

By Norman Ornstein

Last week, I felt faint signs of hope that the House might, if only in a small way, show that bipartisan deliberation and compromise was still possible.

The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security under Chairman Robert Aderholt (R-Ala.) and ranking member David Price (D-N.C.) worked in exemplary fashion with care, give-and-take, respect for the views of all sides and a pragmatic effort to strike the right balance between fiscal discipline and protection of the homeland to produce a bill that could garner broad bipartisan support.

Then it all fell apart. When the list of amendments offered to the bill emerged, there were several poisonous ones. Two in particular, offered by Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), were simply unacceptable to Democrats (and privately so to many, many Republicans).

The first would prohibit the use of funds to provide translation and interpretation services to any immigrant with limited English. The second would prohibit the use of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement funds to finalize, implement, administer or enforce directives that enable ICE to focus on criminal aliens for removal, putting their deportation ahead of immigrants who have not committed violent crimes.

To me, these are just extreme, punitive and destructive ideas. Stick it to immigrants of all stripes facing any enforcement allegation or action, adding to hardships and misunderstandings. Go after people who are no threats to American communities before those who are.

House Republican leaders knew that passage of these amendments would destroy the bill's bipartisan support. If they made efforts to block them, they failed spectacularly. The amendments were added to the bill, and instead of a near-unanimous House vote, we got the usual sharp partisan division, with the bill passing by a vote of 234-182.

In the larger scheme of things, this won't much matter. The bill did pass, and while it cuts a sizable chunk out of the Department of Homeland Security's wish-list budget, it protects the basic functions and can probably be reconciled with the Senate version (if there is a Senate version; with appropriations bills, the history is a bit shaky). If and when a conference committee meets, offensive amendments can be excised, probably meaning no ultimate harm.

What is depressing about this is what it says about the contemporary dynamic between leaders and rank-and-file Members. (I would say leaders and followers, but it is not clear these days which is which.)

In the past, leaders would protect deliberation and comity by discouraging or quashing rogue amendments that serve no purpose but to inflame. Now they are either powerless to do so or afraid they will lose support by reining in their extremists. Or there is another explanation: that they really don't care whether bills get broad bipartisan support or reflect an exemplary effort in committee to work together for the national interest.

The House Appropriations Committee has been vilified by many conservatives as the earmarking, big-spending committee, but for most of its history it was the guardian of the public purse, and even in eras of more spending, managed to operate in a thoroughly bipartisan fashion, and not just to encourage bipartisan spending sprees.

Appropriations used to be the core oversight panel, using its venue to examine whether programs were being implemented effectively and efficiently. It did not do "gotcha" oversight but serious work, and almost all of it avoided partisan conflict.

The committee's norms remain strong, but the magnetic pull of tribal and parliamentary-style politics became especially clear in the 111th Congress, when members of both parties were involved in crafting the bills in subcommittee, with minority amendments considered and often added, a process that extended to the full committee. But when the bills hit the floor, the subcommittee and committee minority members who had participated fully in their panels and vetted the bills, voted — usually in unison — against them.

This year, on most of the bills there is another factor: the decision by House Republican leaders to abrogate the deal they agreed to on the debt limit and opt for bigger cuts on discretionary

domestic spending while exempting defense from any of the scheduled cuts.

It would have been tough enough to make the originally agreed-upon cutbacks; the new ones virtually ensured that there would be no bipartisan agreements and that serious confrontation would emerge with the Senate in September ahead of the new fiscal year starting Oct. 1.

I don't think that will lead to shutdowns five weeks before the elections (even hard-line leaders are not suicidal). But after a continuing resolution that takes the disputes past the election, there will be a showdown, probably wrapped into the big showdown over the "fiscal cliff."

These are huge decision points. We need leaders who can lead, and a continuing commitment, when the crunch really comes, to find broad bipartisan leadership agreement and consensus.

The Homeland Security spending bill flap moved from a sign of hopefulness to a warning that more trouble lies ahead.