Trump’s pick for Canberra faces deadline

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Donald Trump’s pick for US ambassador to Australia, Republican Washington lawyer Arthur B Culvahouse, could be confirmed by Congress on Wednesday.

Nominated in November to fill the long vacant position in Canberra, Mr Culvahouse’s nomination could be dealt with on the final sitting day of the Senate’s current term, coming amid the growing US government shutdown over Mr Trump’s demands for funding for a border wall with Mexico.

The long-time GOP adviser and former counsel to Ronald Reagan was approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on December 13, but still requires a confirmation vote from the full Senate.

Wednesday is the deadline for any current business, before members elected in the November mid-term elections take their seats for the 116th Congress on Thursday.

Visiting Fellow at the US Studies Centre at Sydney University, Bruce Wolpe, said it was customary on the Senate’s last sitting day for cleared, non-controversial nominations to be processed by unanimous consent after agreement by Senate leaders.

Mr Wolpe, a former adviser to Julia Gillard, said a delay this week would see the nomination process start again.

“If the work has been done by the Senate Republican and Democratic leaders, together with the bipartisan leaders of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, so that the Culvahouse nomination is given priority now as the Senate concludes its business, there is a good chance we will have a new US ambassador to Australia confirmed by Wednesday,” Mr Wolpe said.

However, if the Senate fails to act, the whole process will have to begin again in the new Congress that convenes Thursday. Culvahouse nominated again by the president to the Senate, and new hearings in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and ultimately a vote on the Senate floor at some point later this year.”

Already the ambassador’s position has been vacant for two years.

Charge d’affaires James Caruso has been running the embassy in Canberra since Barack Obama’s pick for ambassador John Berry left Canberra in September 2016.

Mr Culvahouse, who vetted Vice-President Mike Pence for the Trump campaign, has experience dating back to the Watergate crisis and is chairman emeritus and counsel to global law firm O’Melveny and Myers.

He also oversaw the vetting process that led to former senator John McCain picking Sarah Palin as his running mate in 2008 – a choice that backfired badly.

Last month Mr Culvahouse vowed to publicly call out attempts by an “aggressive” China to drive a wedge between the United States and Australia if confirmed as ambassador.

He told the Senate he intended to support the so-called “quad” initiative – a grouping of the US, Australia, Japan and India to counter China’s growing heft in the region.

As part of his nomination, the 70-year-old reported earning $US1.7 million in the past two years for work advising Trump administration officials and large corporate clients.

In financial disclosure forms, he reported providing legal services to US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, US Securities and Exchange Commission chairman Jay Clayton and billionaire financier Stephen A Feinberg.

Mr Culvahouse reported representing Exxon Mobile, the Ford Motor Company and Goldman Sachs, while keeping secret three clients due to legal confidentiality.

He told the Senate he would resign from positions with think tank the Brookings Institution, the University of Tennessee and the US Chamber of Commerce if confirmed.