

The corrosion in the Commons

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The House of Commons has long been a fractious place. In Question Period, the non-answers to questions are drowned out by applause or catcalls, and the Speaker has the thankless job of kindergarten monitor. But it is hard to remember a lower point than now. The Conservatives and the Bloc Québécois are desperate to force an election, the Liberals have used every procedure available to keep governing, and the hostility is corrosive. It's a measure of the debacle that NDP Leader Jack Layton is looking positively statesmanlike in comparison.

Start with the Liberals' offensive decision last month to deny the opposition parties their scheduled day, April 20, to propose a motion and force a vote on it. Government House Leader Tony Valeri, figuring the Conservatives might schedule a no-confidence vote, put off the opposition day until some time in May or June. When the Conservatives tried in committee to set a new opposition day for May 19, the Liberals staged a filibuster. When the Conservatives won that battle, Mr. Valeri had the gall to accuse them of playing politics with House rules. The ill will the government generated with its anti-democratic stunt has fed much of the subsequent animosity.

But there are more than enough stunts to go around. Consider yesterday's outlandish decision by the Conservatives and the Bloc to shut down the Commons and boycott most of its committees.

Yes, the Liberals had said they would not treat Tuesday night's defeat of an opposition motion as a no-confidence vote, but constitutional experts had made it clear that the Liberals were on solid ground. And yes, in setting a confidence vote for next Thursday, Mr. Martin is angling for political advantage by making it a vote on the budget, calculating that voters might resent the Conservatives and the Bloc for deliberately killing a money bill that promised so much to so many.

But for Mr. Harper and Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe to say the government has lost all legitimacy, and to refuse to let Parliament function, is so wildly disproportionate a response as to make Mr. Martin seem the soul of reason in contrast. And Mr. Harper didn't leave it at that. He condemned the Prime Minister for arranging the vote so that it wouldn't conflict with British Columbia's election next Tuesday or the start of next week's visit by Canada's head of state, the Queen. And -- shades of his notorious suggestion last June that Mr. Martin was in favour of child pornography -- Mr. Harper accused the Prime Minister of hoping that cancer would further weaken two Conservative MPs before next Thursday's vote. Seldom has a political leader's election fever proved so virulent. Is it too much to expect the Leader of the Official Opposition to show a little class?

It's not as if Mr. Martin hadn't handed his opponents enough legitimate ammunition. Consider the appearance of manipulating Canada's military priorities to buy Independent

MP David Kilgour's loyalty. While it's hard to argue with military and humanitarian assistance for the Sudanese region of Darfur, the timing of yesterday's announcement suggests a concerted effort to give Mr. Kilgour what he wants -- quick, substantial aid to Darfur -- in return for his support for the government. (Mr. Kilgour was not as impressed as the government might have hoped.) Defence Minister Bill Graham says the timing is entirely coincidental. If only Canadians could be sure of that.

In other military news, the government's participation in the 60th-anniversary commemoration of V-E Day was worthy of farce. First the Prime Minister cancelled his trip to the Netherlands because he feared the Opposition might defeat his government while he was away. Then he and the other leaders turned up after all, missing most of the ceremonies, and agreed to mollify offended veterans by fast-tracking the Veterans' Charter to improve their benefits. They sent the bill to committee -- or will that be one of the ones the Opposition boycotts? Who'd have thought Canada's parties could fumble so simple an act as celebrating the contribution of countrymen who fought so hard to win the Second World War?

Will the government win or lose next Thursday's vote? Who knows. Given the recent behaviour by the main parties, it's tempting to say, who cares. But that's the problem. By their actions, the Conservatives and Liberals have catered to the cynicism many Canadians share about politicians, and have given more people an excuse to hold politics in low esteem. The Commons deserves better than that.