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THE HILL



House commission offers lessons for foreign lawmakers

By [Kelly McCormack](#)

The low hum of translators reverberated through the House chamber Tuesday morning while the House Democracy Assistance Commission greeted foreign lawmakers from around the globe.

It wasn't the usual group of congressional regulars seen on C-SPAN or roaming the halls of Congress, but instead a group of international delegates who were visiting the Capitol for some lessons on building successful democracies.

Approved as a House resolution last year, the commission was created to assist emerging democracies in strengthening their parliaments. A bipartisan group of 16 members was selected to help certain countries' legislatures by offering advice, visiting the various nations and making recommendations to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

"This is where the House and Senate and many visitors come together for momentous events, and this is a momentous event, having you here on our House floor," commission Chairman David Dreier (R-Calif.) said as he welcomed delegates from the Republic of Macedonia, East Timor, the Republic of Indonesia and Georgia.

Interestingly enough, the visit was scheduled during a critical week for Dreier, who is leading the House GOP effort to clean up our own system of democracy from the taint of corruption brought on by the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal. Finding consensus even within his own party on the right approach has been a difficult, messy process, and the irony of trying to teach foreign lawmakers lessons in democracy while struggling to improve our own is not lost on Dreier.

"The issue of corruption is an issue that we deal with worldwide," Dreier told the delegates Tuesday, "and the challenges of corruption exist right here."

When asked about lobbying scandals in America, Macedonian representative Ristana Lalcevska said that it was not the "goal of our visit" to critique America's problems with money and politics, but she acknowledged that "corruption is something that we struggle with in our country."

Still, Lalcevska and the other foreign lawmakers focused on the positive lessons they could learn from the extensive, two-week experience.

Dreier and Reps. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.), Lois Capps (D-Calif.), Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) and Candice Miller (R-Mich.) gave representatives from the emerging democracies tours of their district offices last week. The groups arrived in Washington last weekend.

The deputy speaker of Indonesia's parliament, Muhaimin Iskandar, was most impressed with members' constituent services.

"Congressmen and congresswomen are very close to their constituency. They have an office in their district," said Iskandar, whose delegation visited California with Dreier and Capps. "They have very good communication with their constituents. I'm going to apply that in Indonesia."

But the visitors are not the only people learning.

"We learned a tremendous amount from them as well," said Miller, who assisted the group from Macedonia. "They are so passionate about freedom, liberty and democracy."

Miller was impressed about just "how fervently they believe" in democracy. She noted that a large portion of her district is made up of people of Macedonian descent. Miller's group shadowed her on trips to a circuit-court trial, an assembly plant and other district events. She also showed the lawmakers how to start voter-registration drives and gave them advice on economic development.

After Dreier formally welcomed the countries' members, a Congressional Research Service representative taught them the basics of the legislative process. They were also given a tour of the Capitol, the Library of Congress and the research agency. Later that day, they met with their respective embassies and attended a reception in their honor at the Library of Congress.

One delegate from Macedonia's parliament said the trip has opened her eyes to the many intricacies of running a successful democracy.

The Macedonian lawmakers will be "well prepared to apply some of the solutions that will contribute to our democracy," said Lalcevska, who serves on Macedonia's Committee on Rules and Procedure. She said she was most impressed with the opportunities that exist in the United States as compared to Macedonia, which has 2 million inhabitants.

The Republic of Georgia's vice chairman of its Foreign Relations Committee was inspired by the American procedures. "I like very much the process. The procedures are well organized so you cannot violate the procedures. The procedures are dependent on human nature. [It's] so well organized that it can't be broken," said Nino Nakashidze.

Wilson, who assisted the delegation from Georgia, said the level of energy is inspiring.

While in South Carolina, Wilson took the Georgian representatives to Fort Jackson, the Bose Corp., Charleston and an Aretha Franklin show.

This week, the groups have also sat in on formal House proceedings, observed committees in action and attended commission-sponsored workshops aimed at developing programs that would strengthen their parliaments.

The secretary of East Timor's parliament, Francisco Soares, said he picked up some important lessons. "First and above all, protect the interest of the people who elect me," Soares said. "The U.S. democracy is very good ... and it's good to learn from an old democracy."

Iskandar was impressed with the landscape and the extent of the Library of Congress's holdings. He also noted that he was able to find all the Indonesian books he searched for.

"I was astonished with the Library of Congress. It's extraordinary. It's complete. And I am now convinced that this is the largest library in the world," Iskandar said.

A similar commission, the Frost-Solomon Task Force, aided parliaments of 10 democracies in Central and Eastern Europe from 1990 to 1996.

"We're picking up on that effort, where we left off, but it's not limited to that region. The situations are more diverse," said the commission's ranking member, Rep. David Price (D-N.C.), who was also involved with the Frost-Solomon Task Force.

Groups from Lebanon, Afghanistan and Kenya are slated to be part of the next visit to the Capitol.

"I want the same thing that you have here," said George Grigolia, one of the interpreters who worked with the Georgian delegation since last week. "This is an unbelievable system of democracy."

Dreier was quick to remind the lawmakers that democracy is normally an evolving, messy process that the United States is still trying to refine.

"We know that we have a lot to learn. Not one democracy fits all countries or situations," Dreier said. "We hope that together we can further democracy across the world and lay the foundation for future work together."