

A question of integrity

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In what seemed a remarkable demonstration of integrity by an institution often viewed as ethically challenged, the District of Columbia City Council last week finally moved to censure its most famous member, former Mayor Marion S. Barry, for his well-publicized ethical misdeeds.

The council acted after an independent investigator's report found Mr. Barry had improperly steered thousands of dollars in city contracts to his girlfriend, then pocketed part of the money himself. Though the evidence of Mr. Barry's flagrant disregard of the law and the city's own ethics policy was clear, Mr. Barry protested his innocence to the end. Nevertheless, his peers on the council voted unanimously to strip him of his committee chairmanship and referred the case to federal prosecutors.

Would that Baltimore's own city council could summon the courage to show the same moral clarity. But instead of standing up for the integrity of their institution, council members here seem intent on cutting deals to advance their personal political agendas rather than upholding principles aimed at ensuring that elected officials conduct themselves honorably.

What other conclusion can be drawn from the case of Baltimore Councilwoman Helen L. Holton, who was indicted last year by Maryland State Prosecutor Robert A. Rohrbaugh on charges that she improperly solicited \$12,500 from two developers doing business with the city? Yet unlike Mr. Barry, Ms. Holton is still sitting pretty in her post as chairman of a powerful council taxation and economic development committee. What's more, neither her colleagues nor the city ethics board have raised so much as a peep in protest.

Last year, former city council president Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake rightly removed Ms. Holton from her committee chairmanship after she was indicted but then reinstated her when the charges were dropped a few months later. When prosecutors brought new charges of violating campaign finance laws and appealed the dismissal of the bribery count, Ms. Rawlings-Blake again suspended Ms. Holton pending her trial, which is expected to begin in May.

Yet Ms. Holton has managed to return to her job as committee chairwoman, even though criminal charges against her remain unresolved. She was reappointed to the post by the new city council president, Bernard C. "Jack" Young; she had supported him over Councilman William H. Cole IV in his bid to replace Ms. Rawlings-Blake after she became mayor last month.

That decision is enough to cause concern that Mr. Young intends to hold council members to a lower ethical standard than his predecessor, and it stands in marked contrast to Mayor Rawlings-Blake's push to increase ethics and transparency in city

government. She rightly views the restoration of public trust in the wake of former mayor [Sheila Dixon](#)'s forced resignation from office for perjury and theft to be a top priority.

Mr. Young is apparently more intent on rewarding those who backed his rise to the council's top spot; many of the plum assignments he's made so far have been handed out to council colleagues who, like Ms. Holton, publicly supported him over Mr. Cole. Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke, one of Mr. Young's strongest supporters, now sits on five of the council's nine committees. She is chairwoman of one and vice-chairwoman of another. Mr. Cole now serves on one committee, and his top supporters, council members Rochelle "Rikki" Spector and Robert Curran, saw their responsibilities downgraded, too. Meanwhile, Councilwoman Sharon Green Middleton, another Young supporter, was given the chairmanship of the Executive Appointments Committee, which has the power to confirm or reject agency heads who negotiate contracts with city employee unions, the largest of which is headed by her husband. That all smacks of cronyism, not a new day at City Hall.

Mr. Barry's colleagues on the D.C. city council at least had the good sense to take appropriate action when it became apparent that his ethical lapses had reached a point where they could no longer be ignored. We fear that the Baltimore City Council is headed down the same road. Mr. Young needs to move quickly to reassure citizens that, in his ambition to occupy the council's highest office, he and his colleagues haven't simply thrown the most basic ethical considerations completely out the window. Removing Ms. Holton from her committee chairmanship until her legal problems are resolved would be a good place to start.

Readers respond

Just when we're starting to climb out of the debacle Dixon insisted on creating for us, more slime appears. Why do so-called "lawmakers" think they can get away with downplaying legal charges?

Young's action to reinstate Holton to a position of power suggests the conduct she's charged with isn't unethical, and he is demonstrating to the people of Baltimore that he does not support our mayor or believe in her judgment.

Government officials should have to operate by a higher standard. They are, after all, the lawmakers.

Let's clean up and shine!! We have a lot to be proud of. Baltimore is a great city of good, caring, decent people. We don't need thugs representing us!

Karen in Hamilton

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