

Lou Dobbs tonight

Transcript: CNN Lou Dobbs Tonight
October 27, 2005

DOBBS: You've got to love the free traders at any cost. New concerns tonight about Washington's so-called K Street connection. A negotiator, a trade negotiator responsible for Korea at the U.S. Trade Representatives Office is leaving public service. And where is she headed? Well, she's been hired by a firm that represents private Korean business interests.

Critics of America's failed free trade policy say this isn't even the most alarming example of what is a growing Washington ethical mess.

Christine Romans reports.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

CHRISTINE ROMANS, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice over): Washington's revolving door, where federal officials routinely end up working on the other side. Since 1998, at least 2,390 federal officials have left public service to work for lobbyists on K Street. Add to that two more this week from the U.S. Trade Representatives Office.

Lobbyists Crowell & Moring International announced hiring senior U.S. trade officials Amy Jackson and Brian Peck. CNN says of its new hire, Amy Jackson, "As deputy assistant U.S. trade representative for Korea, Jackson's primary responsibility was overseeing U.S. trade relations with Korea, including the proposed U.S.-Korea free trade agreement."

The firm says her Korea experience will strengthen its international trade practice. Indeed, a client of C&M International is the Korea International Trade Association. It represents 81,000 Korean businesses. But its managing director downplayed any controversy.

ANDY SUK-HO MUN, KOREA INT. TRADE ASSOCIATION: Personally, I don't care if Amy Jackson is working there. Whoever working there, I don't care, because, you know, I feel we don't have the contact with the U.S. government or Congress or something like that.

ROMANS: He says he uses his lobbyists for research and consulting, not to lobby Washington. And he says he represents his country's business, not its government.

The U.S. Trade Office also dismissed concerns about her move saying, "She may not ever come back and lobby USTR or any other part of the government on issues she wants worked on." Still, critics called it a relatively minor example of a Washington epidemic.

DANIELLE BRIAN, PROJECT ON GOV. OVERSIGHT: I really am amazed that people seem to be not at all embarrassed. And frankly, for the most part, the media sort of yawns when you point out one of these revolving-door stories, because it happens nearly every day.

ROMANS: A few congressmen have taken up the cause, suggesting tougher ethics guidelines and restrictions.

REP. MARTY MEEHAN (D), MASSACHUSETTS: I don't think there's anything wrong with a cooling off period of two years, where somebody could go and teach, or they could go and do other things that aren't in conflict with what their public position -- public service position with the federal government was.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

ROMANS: He might have some trouble getting Congress to vote on something like that. Since 1998, 86, 86 former members of Congress are working for lobbyists. A handful of them working directly for other governments.

Now, there are no current numbers on just how many former federal trade officials are now representing foreign interests. But a Center for Public Integrity study all the way back in 1991 found 47 percent of former trade officials were representing foreign companies, associations or governments. Since then there have been some rules changes. So it's a little harder to track down those kind of connections.

DOBBS: Not a little harder.

ROMANS: A lot harder.

DOBBS: All but impossible. And it's not an accident, of course, those rules put in place by Congress.

We want to be clear, nothing that's happening here is against the federal rules on ethics. But there is a higher standard of ethics, and there is a little common sense that should be at work here. It makes you wonder how those devoted congressmen from their districts decide suddenly to live in Washington and represent foreign governments, for example.

You wonder how people that are committed to public service suddenly find themselves serving another government. It's remarkable.

ROMANS: The agency is telling me that if they had stronger rules, privately they say it would be a lot harder to get top talent to work for the United States government in the first place. That's what they say.

DOBBS: I don't think we need that kind of talent anyway. And we might be just -- no, we'd definitely, we'd be a lot better off.

We appreciate you keeping this in front of the -- this audience's eyes and ears. And we're going to continue to follow this, no matter what the rationalization is in Washington.

Christine Romans, thank you.