

## Commons session ends with some startling moments of co-operation

Little assurance the collegiality will continue in the fall

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The spring session of Parliament that ended this week was marked by recent moments of cross-Commons co-operation that seemed startling against the backdrop of acrimony that looms over federal politics.

Three of the four parties agreed on a mechanism for reviewing documents related to the treatment of Afghan detainees. There was a negotiated consensus on the reform of the refugee system. There was a deal to expedite a portion of a bill that would restrict criminal pardons. And there was co-operation on the creation of a national seniors day.

But the collegiality that occurred at the session's 11th hour was spurred by the eagerness of MPs to get out of Ottawa. And there is little assurance that it can be sustained when they return in the fall.

NDP Leader [Jack Layton](#) said that, despite periodic harmony between parties on specific issues, the government fosters a constant state of crisis and he foresees a return of the "bumpy rhetoric" in the fall.

Jason Kenney, the Conservative Immigration Minister whose willingness to give and take built unanimity around the refugee bill, said it is easier to get agreement when there is a common objective and public support. Obviously, he said, it requires flexibility.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff said he believes Prime Minister [Stephen Harper](#) was simply forced to compromise on a few key matters.

"I think the Prime Minister believed when he took power in 2006 that the right way to run a minority Parliament is simply to intimidate everybody," Mr. Ignatieff said. "Recently, faced with mounting difficulties of his own, he's actually discovered if you reach across and do a little talking you can get business done."

But intimidation has also proved effective.

One of the bills now before the Senate is a piece of omnibus budget legislation, called C-9, that includes all sorts of measures with little or nothing to do with the budget that are opposed by all three opposition parties. It was passed in the Commons with the help of the Liberals, who were afraid that its defeat would prompt an election.

The New Democrats sneer at what they deem to be Liberal cowardice. They argue the Conservative government would have found a way to compromise on C-9 rather than take the country to the polls just as it was about to host the G8 and G20 summits.

In truth, the Conservatives have no more reason than the Liberals to want an election. While public-opinion surveys suggest Mr. Ignatieff's party is stuck with the support of about 26 per cent of Canadian voters, Mr. Harper's party is well below where it was at the 2008 election.

"I think what we are seeing is a classic case of survival instinct on the part of all the parties," said Nik Nanos of Nanos Research. "It's the truth that no one will speak that no one wants an election and everyone would fear an election. As a result, there is an awkward little dance that takes place as to how would the government survive so that an election could be put off for the time being."

Mr. Harper has been working at broadening his base since he took office four years ago – without much success.

Mr. Ignatieff, who is saddled with dismal approval ratings, will be visiting every province and territory over the summer in an effort to turn things around. Some members of his own caucus say privately that he should quit and let someone else take over before a vote is called.

Nelson Wiseman, an expert in Canadian government and politics at the University of Toronto, said the problem with the Liberals is that they are afraid of their own shadow

"You can see how they panic," he said. "The minute the polls go down they decide if we change the leader it's a magic wand, everything is going to change."

For his part, Mr. Ignatieff claims to like what he is doing. "It is a truly inspiring experience and I am learning every day and want to earn this," he said.

But he cannot enjoy the prospect of returning to a House of Commons in which Mr. Harper governs as if he had a majority, and he is not convinced the Conservatives are eager to foster a new spirit of co-operation.

The real test will come this summer as the parties sort through the issue of the detainees documents, said Mr. Ignatieff. "If we get bad faith on the documents, it's going to make it very difficult for us to go on into the autumn," he said.