

Debates spur brinksmanship, not progress

Ron Eachus

April 12, 2011

A government shutdown was, avoided again at the last minute and House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wis., unveiled a plan to cut \$6 trillion in federal spending during the next decade.

These events don't demonstrate that compromise is winning the day. What the events of the past week and a half tell us is that Congress has ceased to be a deliberative body. It is no longer a body in which policy issues and accompanying budgets are the product of a legislative process based on hearings and open examination of issues and options.

These days it is high-level closed negotiations by a few powerbrokers, hostage taking and continuing brinksmanship designed to create big-time "leverage moments."

On April 2, President Obama, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Senate President Harry Reid, D-Nev., avoided a government shutdown when they reached agreement on a short-term spending deal to cut \$38 billion from this year's budget.

A few days later, Ryan announced his plan that calls for turning the Medicare system into a voucher system and reducing the tax rate for high incomes and corporations from 35 percent to 25 percent.

It is a bold plan, with plenty of controversy. Most of the spending reductions come from the Medicare changes under which recipients are given vouchers they can apply to private health insurance. The Congressional Budget Office points out that it means shifting more costs to Medicare recipients.

This deserves a lot more scrutiny. You'd think it would receive some hearings, some expert testimony, some airing in public before Congress proceeds. Not in today's Congress, not in today's budget wars.

One day after Ryan put his plan forward, the House Budget Committee voted, along party lines, to send a 2012 budget resolution implementing the plan to the House floor, where it is expected to pass this week.

Remember when the Republicans chided the Democrats for ramrodding the health care reform through without enough time to review the bill or consider alternatives?

And if you think this really is just for show because it wouldn't pass the Democrat-controlled

Senate, consider that the next showdown moment is coming soon in the form of a vote to raise the federal debt ceiling, which will be met by May 16.

Ryan has said he's willing to tie parts of his plan to the legislation that would raise the debt limit, and other Republican leaders have indicated a willingness to tie the debt-ceiling vote to the Medicare reforms.

It used to be Congress would deliberate and debate something, then pass it. Now it is pass it and delve into it later. Better yet, pass it and maybe we can avoid any real serious examination in full public view if we can find the right hostage and leverage the moment. Details can come later.

Lest you think only a tirade against Republican leadership and tactics hits the target, don't forget that we are in this mess of continuing brinksmanship because the Democrats failed to pass a 2011 budget when they were in charge. When the last Congress ended, no formal budget was adopted for this fiscal year, which began October 1, 2010.

Instead Congress has relied on a series of continuing resolutions to keep funding government activities. This isn't that unusual in recent times. It has happened under administrations and Congresses controlled by both parties. But not to this extent.

But given the size of the federal deficit and the change in leadership in the House after the 2010 elections, the failure of the Democrats to pass a budget set themselves, and the public, up for a series of on-the-brink decisions to postpone decisions until the next on-the-brink decision.

The first continuing resolution passed on Sept. 29, 2010. Before the April 2 deal, there had been seven continuing resolutions to keep the government going. Three of them were last year when the Democrats still controlled the House.

Ron Eachus of Salem is a former legislator and a former chairman of the Oregon Public Utility Commission. His column appears on Tuesdays. Send e-mail to re4869@comcast.net.