislative framework is needed as well. We need Rules in the House that will keep this body focused on the well-being of the American people - in other words, keep us focused on our job.

And that is the framework we are beginning to lay out today.

The political process by which bills are written and voted on often seems arcane. It certainly receives little of the focus given to so much else that goes on in Washington.

And yet, it is at the very heart of what we do here. A broken political process undermines the democratic principals this House was built on. It serves as the gateway to a corrupted Congress.

By contrast, a responsible process acts as a powerful check against the abuses and misuses of power so common in recent years.

In so many ways, our Founding Fathers were visionaries. The Rules Thomas Jefferson first wrote down two centuries ago provide for order and discipline in the House. They provide for transparency and accountability.

If they are followed, corruption will be exposed before it has a chance to take root.

Democrats are going to follow the long-established Rules of the House, instead of treating them as impediments to be avoided.

We are going to allow Members to read bills before voting on them, and prevent them from being altered at the last minute. We are not going to hold open votes for hours on end while arms are twisted and favors are traded. We are going to conduct business whenever possible during normal hours, instead of in the dead of night. We are going to be open about the schedule we keep.

In short, we are going to restore basic civility to this body.

But we are going to do more than that. While the Rules package of the 109th Congress effectively embraced corrupt practices, this package stamps them out.

Today and tomorrow, we are introducing a series of critical new rules, legislation that will help guarantee that the unethical practices of the past will have no place in our future.

Gifts and lobbyist-sponsored travel are banned by this Rules package. They have been used to grant select groups of people unfettered access to Members of Congress. They have no place in this new Congress.

This Rules package will finally shed light on an earmarking process that had greased the wheels of corrupt House machinery. It requires the full disclosure of earmarks in all bills and conference reports before Members are asked to vote on them. If a Member is convinced that a project is worth a federal earmark, then they should have no problem attaching their name to that funding. If the project is sound, then they will have nothing to hide.

And this package will make real fiscal responsibility a fundamental principal of the House, not a rhetorical one. It will prohibit the consideration of any legislation that would increase budget deficits without offsets.

Democrats are joined by many Republicans in believing that it is immoral to pass on crushing debts to our children and our grandchildren. Enough is enough. No more deficit spending.

M. Speaker, and my friends on both sides of the aisle:

I know I am joined by my fellow Democrats, as well as by many principled Republicans, when I say that I want a Congress America can be proud of again.

I am tired of having to tell my grandchildren that what they learn in school about the ideals and practices of our democracy isn't true any more.

It is long past time that this House started living up to those ideas and practices, and that it started putting honesty, integrity, transparency, and accountability ahead of everything else.

We must rededicate the People's House to the needs of our citizens. We must return the keys of this government and of this democracy to the citizens they belong to.

This body was created to serve as a battleground of ideas - not of checkbooks, or back-room deals, or deceptions. It was created to serve the people of the United States.

Today, the men and women of our country have given us a special gift: the ability to leave our mark on the future of our nation. It is the only gift Members of this Congress should ask for - and one we must cherish and use for the good of all.

Let us begin.

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