

The Case of the Liberated Legislator

by RALPH KEYES

John Vasconcellos is decidedly not your regular run-of-the-mill, traditional California assemblyman. He practices what might be called the politics of personal openness, and he could be representative of a new and growing constituency.

Ralph Keyes, author of *We, The Lonely People*, recently wrote about singer-composer Dory Previn in HUMAN BEHAVIOR.

For some time I'd been hearing about a California assemblyman from San Jose who was supposed to be "different." John Vasconcellos, rumor had it, was a known participant in encounter groups, a confessed reader of Paul Goodman and a proponent of a futuristic politics based on personal liberation. When I wrote the assemblyman, he put me on his mailing list. Every couple of months, mixed in with circulars from Sears and 10¢-off coupons would be Xeroxed articles Vasconcellos had liked and underlined, a lists of books he'd recently read (85 of them) and regular newsletters addressed to "Friend," and signed "Peace," in which John would wonder aloud about whether to stay in politics and report such news as: "I try to be myself with all persons, and to be open—not claiming to know all the answers, but ready to listen, think deeper, learn more—so I may keep growing, as a person and as a legislator."

I mentioned this assemblyman in a *Human Behavior* article on the influence of encounter groups and soon got a penned note from Vasconcellos agreeing with the piece overall, but questioning one part. I'd argued that such groups don't really influence people deeply but also listed examples of personal change reported by encounter veterans. Vasconcellos questioned the contradiction, adding, "For me, encounter helped (plus much other experience). I now live very differently—not as fully in political as personal relationships—yet radically different from before in both."

Just a few days later, Vasconcellos's office called from Sacramento to see if I'd lunch with the assemblyman while he was in San Diego for an education committee hearing. While eating fish and chips sitting on the grass beside San Diego's harbor, we watched Navy destroyers and talked about politics, what life was like for us in high school and with our parents. When I returned home that evening, a message was waiting from two hours before to call the assemblyman at his hotel. When I called back, he said he'd phoned only to say that while he had enjoyed our time together, he felt we hadn't quite "made contact."

Only after I'd hung up did it occur to me that this prominent political figure seemed to be spending a lot of time alone in his hotel room; so I picked up the phone again and invited him to join us for some sausage and rice. He seemed delighted and

soon arrived in a cab. My wife, Muriel, teaches a method for improving posture, and John spent a lot of time discussing this with her, since growing more comfortable with his body is so important to him. We ended up lounging on the floor of our living room, listening to the music of Dory Previn who, like Vasconcellos, was born a left-handed Catholic and thinks a lot about her parents. I think we may have made contact.

Wondering how this man functions within his political community, at the beginning of this year's assembly session I traveled to Sacramento; Vasconcellos was meeting with the education committee when I arrived. "Vasco" (his assembly nickname) stood out on the platform, partly because of the beacon of his red plaid jacket, partly because he's a bear of a man—well over six feet and 200 pounds, with a full head of dark, curly hair. Vasco also seemed the most restless man present. Out of his seat more often than in, he consulted with a succession of young faces in the audience including an attractive young secretary who showed her boss some papers, then examined his face and asked, "You okay?" She reacted skeptically when the assemblyman quickly replied, "Sure."

Vasconcellos had two bills before the committee: one to set up a pilot drug study program, another to loosen the state's educational code. In defending the bills, he put one foot on the lectern's ledge, turned somewhat to the side and lightly chopped the air like John Kennedy.

His first bill passed, eight ayes the chairman at first reported, correcting himself when Vasconcellos said, "I believe that's nine, Mr. Chairman."

"He's right," muttered Susy Lange, Vasco's administrative assistant, sitting next to me in the audience. "Don't argue with John. He's always right. He's so careful about everything. I hate it."

During debate on Vasconcellos's next bill, revising the education code, some committee members suggested clarifying its implications for teachers' collective bargaining. "Oh, do it, John," Susy muttered. "It might get through anyway but it would be a good political thing to do." She half-turned to me, explaining, "But he's not always political."

The bill passed committee unamended and Vasco sailed from the room, his broad mouth stretched in a grin. Susy and I caught up with him checking out from the assembly floor, just as he stepped onto a scale in the hallway. "Hm, 204," he mumbled,

getting off the scale, grin still alive.

