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Testimony of Chellie Pingree, President, Common Cause
Before the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct
Possible changes to House Rules governing gifts of travel

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Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member Berman and members of the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee as it considers possible changes to House rules governing gifts of travel from private sources.

The goal of any changes you recommend to existing travel rules should be to prevent the kinds of abuses that have come to light as a result of the investigation of lobbyist Jack Abramoff. It is clear that Mr. Abramoff supplied numerous members of the House with things of value, including trips.

Mr. Abramoff sponsored trips for members to the famous St. Andrews golf course in Scotland. Not only were these trips organized and paid for by a lobbyist, they were in large part recreational in nature. I am sure that all of you are aware of these stories, as I am sure you are also aware that these are violations of *existing* House rules.

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Chairman

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Chairman Emeritus

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Founding Chairman

Common Cause believes the first change that needs to occur is enforcement of the rules that already exist. There are some specific rules changes I will get to in a moment, but the biggest challenge facing this Committee is the prevailing sense here and around the country that no one cares about ethical standards in Washington and that there is no oversight, enforcement or punishment for bad behavior. It is no surprise public approval of Congress stood at 22 percent as of April, according to a *Wall Street Journal/NBC News* poll.

I have no doubt that each of you on this committee takes seriously your charge of upholding the highest standards of conduct in this institution. However, the public has watched as this committee has floundered for more than 16 months despite public demand for action on the wealth of evidence suggesting members of both parties may have violated existing House rules.

The problem with privately funded Congressional travel, as we have seen, is the coupling of lavish, all-expense paid trips with specific legislative requests. Organizations are sending their lobbyists and members of Congress off to places like Pebble Beach, Palm Springs, or luxury resorts like the Greenbrier and picking up the tab for their travel, meals and lodging, which sometimes costs more than \$800 or \$900 per night, according to disclosure reports. Many organizations that sponsor these trips have a clear legislative agenda.

The Ethics Committee needs to begin playing a proactive role in monitoring privately funded Congressional travel. The current system of pre-approval for privately funded travel is ineffective. For example, Rep. Tom DeLay has said that this committee approved his trip which included a visit to St. Andrews golf course.

Oversight of the disclosure of privately funded travel is poor. In one instance, several members listed a lobbyist firm as the official sponsor of a trip, a clear violation of travel rules. Only when the press reported it months later did the offices recognize this mistake and amend their reports.

Although members are required to describe the purpose of a trip on the travel disclosure form filed with the clerk of the House, the descriptions for many trips, including week-long trips to Paris for example, consist of just one or two words, such as “fact-finding.”

After the press broke the story of Rep. DeLay’s trip to Scotland, hundreds of amendments and new travel disclosure filings flooded into the clerk’s office, in some cases years late, because it was clear the press was now looking at the forms. This kind of widespread disregard for disclosure rules points to a longstanding absence of oversight.

Many people, including House Speaker Dennis Hastert, have called for a complete ban on privately funded Congressional travel. I believe the only reason such a ban would be necessary is because the rules that govern travel are not being enforced.

As for specific requirements for privately funded travel, I would suggest:

- A pre-approval system by this committee that requires a detailed agenda for trips, including a thorough description of the purpose of the trip, a daily trip agenda and a list of trip participants.
- A certification from trip sponsors that lobbyists will not participate in or pay directly or indirectly for the trip and that the trip does not violate any House rules.

- Posting within 30 days of returning on the home page of the official website of each member involved in the trip, the nature of the trip, itinerary and cost for travel meals and lodging. The posting should remain on the home page for the remainder of the Congressional session.
- Certification within 30 days of returning from the trip that the agenda presented to this committee did not significantly change, with clear penalties for misreporting.

I thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing and hope that you incorporate our suggestions into the House rules.