

Politics on the Cutting Edge

Behind the Little Rock-Silicon Valley connection is an unorthodox legislator who's forging a new partnership between California and its business sector—part of an innovative plan to revitalize the state's economy while protecting its social programs against further cuts

BY HAL PLOTKIN

BLOOD-RED HUES pulsate into a purple fold in the framed finger-painting that decorates John Vasconcellos' small two-bedroom Santa Clara condo. The handiwork looks a bit like an impressionistic stop sign.

"It's my heart," he says, surprised that the viewer doesn't immediately recognize the bluish outline. "And that," he continues, pointing toward a small coagulate, "is the clot." The creation serves as an artful reminder of mortality to the veteran assemblyman, who created the piece while recuperating from a 1984 heart attack.

After a seven-way bypass operation, Vasconcellos heard what he considered to be even worse news than the heart attack that preceded the surgery: Either give up his position as chair of the powerful Assembly Ways and Means Committee or start planning his funeral.

His regular routine—weekly commutes to and from Sacramento, long committee hearings, contentious negotiations, poor diet, inadequate exercise and a policy of personally seeing every single constituent who requested some time—was killing him. The best thing, he was advised, would be to cash in on his service as the second-most-senior legislator in Sacramento.

As the longest-serving chairman in the history of the California Assembly's key budget-writing committee, Vasconcellos would have had no problem finding lucrative employment. In a few months, a year or two at most, the eldest son of a strait-laced, Portuguese-German Catholic family could have squirreled away more money as a lobbyist or an industry consultant than he had made in his entire career in Sacramento. The time had come for Vasconcellos to take the money and run—to a nice beach house somewhere.

Vasconcellos thought it over "for about two seconds," he says, and then headed for the racquetball court and the salad bar, determined to regain his health and to continue one of the most remarkable careers in local public service.

Despite a comparatively paltry personal financial net worth of about \$50,000, Vasconcellos says, "I learned a long time ago that I don't really need a lot of money to be happy."

Although he belongs to a generation that values material accumulation, Vasconcellos owns few possessions. He has no TV. His dilapidated car, a convertible with a leaky roof, was a local fixture for more than ten years until it finally collapsed in a heap. His wardrobe, a notorious trademark collection of rags, T-shirts and ill-fitting suits, wins him unending derision from his friends, including his longtime ally, Assembly Speaker Willie Brown Jr.

"A few years ago, when we were in New York, I took John shopping," the fastidious Brown recalls. "We picked out a nice double-breasted blue blazer and appropriate pants, and for a period of a few months John looked great. But now," Brown laughs, "John has retrogressed beyond repair."

For entertainment, Vasconcellos prefers movies, that is, when he is not devouring novels at a pace of two or more per week. Between books, there is an endless series of meetings.

More than most public figures, Vasconcellos thrives on human contact. In restaurants and grocery stores, he usually takes time to talk with those who recognize him, often jotting down their names and addresses. A week or



Straight Talker: Assemblyman John Vasconcellos has a reputation for speaking his mind

two later, the former strangers will likely find a handwritten note from Vasconcellos in their mailbox, thanking them for recognizing him and offering help whenever needed. Dozens of such notes go out each week.

Vasconcellos' ascetic tastes were nurtured by his Jesuit training, first at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose and later at Santa Clara University, where he served as student body president. As an undergraduate, Vasconcellos delivered the valedictory address, in which the straight-arrow student pledged to devote his life to furthering the work of Jesus Christ.

It was at Santa Clara's law school, however, where Vasconcellos became enmeshed in his first major political skirmish with earthly powers, challenging the law school dean's competence. The battle almost cost Vasconcellos his diploma, but ended with the removal of the offending official. "The president graduated me and fired the dean," Vasconcellos relates.

Soon thereafter, the Jesuit crusader was drafted into public service. A group of friends began drumming up support for a Vasconcellos run for the state Assembly. The district of Assemblyman Al Alquist, who was busy running for the state Senate seat he still holds, was open, and without bothering to tell him, Vasconcellos' friends launched a campaign. One of them placed a call to Vasconcellos and informed him he was in the race.

At the time, Vasconcellos, who had already served as an aide to former Gov. Edmund G. (Pat) Brown Sr., was managing, with 15 other young Catholic men, a fund that had been established to work on hunger issues, push for enforcement of minimum-wage laws and enact fair housing policies. In 1966, Vasconcellos, with eight fellow Catholic activists in tow, joined Cesar Chavez on his now famous

Good Friday march from Delano to Sacramento.

Young Vasconcellos won handily that November. Since then, he has notched 24 straight electoral victories, with a close contest only once, in 1976, when then-Santa Clara Councilman Bill Gissler came within four percentage points of ousting Vasconcellos.

His performance at the polls is remarkable, even astonishing, given the controversy often generated by the unorthodox legislator. Take, for instance, the time he announced, in December 1974, that he was forming a new political movement. Dubbed "Self-Determination: A Personal/Political Network," the new group's goals included fostering "humanistic alternatives" aimed at recognizing "the energetic, emerging movements regarding human personal needs and wants, sexual revolution, new religious drugs, encounter, sensitivity, etc."

Sacramento's startled press corps, which had voted Vasconcellos "best freshman member of the Assembly" in 1967, now had no idea what to make of the shaggy-haired rebel. By 1974, of course, they had seen people like him—but never walking around inside the state Capitol, let alone actually belonging there. The "touchy-feely" label made its debut.

Vasconcellos, however, seemed to revel in the attention. There was, for example, the now-infamous episode when Vasconcellos persuaded a coed group of legislators, including Willie Brown, Leona Egeland and Bob Moretti, to join him for a naked soak in Big Sur's Esalen Institute hot tub. The goal was to get the legislators to open up to each other and realize their commonality. At first ridiculed, the event helped break an interpersonal logjam in the legislature and left Vasconcellos with a pile of requests from other legislators ready for their own soaks.