"Get in the habit of acknowledging support, John," said Susy, a 27-year-old former Peace Corpswoman who looks like Joan Baez.

"I did," he replied without losing his smile.

"Yeah, but you didn't with Dorothy Ellenburg."

John toed the floor. "Yeah, well . . ." He looked up again, still cheerful. "I'm really surprised we won."

John Vasconcellos was voted Best

"For solace, the young legislator turned to works in humanistic psychology."

entered the assembly in 1970, says that during their first year together he used to tell his colleague from San Jose, "You know, I'm sure glad you're around. You carry the burdens of the



Vasconcellos reviews proposed bills with his administrative assistant, Susy Lange.

Freshman Assemblyman by the capital press corps after being elected in 1967 along with 34 others—the largest freshman class ever. (It was Ronald Reagan's freshman year as governor, too.) A 42-year-old bachelor, he won scholastic honors and class office as an undergraduate and law student at the Jesuit's University of Santa Clara. After practicing law for a few years, Vasconcellos served one year as ex-Governor Pat Brown's travel secretary, then won a six-man primary and election to the assembly as a Kennedy Democrat.

Most of the photographs in Vasco's cluttered office are of Kennedys, including one of John Kennedy shaking hands with a slimmer, crew-cut Vasconcellos wearing a skinny tie. To the side of his desk is hung the picture of a laughing Jesus captioned: "Live not in ANGER but in LAUGHTER."

Two years before entering the assembly, John Vasconcellos was so grimly devout a Catholic that he opposed translation of the mass into English, and during his first term joined other assemblymen in a bible study group. Jim Keysor, a Democrat from the San Fernando Valley who

world on your shoulders. As long as I know you're carrying them around for me, I can relax."

Keysor, a Mormon, grins. "You know what he said? 'That's right. I am carrying those burdens around.' And he meant it. My first year or two here, John used to walk around very sober, with a worried expression on his face all the time."

Vasconcellos was working on his shoulders when he got back from a trip to Berkeley the evening of my first day in Sacramento. He'd just been to see Stanley Keleman, a bioenergetics therapist who's worked with John for three years, helping him loosen bodily tension and release repressed feelings such as anger. "It was really a good session," he said, looking more tired and relaxed than when he left. He flexed his torso like a fighter warming up. "Look at my shoulders. They've really gotten lower. Listen," he said, twisting them halfway around. A popping, grinding sound could be heard within. He smiled. "Isn't that weird? I don't know what causes that sound, but something sure is going on in there." The assemblyman popped and ground his

shoulders one last time, then let them fall into their natural place, saying, "They sure do feel a lot less tense. My whole body does."

At supper that night—meat and pasta with red wine in a trattoria—Vasconcellos described for me some highlights of his sojourn, saying, "I remember growing up being very afraid. In high school, I ran for student office twice and failed. Both times I got up on stage for a speech and all I could stutter out was 'Vote for me.' Even later, in college, I was really afraid despite my successes. Until 1966, I couldn't give a speech without writing it out word-for-word beforehand."

One incident in particular stands out in John's psychological memory—the time an old college roommate wrote the then-29-year-old Vasconcellos a letter accusing him of being distant, cold, aloof, of not knowing how to love. John wasn't sure what his friend meant, even after talking with him, but the charge gnawed.

By the time he entered the assembly, Vasconcellos's neatly dressed, closely shorn exterior hid from colleagues the inner turmoil that accompanied the crumbling of his lifelong Catholic belief. For solace, the young legislator turned to the works of humanistic psychology—Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and, particularly, *The Transparent Self* by Sidney Jourard, which became a textbook for his early transition. In late 1968, he joined an encounter group at the Los Angeles home of actress Jennifer Jones, which he today recalls as "a

Ray Gonzales, chairman of the education committee, chats with Vasconcellos.



big nothing." But he continued to seek similar experiences, including one five-day group at Esalen, where he had his first taste of body therapy. Observing the big assemblyman's physical tension, his taut shoulders, the group leader suggested prophetically that there might be much anger locked within.

