



US Congress averts partial shutdown

By Barney Jopson

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The US Congress averted a partial government shutdown late on Friday but only after conservative Republicans revolted against their own party leaders by refusing to support a temporary funding fix.

Less than two hours before a midnight deadline, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed a bill to extend funding for the Department of Homeland Security by seven days with Republican leaders relying on support from Democrats.

Republicans had dragged the agency into a battle over President Barack Obama's immigration policy, but this week that strategy only served to highlight policy splits in the party and raised questions about its governing credentials.

Republican leaders set up the shutdown threat by drafting funding legislation that would have also blocked Mr Obama's move to shield up to 5m unauthorised immigrants from deportation.

Leaders slowly relented this week by separating the two issues, but House conservatives who accuse the president of overstretching his authority refused to support any funding bill that did not impose constraints on the immigration move.

Nancy Pelosi, the top Democrat in the House, urged her colleagues to support the stopgap seven-day funding bill because she said it would lead to a vote on long-term security funding next week.

President Obama quickly signed the temporary fix into law late on Friday.

Earlier on Friday, conservative lawmakers inflicted a stinging defeat on John Boehner, speaker of the House, by ensuring the failure of a leadership-backed bill to extend homeland security funding by three weeks.

The Republican party had boxed itself into a corner, analysts said, as internal disagreement raged over how hard to fight the president's use of executive action on immigration.

Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, said: “The GOP got bogged down in debating this funding bill and has nothing to show for it, except more division and showing the country that they came in without a plan . . . They are grasping at straws.”

Polls suggested that had security funding been cut off because Democrats refused to support a bill that also stopped the immigration action, Republicans would have taken most of the blame.

Instead, passing a one week extension is likely to open Republican leaders to accusations that they are, at best, delaying the need to reconcile divisions and, at worst, capitulating to Mr Obama.

Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, followed sweeping electoral gains in November by vowing that his party would use its control of Congress to demonstrate that Republicans can govern.

Splits between the establishment and conservatives are longstanding, but the shutdown threat showed how differences between relatively moderate Senate Republicans and the more populist House of Representatives break down along roughly the same lines.

Mr Boehner said this week: “We have two different institutions that don’t have the same body temperature every day . . . You know the House, by nature and by design, is a hell of a lot more rambunctious place than the Senate.”

US media commentators were surprised on Wednesday by reports that Mr Boehner told lawmakers in a closed-door meeting that he had not spoken to Mr McConnell in two weeks.

William Galston, a former Clinton administration official now at the Brookings Institution think-tank, said the week’s events “raised a big question mark” over congressional Republicans’ ability to govern.

“There are very important items of legislation that Senator McConnell views as exemplary governance issues — including trade promotion authority and a broad-based approach to tax reform — and he wants this Congress to be defined by serious deliberation and legislation about issues like that rather than by conflict over hot button, no-win issues,” he said.

Mr Nowrasteh said the party had “missed a golden opportunity to outsource” the immigration issue to the courts given that a federal judge in Texas last week temporarily blocked the president’s executive action.

A Washington business lobbyist said: “Most people aren’t going to remember that Republicans lost this little battle of checkers but it will be remembered if the [homeland security] department shuts down.”