

Guardian Angel?

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Conventional wisdom says Los Angeles Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa will reach out to the city's burgeoning Latino population. But L.A.'s first Latino mayor since Lincoln's time is more likely to leave an indelible mark by wooing business and the middle class and fighting against L.A.'s march toward un-livability.

Mr. Villaraigosa's 59% to 41% near-landslide on Tuesday over Mayor James Hahn was delivered in large part by liberal voters. But Mr. Villaraigosa also trounced Mr. Hahn thanks to top business leaders whose endorsements helped make him palatable to moderates in the San Fernando Valley and to Republicans who comprise one-quarter of Los Angeles.

It wasn't a pretty victory. Mr. Villaraigosa almost hourly taunted Mr. Hahn's administration as "the most investigated" in city history -- he couldn't go any further since investigators have brought forth criminal charges only in a single, garden-variety case involving a PR firm that overbilled City Hall. And those ho-hum charges had nothing to do with Mr. Hahn.

For his part, Mr. Hahn, an aggressive campaigner, tenaciously focused on Mr. Villaraigosa's ultra-liberal history as a labor organizer and chief of the local ACLU. Mr. Villaraigosa once spoke out fervently about the rights of gang members, a fact Mr. Hahn frequently hammered. That issue found traction at the end, when the local media, perhaps feeling a touch of remorse for its histrionic coverage of Mayor Hahn's tenure, finally began looking at Mr. Villaraigosa's record. The gruesome campaign robbed L.A. residents of a debate on big ideas, and turnout plunged to about 33%.

With all that mudslinging, it's little wonder that few voters ever heard about one of the most fascinating periods in Mr. Villaraigosa's up-from-the-streets life: his time as Speaker of the California State Assembly from 1998 through 2000. Naturally, Mr. Villaraigosa excelled at the age-old Sacramento parlor game of launching entitlement programs for which California taxpayers then get soaked. But he surprised everyone by being fair-minded and reaching across the political aisle to find common ground with conservatives. To the consternation of the left, he consistently refused to paint the private sector as "bad."

Now, having promised he'll be a mayor who "pays attention to the middle class," Mr. Villaraigosa may prove to be more adroit at that task than Mr. Hahn, the putative pro-business moderate in City Hall. Like California's recalled former governor, Gray Davis, Mayor Hahn made the grave error of trying to appease big labor bosses and racial identity groups. Gov. Davis did so in a misguided effort to avoid a recall. Mayor Hahn did it to avert the very debacle he suffered Tuesday -- losing his job to the looming lefty, Mr. Villaraigosa.

I ran into Mr. Hahn in the green room at KCET, L.A.'s public TV station, shortly after he was elected in 2001. A thoughtful and intelligent man, Mr. Hahn was brimming with excitement. He knew, then, that the business community and middle class were fed up with traffic-choked boulevards, rundown business strips, filthy sidewalks and the sort of

civic disorder I call Abandoned Sofa Syndrome. He knew Angelenos expected him to patch things up.

Then he failed to deliver. During the mayoral primary campaign early this spring, one of Mr. Hahn's top challengers, Bob Hertzberg, pointed out that although by last year more than \$400 million in new annual revenue had begun pouring into the city treasury, as compared to 2001, Mayor Hahn spent some three-quarters of it on raises and perks for spoiled city employees. Once that money was gone, there wasn't much left for the "quality of life."

Mr. Villaraigosa is less likely to back down, as did Mr. Hahn, when confronted by intense pressure from government labor unions. Unlike Mr. Hahn, he needn't constantly prove his fealty to labor. A unionista himself, Mr. Villaraigosa is fully capable of staring down public unions, for example, on the question of whether to address the city's drastic shortage of police officers, or just give raises to pushy city workers -- which is what Mr. Hahn so timidly chose to do.

Moreover, it's almost impossible to imagine Mr. Villaraigosa taking three-and-a-half years to push through an ineffective business tax "reform," as was finally, painfully, approved by the 15-member Los Angeles City Council under Mayor Hahn. Unlike the reserved Mr. Hahn, Mr. Villaraigosa knows how to shmooze people like the dreamy L.A. City Council, which spends much of its time devising new ways to make private employers think about moving.

As Assembly Speaker, it was Mr. Villaraigosa's schmoozing and gift of gab that turned him into an unexpected leader. (Of course, he's also remembered for enhancing his power by taking credit for the work of others. But then, politics is ugly.) Mr. Villaraigosa understood that if others perceived him to be powerful, he was in fact powerful. Mr. Hahn, an intensely private man who hated to make a splash, paid dearly for not grasping that fact. According to exit polls this week, roughly one-third of Mr. Hahn's supporters were unable to name more than two things he had done that they admired.

Of course, not even a victor like Mr. Villaraigosa can rely on flash and personality to solve troubles as big as those in L.A. According to the new Kosmont-Rose Institute report on the cost of doing business, L.A. is the second-most expensive city in California. San Francisco is the worst -- but it's a trendy burg that boasts few families and doesn't particularly care if average folks leave in a huff.

L.A. has to care. Just outside its city limits are quiet and attractive towns like Glendale, Burbank, Culver City and Calabasas. They beckon businesses. They boast much better schools. They even seem to have more shade. High-paying, white-collar businesses and middle-class families well understand that they can move a few hundred yards east, west, north or south to escape L.A.'s insolence.

Can Mr. Villaraigosa turn things around? We won't know until we've seen him focus his considerable intensity on the middle class, as promised. If he does that, he'll hardly be ignoring Latinos and their cares. Despite the high poverty and lack of skills among illegal immigrants who keep streaming into the city, longtime Latinos are solidly middle class. One of the leading names for home purchasers in the region is "Martinez." Middle-class Latinos make no apologies about "assimilating" to attend good colleges or relax around swimming pools they worked hard to earn.

Even so, L.A.'s chorus of liberal pundits will soon begin pressuring Mr. Villaraigosa to choose between overtures to the business community and the "needs" of Latinos. Given

the path he took as Speaker, there's good reason to believe that this new mayor understands that these two things are one and the same.

Ms. Stewart, a Los Angeles-based writer and syndicated columnist, is a political analyst on KCAL-9 TV Los Angeles.