John saw his point. "I'd always been a bright, achieving, locked-away person," he explains. "I'd been raised so long as a strict Catholic intellectual, and what these experiences did were to give me a whole new framework, a process to justify emotional and physical exploration."

As with so many of us, the transformation from the person he'd been to the one he wants to be hasn't always been smooth for John Vasconcellos. As he tried to loosen up, to be more free with his feelings, anger was a feeling he began to share rather frequently with his colleagues. There was a time around the turn of the decade when the San Jose assemblyman was losing his temper so regularly—about Vietnam, put-downs of the young and laws of sexual repression—that some colleagues were seriously concerned about him. "I've seen John so mad he'd pretty nearly froth," recalls one Republican assemblyman. "He's kind of like an artist, or a musician—temperamental. If one thing's out of place, he almost turns white with rage. But next time, you'll see him mellow—like a big old dog."

Vasconcellos is painfully aware of his reputation for popping off and doesn't deny it's been a problem. He explains, "When I first got here, I was so insecure I wouldn't go talk to people who didn't agree with me—conservatives—but I didn't realize why. I thought they were just bad guys." He adds that at one time he thinks a couple of people from each party were assigned to come over and keep an eye on him whenever he got mad on the assembly floor.

"Do you really believe that?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Well, the same four people sure seemed to show up around my desk pretty regularly for a while there whenever I lost my temper."

His colleagues confirm that there was a time when John concerned them—but say this time has past. Ways and Means chairman Willie Brown of San Francisco, recently defeated in a close race for assembly speaker, has watched Vasco, over a seven-year period, transform from the trim young Kennedyite to a shaggy humanist lashing out at those who disagreed with him. "At one time," Brown told

"On issues today, I think we're just beginning to catch up with him."

me, "if I had to predict whether John would stick around, I'd definitely have said no."

But John recently bought some new clothes and got his hair trimmed and, just that morning, put on his jacket without protest for a Ways and Means picture that impressed the committee chairman, who replaces his own wardrobe every year or two. "Before, he might have refused, felt that was hypocrisy and said, 'I'll turn my head as the camera clicks, anyway.' Today, I think John feels that he'd rather put on a jacket and have people hear what he says."

Brown, recently demoted from his chairmanship after losing the speaker's race, as was Leroy Greene for supporting him, feels Vasconcellos's impact on the assembly has often been intangible—that of an example, a model of openness. "His mere presence," explains Brown, "prevents me from being too hostile against human beings with whom I'm having problems." The San Franciscan remembers in particular the time he and a fellow Democrat were berating each other on Ways and Means. "John literally went about changing my attitude toward this man and helped us work out our problems, pointing out that we were on the same side of things and shouldn't be arguing so much.

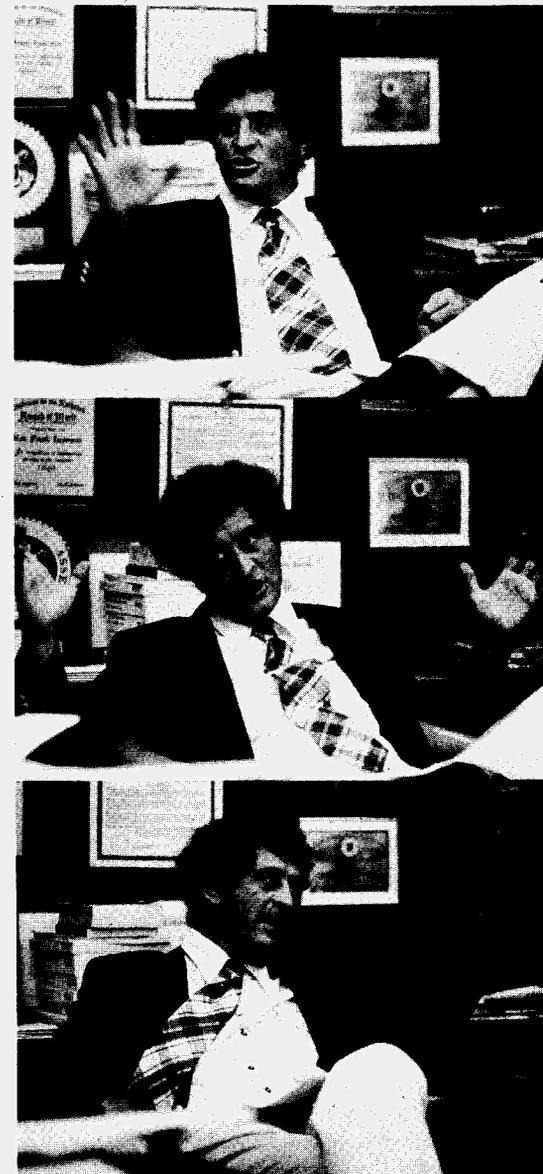
"His attitude of openness and peacefulness has definitely had an impact," concludes Brown, adding "and on issues today, I think we're just beginning to catch up with him."

