

# THE COFFEE AND COOKIES OMBUDSMAN

By Lewis Seale

Keith Spicer, the flamboyant young professor-journalist who once advised Scarborough College students that the best place to learn French is in bed, has become an Ottawa bigwig and learned a new style.

As the Federal Commissioner of Official Languages, an ombudsman with wide power to ensure equal treatment for English and French in federal agencies and crown corporations, he shuns dramatic confrontations in favour of what he likes to call the coffee and cookies approach.

Stripped to its essentials, this means he loosens his tie and talks to the people involved in disputes in the big orange armchairs in his office rather than in a courtroom atmosphere.

"You've got to use your bloody head as well as your bleeding heart," he said in an interview recently.

Thus he interprets the Official Languages Act of 1969 to say that he can help make French a working language in the civil service, but he sees this as a long-range programme that it would be quixotic to try to implement immediately.

## Not Faceless Mandarin

Mr. Spicer is still not the image of the faceless mandarin, despite his rank as a deputy minister. With his long hair in a fashionable tangle and his shirtsleeves rolled up, he looks more like a bright young man from a far-out task force.

But he has turned out to be the singleminded crusader that some people pictured when the act established his job with vast powers of inquiry—a Czar, a potentate, or (this from John Diefenbaker) a super-duper-snooper.

In the 10 months since he took office, he has been involved in only one public controversy, and

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he cooled it quickly with apologies to Air Canada employees who protested that Mr. Spicer's officials were unfairly spying on their bilingualism.

The coffee and cookies approach was the one Mr. Spicer took on his first difficult case and it worked so well that he hopes never to have to abandon it.

As he recalls it, the case involved an official who angrily tore up a form because it had been filled out in French. Mr. Spicer got a complaint and invited the official over to tell his side of the story.

"I was trembling more than he was," Mr. Spicer said. They sat down in the orange armchairs with their coffee and the official quickly admitted that tearing up the form was a mistake. He volunteered an apology and Mr. Spicer's secretary translated the note into French for him and typed