June 2, 2010

They Must Be Doing Their Job

The good news from the House is that its new independent Office of Congressional Ethics is doing a strong enough job to prompt outrages from members whose behavior has come under scrutiny. The bad, if predictable, news is some of those lawmakers are trying to strip the office of its powers.

A resolution to bury the office's investigative reports from public view and curtail its investigatory authority was filed this week by 20 members of the Black Caucus. Five caucus members were recently embarrassed by the office's investigation of a Caribbean junket they took that was financed by corporate sponsors in violation of House rules.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi created the new ethics office to repair taxpayer confidence badly frayed by a series of corruption scandals and the failure of the House's separate ethics committee — a secretive, rubber-toothed panel of lawmakers — to root them out. She should spike the resolution now.

In the junket case, the see-no-evil committee puntèd, contending that four of the five caucus members did not know corporations paid the tab. Only Congressman Charles Rangel, a Democrat of New York, was admonished. The ethics office properly concluded that all five should have known, since corporate banners and hospitality freebies were as plain as the sand and sunsets.

Even more encouraging is the office's investigation into whether members of the House Appropriations Committee custom tailored defense contracts worth hundreds of millions in return for generous campaign contributions. True to form, the House ethics committee — urged to investigate further by the new ethics office — found no sign of quid pro quo.
The new ethics watchdog has refused to let the case die. It asked the Justice Department last week to review evidence that “certain persons and companies” trafficked in lucrative back-scratching.

To gut the ethics office as it makes real headway against corruption would be another scandal. Surely House members realize that. Surely Ms. Pelosi must.