This is something you hear often about John Vasconcellos in the assembly, that "we're catching up with him." Positions he supported long before respectability included decriminalization of marijuana possession, state-supported methadone maintenance, open voting in committee and full financial disclosure for legislators. Today, the San Jose assemblyman could be the lone elected voice in this country proposing we explore the link between personal and political repression. He argued once in debate on the assembly's floor, "It seems to me that it might be time that there be some questions raised about the relationship between violence and repressed sexuality or rampant materialism and repressed sexuality."

Kindred spirits look with anticipation on John Vasconcellos as a fore-

runner, others with dread. Reapportionment has thinned the assembly's 80 members of white-haired farmers and replaced them with a new breed of flare-bottomed urbanites who bandy phrases such as *self-esteem* and *affective education*.

Vasconcellos is not the California Assembly's only seeker. Several assemblymen told me of attending encounterlike groups themselves (Jim Keysor called his "self-awareness sessions") and various legislators have



The assemblyman discusses the protection of mental patients during a meeting in a colleague's office.

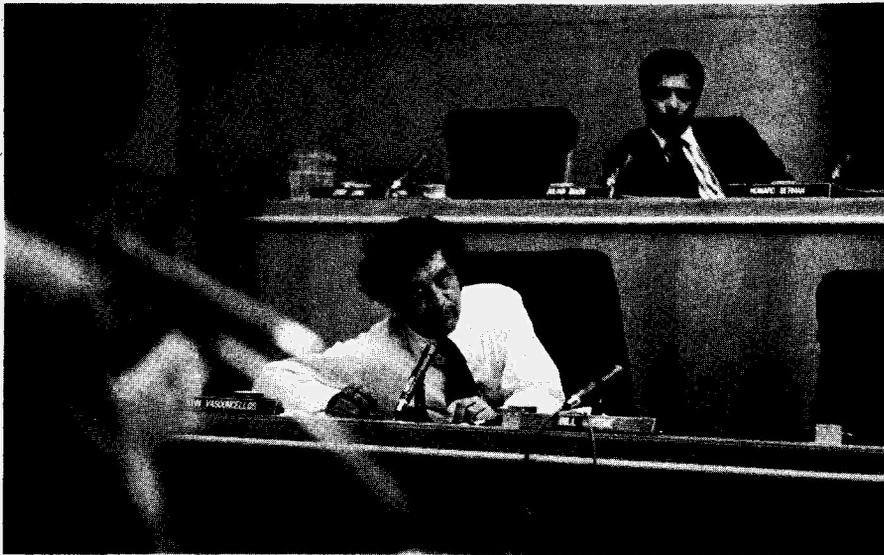
sampled transcendental meditation, including one enthusiast who proposed it be taught in schools. Assemblyman John Dunlap (D-Vallejo), himself involved with transactional analysis, estimates that 25 percent of his colleagues have had similar personal growth experiences, although none so publicly as Vasconcellos.

When discussion of this new style among legislators comes up, Vasco's is usually the first name mentioned.

"John may be a forerunner of where we're going and may not," muses Leroy Greene, former chairman of the assembly education committee that Vasconcellos has made his focus. "He draws attention to areas we might not consider otherwise—drug use, organic structures, the role of students and faculty in governance. The point is that John Vasconcellos is an intelligent man and you must consider his

"I still get angry, but that's part of being open—sharing my anger."

was sponsoring, one for which he'd already lined up enough support. "John admitted that he didn't have the answer to the question and would have to go back and 'work things out.'



