

October 4, 2005

The Honorable Doc Hastings  
The Honorable Alan B. Mollohan  
House Committee on Standards of  
Official Conduct  
HT2, The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Hastings and Rep. Mollohan:

We write to urge you to promptly begin thorough investigations of the multiple allegations of ethical improprieties, by both Republican and Democratic members, that have long languished before the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct. Recent events have made expeditious action by the Committee more critical than ever.

The recent criminal indictments of Rep. Tom DeLay (R-TX) are only the latest in a series of instances that have raised serious questions about the conduct of members of Congress. Serious allegations of improper activities by a number of members, combined with the widely reported congressional travel controversy, have served to raise public concerns about whether members are acting without regard to basic standards of ethical behavior.

A recent poll put public approval of Congress at 33%. There is little doubt that this deep public disdain is substantially related to the "anything goes" climate that appears to have infected the legislative branch.

Unfortunately, the House Ethics Committee has made itself part of the problem, rather than offering solutions. The public rightly looks to congressional ethics panels, as the only bodies with jurisdiction to enforce the ethics rules, to police the behavior of members. Public faith in democratic institutions is central to a functioning democracy, and the central purpose of the Committee is safeguarding the precious credibility of the House. In the current Congress, however, the Committee has allowed nine months to pass without even becoming operational, and without appearing to initiate any action on any of the many public allegations of misconduct that should be on the panel's agenda.

For months, the Committee's inactivity was due to wrangling over the majority's insistence on a set of operating rules that would have badly undermined the panel's effectiveness, and subsequently over the majority's insistence on the right to place partisan people in the panel's top staff positions. Despite having rightly reversed course

on both matters some time ago, the Committee has yet to hire the professional staff necessary to become operational and begin its work. This is an unprecedented failure by the House Ethics Committee.

Beyond the panel's failure to serve the public interest, the Committee's inaction disserves members by denying them the only forum in which they can definitively clear their names in the event they have committed no wrongdoing.

Among the matters requiring urgent attention:

- an inquiry into the allegations – unrelated to last week's criminal indictment – regarding a number of activities by Rep. DeLay, including his various dealings with Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Chairman Hastings indicated months ago that the Committee would conduct this investigation, and Rep. DeLay has publicly requested Committee action;
- an inquiry into whether Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) and his aides improperly conducted partisan political activities out of his Detroit congressional office;
- an inquiry concerning Rep. Bob Ney (R-OH) and his dealings with Abramoff;
- an inquiry into allegations that Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA) violated House ethics rules and standards in handing over a tape of an illegally intercepted phone conversation to the press;
- an inquiry into whether Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R-CA) misused his public office for personal financial gain;
- an inquiry into whether Rep. William Jefferson (D-LA) misused his public office for personal financial gain; and
- an inquiry into whether Rep. Curt Weldon (R-PA) improperly used his office to aid his daughter's public relations firm;

The Committee has both the responsibility and opportunity to show the public that it takes seriously its institutional obligation to enforce the congressional ethics rules and hold members of Congress accountable for any ethics violations they may have committed. We urge you to promptly initiate thorough investigations into the many matters that should be on the panel's agenda.

Campaign Legal Center  
Center for Responsive Politics  
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics  
In Washington  
Common Cause  
Democracy 21  
Judicial Watch

Public Campaign Action Fund  
Public Citizen  
U.S. PIRG

CC: House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct