

**Washington, D.C.** - Jack Abramoff's travails should inspire Republicans and Democrats both to reform the system in which the high-flying lobbyist flourished.

Mr. Abramoff pleaded guilty Tuesday in federal court to fraud, tax evasion and conspiracy to bribe public officials. Wednesday he pleaded guilty to more charges in Florida. In exchange for information about half a dozen House and Senate members, he's expecting a sentence of 9 1/2 to 11 years -- out of a possible 30. In other words, the man is squealing. That scares plenty of people in Washington.

Even former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich is urging a broad review of how politicians finance campaigns and deal with lobbyists. "I think Abramoff is just part of a large pattern that has got to be rethought," he said.

He's right. The current system is awash with too much cash and too-cozy relationships with lobbyists. The public is rightly disgusted with the whole crowd.

Of course, just taking a campaign donation from a lobbyist isn't necessarily a bribe. Proving cause and effect is squishy. But there's plenty in the Abramoff case to fuel suspicion.

Former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who denies wrongdoing, took thousands in donations from Mr. Abramoff and went with him on a lavish golf trip to Scotland. Mr. DeLay's wife, Christine, was paid \$115,000 over three years for a special project -- finding out favorite charities of members of Congress. The firm that hired Mrs. DeLay has a business relationship with Mr. Abramoff and is run by a former top DeLay aide.

That aide was Tony Rudy, now a lobbyist. Court papers say Mr. Abramoff directed a \$50,000 payment to Mr. Rudy's wife, Lisa, through a charity group in exchange for Mr. Rudy's "agreement to perform a series of official acts" while he was on Mr. DeLay's staff.

Plenty of reforms have been proposed. U.S. Rep. David Price, D-N.C., of Chapel Hill and three

other representatives in December offered a 14-point plan that would, among other things, curtail lobbyists' paying for congressional travel. The four were Democrats. Republicans who control Congress paid little attention.

But current lax lobbying and campaign donation rules create too much potential for Abramoff-style corruption. That tarnishes whoever's in power. Now, it's Republicans. In the past it was Democrats.

As Rep. Price told National Public Radio in December, "The Abramoff scandal is going to be one that just is huge." Unfortunately, it looks as if Rep. Price was on target.

The time for reform is now.

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