Members of the assembly education committee listen attentively to testimony.

viewpoint no matter what it is. Also, he has a pattern of success in carrying legislation."

But Greene's personal reaction to much of the message propounded by the variety of pilgrims, experimental educators, mediators and "Y-groupers" his younger colleague has invited to testify before their committee is: "It's a lot of crap." A white-haired engineer from Sacramento and 12-year assembly veteran, Greene sees no better world dawning and feels sure the motivation of man hasn't changed much in 10,000 years no matter what "utopia seekers" such as his San Jose colleague may hope.

The image John Vasconcellos seems to project in the California Assembly is that of a modern-day Jesus, or perhaps Savonarola, stalking the halls of iniquity sternly preaching a message of joy and being rigid in his defense of flexibility. *Our conscience* is a term you hear used often to describe the assemblyman from San Jose; "Someone to measure yourself and your motives against," in colleague Leroy Greene's words.

Freshman Democrat Barry Keene of Santa Rosa told me of watching Vasconcellos struggle on the assembly floor with a question about a bill he

This usually means politically but, in his case, John already had the votes and he meant simply that it was a fair question and that he needed to seek the answer."

Trim and pin-striped, at 35, Keene is a former prosecutor who says he's sampled transcendental meditation to cope with the pressures of his first assembly term, and he almost took up Vasco's invitation to attend an Esalen seminar before "chickening out." Although he feels his colleague from San Jose can be introspective and hair-splitting past the point of effectiveness, Keene says Vasconcellos's openness has often provided comforting respite during a frustrating year. "The political roles and the games that occur here really prevent an honest exchange on human questions," he explains, "with a few exceptions like John who bends over so far backward to be open."

John Vasconcellos gets discussed a lot in the state capitol and is one of the three or four "most talked about" assemblymen according to Jim Keyser. In addition to his reputation as an expert on education, Vasco is famous for the Xeroxed articles and book lists he's always circulating to colleagues. One twinkling Republican

told me that Vasconcellos—of whom he professed to be "very fond"—turned down his offer to read every book and article John passed his way if John would only agree to reciprocate.

Outside California's Assembly, John Vasconcellos is slowly building a national constituency of human potentialists, experimental educators and others interested in new approaches to being human. He is a regular speech giver at human-potential gatherings, and this year was one of the few state legislators invited by the Ford Foundation and Department of Health, Education and Welfare to a national conference on higher education, and the only one to attend. He also recently coauthored, with Stanley Keleman, a *Psychology Today* review of Wilhelm Reich's *Sex-Pol Essays* in which the two concluded: "Perhaps our apathy, violence, greed, need for drugs and lack of self-esteem can all be traced to our repressed sexuality and our rejection of our bodies."

This position, of course, has personal implications. Since becoming involved with Neo-Reichian therapy himself, Vasconcellos feels if not less angry, at least more focused in his anger, and more clear about why he does get upset.

"I still get angry, but that's part of being open—sharing my anger," he explains. "And I like Bill Schutz's line, that anger is always a second feeling—that it covers up primary feelings such as hurt or embarrassment. I get most angry when I'm caught in a mistake or don't get taken seriously. That's when I become righteous and preachy. I don't like that, but I'm less that way than I used to be. I think I feel good enough about myself by now not to have to push other people too hard."

Vasco told me this while driving his mustard-colored Pontiac Grand Ville convertible through the barren farmlands between Sacramento and San Jose where he had a constituents' meeting that night.

"I've been through a lot of changes," he continued, "and a lot of it isn't visible to people outside because my beliefs remain the same—those of an intellectual and social liberal.

"But from being very guilt-ridden, withdrawn and unfeeling, I think I've gone to being pretty loose, okay with how I am, liberated. I'm much more aware of what I'm feeling inside and share that with other people."

I asked how he tuned in on his feelings, and he pondered a while before responding. "Sometimes," he says, "being aware of my shoulders hunching some, my legs being locked tighter,

sometimes just not being very comfortable."

