

Whose Idea Was That, Anyway?

Information Canada, an agency given to saying that it's not nearly so bureaucratic, yet, as some of those others, is a year old April 1. It was born of the discovery by a big task force on government information that half of all Canadians have a very fuzzy idea, at best, of what the Federal Government is about and that the government hadn't done a terribly sharp job of telling them.

Information Canada is not the voice of government, according to its charter. The government line still comes from individual departments and offices, such as the Ministry of Justice, the Department of External Affairs, or the Prime Minister's Office. Information Canada has three basic functions:

To coordinate information programs of major federal departments and advise them on their job, if they ask;

To initiate information programs which go beyond the interests of individual departments — the poster at left, for example; and

To help Parliament and government listen to the suggestions, hopes, and complaints of Canadians.

To do this, Enquiry Centers are being set up all over the country — places with lounges, reading rooms, screening rooms, computer consoles, and direct phone lines — where people can leave messages for anyone in government (guaranteed delivery) on how they feel or what they want. They can also buy books, government and commercial, and get answers to virtually any factual question about Canada, the government, or government services. The first part is called Information In. The second, Information Out. The hope is for "a new dimension in dialogue," but both Information Canada and Prime Minister Trudeau have taken pains to point out that there is no intention of usurping the job of Parliament.

Recently Information Canada's Director General, Jean-Louis Gagnon, and Deputy Director, R.A.J. Phillips, were interviewed about Informa-

tion Canada's first year. While Information Canada may be the medium for many Canadians, Messrs. Gagnon and Phillips denied that it is the message.

Has your view of the job changed? Do you find the work has made you spokesmen for the government or ombudsmen for the people?

Certainly not a spokesman or ombudsman.

Have you taken a role in the actual information policy of the various departments?

It depends on what you call policy. When two departments are concerned with the same problem, we come in as the coordinator. We deal not with the substance but with the way it's done. For example, we recently helped prepare a new directive on junk mail. Very briefly, the government is going to stop sending it — Canadians will no longer get press releases and so on unless they ask in writing.

A department may ask to borrow a designer from us, but we'll never have any responsibility for what they say.

A good deal of the task force report dealt with the workings of government information services before Information Canada. One problem was that information officers often were not very helpful because they weren't privy to policy decisions in their field. Are they better informed now?

The situation is improving somewhat. Until Information Canada was born, each information officer and each information office was absolutely isolated. Now there is a collective activity amongst information officers and a general assembly of all directors of information. They bring together a certain moral force. They're very much stronger in dealing with administrators.

Is there a credibility gap between the Federal Government and Canadians?

I think the people believe what the government is saying, though that's not the kind of thing for Information Canada to deal with.

What is the purpose of this poster campaign you've launched? Whose idea was it?

There is a very serious purpose indeed. We

< Part of Information Canada's poster series "to communicate with a group impervious to conventional media." Three have been produced so far (turn page for second). A third, ingeniously drawn by Morris Danylewich, quotes Abbé Arthur Maheux: "If one knows his neighbour's tongue, he possesses the key of his house." All are available from Information Canada, Ottawa. Posters one and three are 27 by 40 inches — \$2. Poster two is 27 by 28 — \$1.50, \$5 the set.