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Confronting Tom DeLay

Leave it to Capitol lawyers to select the wonderfully tepid word "admonish" in trying to symbolically slap the wrist of the Republican majority leader, Tom DeLay, without really stirring his wrath. The House ethics committee has gently rebuked Mr. DeLay for excessive arm-twisting last year in seeking the vote of a resistant Republican, Representative Nick Smith of Michigan, when the Medicare prescription drug bill was in danger of defeat. During a desperate search for votes, Mr. DeLay offered to support the budding political career of Mr. Smith's son. This kind of pressure "could support" a finding of a rules violation, the panel said, while carefully announcing that no further action would be taken.

Critics of the moribund ethics panel have to admit surprise that it found enough election-year grit to even admonish Mr. DeLay, the formidable power broker dubbed the Hammer. We hope this newfound keenness will be extended to the far more serious charges pending about Mr. DeLay's heavy-handed role in seeing to the gerrymandering of the Congressional districts in his home state, Texas, in an attempt to cushion his G.O.P. edge in Congress.

One of the disgruntled losers, Representative Chris Bell, charged that Mr. DeLay had funneled illegal contributions into Texas state races to help the Republicans win control in Austin and gerrymander Democrats out of office.

Mr. DeLay roundly rejected the complaint as partisan sour grapes. But three of his top aides have been indicted in a separate state investigation for laundering Texas campaign donations.

Mr. DeLay was not named in the indictment and has not been summoned yet by investigators. But the charges against his aides echo the ethics complaint and, with the control of Congress at stake in the coming election, it is incumbent on the House to police its integrity properly. The ethics panel should follow precedent and appoint an outside counsel to look into the charges.

The Texas indictment tracked some of the \$1.5 million paid from a DeLay political action committee to help Republicans take the Statehouse for the first time since Reconstruction. Mr. DeLay's money handlers are accused of channeling corporate donations into Texas - where they are illegal in state races - by a circuitous route through the Republican National Committee. "All I did was help raise money," Mr. DeLay said in denying day-to-day control of the Texas operation. This is exactly the issue the House must not duck investigating.

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