Since becoming so involved with body therapy, Vasco adds, "I feel more, recognize my wants and needs more. That sounds like a lot of words, trite phrases. But Stanley Keleman told me the other day that I was 80 percent looser than when I first saw him, and 80 percent more aware of the tightnesses still in me. I hear that as an accurate observation. I breathe more deeply, I'm pretty comfortable with who I am. That's not to say I'm

"I see myself mostly legislating for alternatives. There should be choices."

not impatient about being looser and freer—but I don't seem to get into any heavy depression kinds of places—although maybe they just haven't happened. I'm more impulsive and quite a bit less afraid to pursue the impulse or act it out."

Although he can't see a direct effect of this personal evolution on his work in the assembly, Vasco says that just feeling more comfortable with himself, more "grounded," helps put him more at ease with colleagues, with less demands on them.

Vasconcellos also feels his political views changing as he grows more comfortable with himself—from those of a doctrinaire liberal to one more focused on personal freedom. "Something like helmet-wearing for motorcyclists is an issue I would have voted for at one time," he explains. "Now I believe people should make that choice for themselves.

"I see myself mostly into legislating for alternatives. I don't want all schools to be free schools. There should be choices, not just what liberals and humanists believe best."

This position isn't so far from Burkeian conservatism that someone so classically educated as Vasco can avoid the comparison. In a speech last year to an Association for Humanistic Psychology gathering, he spoke of the need to decentralize power "for which

I do commend Richard Nixon, along with Will [Schutz]. . . ."

While recognizing the traditional thread in his evolving politics, Vasconcellos still emphasizes the unresolved paradox. "I curiously find," he continued in the same speech, "that the most traditionally conservative people—those often thought of as conservative or reactionary—though they tend not to have a very positive sense of what it means to be human, they do tend to have some strong sense about individual freedom and not wanting to be controlled by the state. I can't figure out how it fits together."

In the car, he told me of discussing encounter groups with Max Rafferty while sitting next to California's then-superintendent of public instruction at a dinner. "Rafferty gave the clearest statement of the opposition view when he told me that he was against encounter groups because they help man find what he wants when man should deny his self. I could really see the contrast with my Reichian sense."

Attempting to balance Burke with Reich, and find the common ground between Schutz and Nixon, Vasco feels relatively alone in his mix of political views. Within the assembly, he reports feeling most at home with some younger staffers. On the national scene, he's identified strongly with no one since the death of Robert Kennedy. His emphasis on personal trust has led him to political alliances based more on gut reaction than issues as such. In 1968, the assemblyman supported a friend running against Sen. Alan Cranston in the Democratic primary, and in 1970 endorsed John Tunney for the Senate because he liked the boxer's son better personally than his primary opponent, George Brown, who was more liberal on the issues. In California's 1974 Democratic primary, Vasco emphasized his affection and trust for Bob Moretti in backing the assembly speaker's unsuccessful campaign for governor.

This is not "new politics," if new politics is defined as one based on issues more than personal reaction. If anything, Vasconcellos's style is closer to an older, even a clubhouse, politics of personal alliance and loyalty. I've pointed this out to him more than once, usually getting a shrug and a "maybe so" in response. But he adds that his faith in self-direction, optimism about the human condition and attempt to relate personal and political repression are political approaches Ronald Reagan can't buy, let alone Boss Tweed.

Vasco's attempts to draw political



Stopping for lunch (above), Vasconcellos then joins several senate staff members in the park.



philosophy from personal growth often strike me as vague and confused, probably because this is where he is as a person—still in transition and working out in his own mind how human liberation becomes a social agenda. Also, his rhetoric, relying as it does on phrases such as “being in touch with myself,” or “a positive, affirming, trusting in the organism,” is heavily influenced by today’s humanists who, among their cures, include no antidote for clichés.

My own feeling, similar to Willie Brown’s, is that the approach of John Vasconcellos and all those California legislators sampling new approaches to human growth will have more impact on our political style than the agenda. And just as encounter groups first flourished in California, as with drive-in movies before them and nude beaches today, so does the politics of open feeling have a head start in Esalen’s home state. When Willie Brown stood before 1972’s Democratic convention, shaking his fist and demanding they “give me back my delegation!” he exemplified perfectly an encounter politics—the personalization of a political issue—arguing less the right to be seated of the delegation he headed than his own outrage at having it taken away.

