



April 13, 2005

Speaker Dennis Hastert
The Capitol
Room H-232
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Hastert:

As Speaker of the House of Representatives, your job is to promote and maintain public confidence in one of the most important of our democratic institutions.

Yet, the House is not in order. For the first time in decades, the chamber has no functioning ethics committee and nobody monitoring or reviewing ethical conduct.

It appears that in order to protect the political interests of Representative Tom DeLay (R-TX), who has been admonished four times by the ethics committee and faces new questions about illegal travel that have been raised in recent weeks:

- You forced rule changes on a party line vote that gutted the ethics process.
- You fired the ethics chairman, Representative Joel Hefley (R-CO), for leading investigations of Mr. DeLay, and removed two others on the panel you apparently viewed as disloyal to the Majority Leader. Prior to his removal, Representative Hefley said, "I've been attacked; I've been threatened" and later said, "I think I'm going to get booted."
- You replaced the two committee members with Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX) and Representative Tom Cole (R-OK) both of whom have given money to DeLay's legal defense fund and yet may have to sit in judgment of him. Additionally, Representative Smith helped raise funds for TRMPAC, Delay's political committee that is the focus of pending investigations in Texas and by the ethics committee.
- You allowed a purge of ethics committee staff, apparently because of their role in the committee's actions against Representative Delay.

It is an inadequate response to accuse the Democrats and outside groups of causing this problem, as some of your Republican colleagues have done. Even your predecessor, former Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA), has warned this response does not address the real problem:

I'm saying when you're being attacked, the first thing you naturally do is you describe your attackers. In this case, that won't work. DeLay's problem isn't with the Democrats. DeLay's problem is with the country.

At the same time, allegations continue to grow that as many as a dozen House members and staff members of both parties may have taken foreign trips illegally paid for by lobbyists and/or foreign agents.

Yet you are silent, allowing the rumor and innuendo to swirl and darken the House.

Mr. Speaker, we remind you that you have significant responsibility to protect the integrity of all House members, as well as uphold the integrity of the House as an institution. By allowing the House to function with no ethics oversight, by fueling rumor and speculation with your silence and inaction, you are doing neither.

Representative DeLay and others may or may not be guilty of one or more of the allegations that have been raised. We will not know until ethics standards and a credible review process are restored in the House.

We call on you to allow the House an up or down vote on the on the Mollohan resolution to roll back the changes to ethics rules forced on Members at the start of the new Congress. This is the first step. Once that is done, the House must, in an open and bipartisan process, review and overhaul the now discredited way of enforcing ethics standards in the House.

Sincerely,

Chellie Pingree
President