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Obama must force the parties to co-operate

di Clive Crook

In January, a new Republican majority takes charge in the US House of Representatives. The balance of political power is about to shift decisively – yet the result is not pre-ordained. Can a bitterly divided government get things done, or must the country prepare for two years of quarrelsome stagnation?

In the last frantic days of the current session of Congress, the government's authority to spend, the fate of George W. Bush's tax cuts, the possible extension of unemployment benefits and ratification of the Start nuclear arms accord are all in the balance – and politically interconnected. The deals struck, or not struck, in the dying days of this Congress could set a pattern for the remainder of Barack Obama's first presidential term. The signs so far are mixed, but hint at some interesting possibilities

At first sight, the usual post-election promises of co-operation and bipartisanship clash with the reality of bitter political division. On both sides, the prevailing sentiment is "no surrender". The parties have mutually irreconcilable visions of the country's future and are reluctant to give an inch. As the pendulum swings, each in turn interprets electoral success, however tentative, as a mandate for radical change, and electoral defeat, however crushing, as only a temporary setback.

As a result, both sides are less interested in the next two years than in the elections of 2012. The prize that matters is undivided power: control of the White House, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Even with that, as Mr Obama

and the Democrats found, you cannot always do as you wish. Without it, the system is capable only of compromise or paralysis – and given this choice the true believer prefers paralysis.

From Washington: Clive Crook on the intersection of US politics and economics

This is the logic that somehow must be broken. Most Republicans think Mr Obama is beatable in 2012. Until then, meeting him halfway might improve his prospects, so they are doubly reluctant to do it. Many Democrats, on the other hand, believe their best hope of regaining undivided power is to cut no deals and stand on their principles. Ridiculous as this seems, they think they were pounded in last month's midterm elections because the administration has been too timid.

Both sides, therefore, are alarmed by the possibility that Mr Obama might move to the centre and “triangulate” in the style of Bill Clinton. Historically, the combination of a president willing to compromise and defectors in Congress willing to work across the aisle has been able to break the impasse, and to good effect. Arguably, divided government has produced better results.

The problem is that even if Mr Obama wanted to play this role, there are fewer possible defectors in Congress than in the past, and there will be fewer still next year. Moderate “blue dog” Democrats, typically elected in closely contested districts, did especially badly in November. Many Republican newcomers, meanwhile, speak with Tea Party accents. Congress will be more angrily divided than ever.

Yet the picture is not all bad. Note, first, that Mr Obama has reason to be sincere when he calls for new efforts to co-

operate. For the next two years, without Republican support he can get nothing done.

He has struck a conciliatory tone in recent days, calling Republican leaders over for a chat and going so far – almost – as to apologise for his earlier failure to engage with their side. He has signalled a readiness to compromise on extending the Bush tax cuts next year for all Americans, to the dismay of most Democrats in Congress and all of the party's most fervent supporters.

Consider, too, the response to the report of the president's deficit-cutting commission last week. The panel called for a far-reaching mixture of tax and spending reform, aiming to reduce public debt to 40 per cent of gross domestic product by 2035. The proposals, which I praised when an earlier version was released a few weeks ago, offend both parties. Republicans object to the tax increases and Democrats to the cuts in Social Security (pensions) and other programmes.

The initial response from zealots on both sides was predictably vitriolic. However, 11 of the 18 commissioners ended up voting for the plan – more than expected. Also, this majority included both conservative Republicans such as Tom Coburn, senator for Oklahoma, and liberal Democrats, such as Richard Durbin, senator for Illinois.

House members, as you might expect, showed less flexibility. All three House Republicans on the commission and two of the three House Democrats voted against the report (though some of the naysayers found good things to say about it). A majority of 14 was needed to trigger a congressional vote: formally, therefore, the plan goes nowhere.

Nonetheless the report has had an impact. Co-operation on fiscal reform might not be a lost cause, after all. An upper house capable of doing business would give Mr Obama an opening. He should seize it.

Indeed, behind the posturing, a deal linking Start ratification, the extension of unemployment benefits and the temporary extension of the Bush tax cuts for all could be in the offing. It will not happen by itself: Mr Obama will have to press. But if a bargain could be struck, it would be a good beginning – especially if it encouraged the president to explore what a more forceful triangulation strategy might achieve from now on. And I am not just talking about re-election in 2012.