



Republicans move to avoid shutdown

By Barney Jopson

February 27, 2015

Republicans took steps to pass a temporary fix that would avoid a partial government shutdown on Friday, but did little to resolve policy splits in the party that have raised questions about its governing credentials.

Ahead of a midnight deadline, lawmakers were preparing to vote on a bill that would extend funding for the Department of Homeland Security by three weeks, preventing a shutdown of the agency for the time being.

The Senate on Friday passed a bill that would fund the department until the end of September, but it had little chance of passing the House.

GOP leaders had set up the shutdown threat by drafting funding legislation that would have blocked Mr Obama's move to shield up to 5m unauthorised immigrants from deportation, but they have slowly relented by separating the two issues.

The party had boxed itself into a corner with no good options, 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 had refused to support a bill that also stopped the immigration action, Republicans would have taken most of the blame.

Instead, passing a short-term extension of funding has opened Republican leaders to accusations that they are at best putting off the need to reconcile divisions and at worst capitulating to Mr Obama.

The week was a setback for Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, who followed thumping electoral gains last 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.

John Boehner, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, 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.”

On Wednesday, pundits were surprised by reports that Mr Boehner had told lawmakers in a closed-door meeting that he had not spoken to Mr McConnell in two weeks.

William Galston, a former official Clinton administration official now at the Brookings Institution, a think-tank, said the week’s events had “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.

Republican leaders faced the task of persuading conservatives to permanently disconnect the fight against Mr Obama’s immigration action from homeland security funding, Mr Galston said.

At Cato, 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 blocked the president’s executive action temporarily.

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.”

The power of the party’s conservative wing has been on show this week as a succession of potential Republican presidential candidates have sought to woo grassroots activists at the Conservative Political Action Conference outside Washington.