Protecting the Whistle-Blowers

All those Capitol budget hawks searching out waste, fraud and abuse should first find out why some mystery lawmaker killed a long-needed whistle-blower protection bill in the final hours of the last Congress.

The measure would have greatly bolstered Washington’s ability to recoup wasted multimillions by encouraging government workers to alert superiors to how bad things really are and guaranteeing that they won’t be punished for doing the right thing.

Both houses unanimously approved versions of whistle-blower protection in the lame-duck Congress in December. But just as the final compromise was about to pass, the 12-year campaign was snuffed out by a still unknown senator exercising an anonymous hold. The Senate could use its own whistle-blower right now to let the taxpayers and voters know who is to blame.

Revival of the measure should be a top priority, particularly since the new Senate supposedly will no longer tolerate the skulduggery of secret holds. In the House, Representative Darrell Issa, the zealous new chairman of government oversight, should be the first to drumbeat for the measure.

Mr. Issa already has his own Web site inviting government workers and the public to send his office tips about abuses. But, so far, it’s more an outlet for antigovernment ranters than knowledgeable whistle-blowers understandably wary of the reprisals they can suffer.

The measure, which should also be a no-brainer for the Capitol’s new Tea Party ethic, would strengthen the free speech and due process rights of whistle-blowers. It would allow jury trials for documenting bureaucratic retaliations and enlarge the covered agencies to include airport baggage screeners, nuclear plant workers and other vital jobs.

In the lame-duck session, some Republicans warned that the measure might somehow facilitate more of WikiLeaks’s wholesale disclosure of government business. The issues are unrelated, except on the red-meat talk-radio circuit. And what could possibly be more
patriotic, or budget-minded, than protecting government workers who have the courage and good sense to raise the alarm when taxpayers are being cheated?