

Independent Board to Police Members?

DioGuardi, Frank Make Proposal, Citing Skepticism

By John P. Gregg

Citing public skepticism over the ability of the House to police its own Members, Reps. Joseph DioGuardi (R-NY) and Barney Frank (D-Mass) Thursday called for the creation of an independent Public Review Board and an Inspector General to investigate alleged wrongdoing by Members.

Both Congressmen emphasized that their proposal wasn't meant as a criticism of the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, which currently has the responsibility for such investigations, but was a response to the "perception that Congressmen aren't fulfilling their public trust," according to DioGuardi.

Noting the "collegial, closely knit" nature of Congress, DioGuardi said his proposal was not a political issue but "a question of process.... It is difficult to expect Members to change their roles radically and become judges of their peers," he said.



Photo by Andrea Mohin

At a press conference Thursday, Reps. Joseph DioGuardi (left) and Barney Frank explain their plan for a Public Review Board and an Inspector General.

The proposal calls for a board with three members appointed by the Speaker of the House and three by the Minority Leader, subject to approval of the full House.

Board members could not be current or

former Members, relatives of Members or staff, or lobbyists. The Inspector General, who would conduct random audits of House accounts as well as investigations on

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New Ethics Board Would Attack Perception That Congress Isn't 'Fulfilling Public Trust,' Backers Say

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behalf of the board, would be appointed jointly by the Speaker and Minority Leader.

The board would have full subpoena power for its inquiries and could launch a probe on its own initiative, at the request of a Member, or after an outside request for a probe was refused by at least one Member. The current ethics committee operates under similar guidelines.

Recommendations of the Review Board and the Inspector General would still be brought to the House floor by a revised

ethics committee, said Frank, who called the legislation "an effort to reconcile requirements of the Constitution with the inherent conflict that comes with judging your friends — or enemies."

The Constitution mandates that only the House can punish or expel its Members.

A former accountant who observed the effectiveness of outside peer review boards in the accounting field, DioGuardi said he had worked on the reform package for eight months. Board members and the Inspector General would be compensated, but no rate

was set. DioGuardi suggested Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, and Felix Rohatyn, a New York financier, as prototype members for the Review Board.

Even if a board is set up, DioGuardi said the House ethics committee would still provide "determinations" for Members and staff concerning funding of trips, honoraria, and other questions regarding House rules. The ethics panel could argue for or against sanctions proposed by the board but could not change recommendations.

While Frank and DioGuardi conceded that they were just starting to promote their resolution among their colleagues, they predicted a "groundswell of support" and possible action next spring.

The House Administration and Rules Committees would probably examine the proposal if it has support in the House.

The House formed the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct in 1967 following a controversial move to exclude Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. (D-NY) from Congress.