Although the politics of personal openness may be less risky in California, it can lose votes here as elsewhere. Knowing opponents have at times tried to beat Vasconcellos over the head with Esalen or charge him with encouraging sex among schoolchildren, I asked the assemblyman if he worried much about the practical consequences of his open personal quest. “Well,” he replied after a long pause, “I worry about the political consequences but not a great deal.

“It’s a curious thing, that a lot of the things that we think can’t be discussed, written or said are often the things people really want to talk about. I was doing a weekly newspaper column after Robert Kennedy died, and that week put together some songs and poetry expressing my feelings; then sent this to some friends. One, a lawyer, called to say it was really beautiful, but that I shouldn’t send it to too many people because it was politically dangerous. Another woman called to say the same thing—it’s good, but don’t let it get too far. People don’t give other people enough credit for what they can handle.”

Also, Vasco’s quick to add, he’s yet to be burned politically by his openness; so it’s not pragmatically proved a “problem.” His San Jose-Santa Clara constituency is sort of Oregonish—white, bright, well-educated,

“The politics of open feelings have a head start in Esalen’s home state.”

young and predominantly Democratic. Every two years since 1966, Vasconcellos has been elected by comfortable margins, and this year he had no opposition in the primary, before facing a last-minute Republican entry.

Through his transition period—the years of long hair and short temper—John debated with himself daily about whether to stay in office. Today, he feels sure of wanting to stay in the assembly, saying, “Mainly, because I like it. I haven’t always. But I like the place, like being there—to raise questions and to show that you can be honest, open and up front and still be elected. I like providing an alternative model.”

We pulled into the parking lot of an elementary school in San Jose for John’s town hall meeting, one of three or four he holds every year. Fifty or so people were waiting for him, sitting on folding seats, mostly white, a few with beards, dressed well generally, but not elegantly. Soon after he entered, a stream of newcomers filled the small auditorium—brawny men with potbellies, wearing cut-off jackets and cardigan sweaters—who had arrived together in three chartered buses, to protest revocation of a bus line charter. John glanced around the crowding auditorium, smiling uncomfortably, and began flexing his shoulders.

“There they go again,” I said.

“Yeah,” he replied with a tight grin, twisting his torso and making it pop.

The meeting started, and one of the earlier arrivals, identifying himself as “a European,” began to question John in a thick accent about behavior problems in the schools. John explained that the money situation had forced staff cutbacks and had created some of this problem. His interrogator wondered why they didn’t just use fewer teachers and more discipline. “That’s one theory of education,” John replied, “not one I like or prefer. Some people believe more discipline is necessary. I believe it’s not. Maybe we ought to have different kinds of schools to try more different ways.”

Leaning against a desk in front, he looked imposing but comfortable, listening intently to each speaker, cocking his head a bit to one side and letting his mouth hang open. Occasionally, he’d smile.

I had to leave early. Kay Davis, John’s Santa Clara aide, drove me to catch a bus. On the way, she told me that the number-one comment about Vasconcellos among constituents was that he was honest; number-two, that he was “too hippy.” I asked if his participation in encounter groups and the like ever came back to haunt him, and she said rarely. Most people just didn’t know about it or, if they did, didn’t care.



Working late in his office, Vasconcellos takes a telephone call.

It’s hard for me to envision John Vasconcellos still getting elected to office while taking so many risks personally. Willie Brown sees it the other way around, sees Vasco representing “the new constituency,” as a sort of antipolitician, a “Naderite” of the breed who will prevail in the future.

John himself regards the whole issue as irrelevant, feeling sure he wants to stay in politics but not being too concerned if this isn’t to be. At one time he thought about teaching after leaving politics, by choice or necessity, but today he wonders if he might prefer becoming a therapist, a therapist of the body. I wondered how that related to politics and what was the common thread? He chewed for a while, then said, “Well, in both professions I’d be trying to affect structures that imprison people.”

We laughed together at the glib eloquence of the remark, but I copied it down anyway and said maybe I’d work it into the story. HB