US Senate sign-off at risk for new envoy

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Donald Trump’s pick for the next US ambassador to Australia, Arthur Culvahouse Jr, could be appointed today but the partial government shutdown has triggered fears the US Senate may not vote on his nomination for several weeks.

The term of the 115th US congress ends at 4pm AEDT today, at which time all existing business in the Senate and House of Representatives — including Mr Culvahouse’s nomination — also expires.

Bruce Wolpe, a visiting fellow at the University of Sydney’s US Studies Centre who has worked in congress, said if a vote on Mr Culvahouse’s nomination was not done today, “it will take several weeks” before the Senate was in a position to do so again.

When the Senate resumes, its priority will be tackling a budget standoff that has led to the government shutdown.

“To process it properly, the President will have to renominate Culvahouse and then the Senate foreign relations committee will have to re-approve him,” he said.

“They will hold a hearing; maybe the committee will waive a hearing based on what occurred previously (when it approved his appointment in mid-December).

“Then the committee will have to vote to send the nomination to the full Senate and the Senate will have to confirm Culvahouse, which is exactly the position they’re in today.”

Sources said it was unlikely Mr Culvahouse would require another confirmation hearing. The new Senate may want to clear the decks and deal with outstanding business, they said, in which case non-controversial votes such as the Culvahouse nomination could be scheduled “in the near future”.

It has been more than two years since the US has had an ambassador in Australia but Mr Wolpe said there was goodwill across the political aisle towards Mr Culvahouse.

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