

Republican gubernatorial candidate Neel Kashkari delivers message on talk radio

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By David Siders



Republican gubernatorial candidate Neel Kashkari.

DAMIAN DOVARGANES — AP

Another station cranked up for news talk, and Neel Kashkari chewed pizza outside the studio, ready to go on air.

"Let's rock," said Ken Charles, program director at KFBK in Sacramento, the latest of four talk radio stations that Kashkari, the Republican candidate for governor, has visited as a guest host since the June primary.

For three hours Thursday night, Kashkari lambasted Gov. Jerry Brown on high-speed rail, education and the economy, leaning into the microphone and gesticulating from the front edge of his chair.

On KMJ (580 AM) in Fresno, Kashkari asked station staff for "a little Ozzy Osbourne 'Crazy Train' music" for his lead-in.

"We love hating on the crazy train," Kashkari said, using his favorite sobriquet for the \$68 billion high-

speed rail project.

The totality of the effort — 13 hours over several weeks taking calls, throwing to traffic, introducing guest after guest as his "friend" or "good friend" — is unusual in a state where TV ads are king and candidates typically measure their public appearances to avoid rhetorical mistakes.

For Kashkari, the full-on embrace of talk radio is a reminder how little money he has for paid advertising and how limited his outlets for exposure are.

Yet it also suggests a benefit of modest expectations: Brown, a popular third-term Democrat, would be favored to beat nearly any opponent the Republican Party could muster in this Democratic-leaning state. Running against him, Kashkari has little to lose.

"It's very clear that the governor's favorables are very high and he's raised a war chest that he probably doesn't need," said Joe Tuman, a political and legal communications professor at San Francisco State University and candidate for mayor of Oakland.

"But you know, it's a long time between now and November. You never know, and if you're a candidate challenging, you've got to make a game of it and put your game face on."

Kashkari's shows are heavy on policy, and he tells listeners his goal is to talk "about some of the most important issues facing the state." His campaign also is eager to raise Kashkari's low profile, and the radio spots are free.

"As a reminder," Kashkari said on "The John and Ken Show" on KFI (640 AM) in Los Angeles, "I'm a candidate for governor of California."

Over the course of his recent radio appearances, Kashkari said his name no fewer than 95 times and reminded listeners of the office he is seeking nearly as often. He spelled K-A-S-H- K-A-R-I about once an hour to help listeners find him on Twitter.

Fred Davis, a Republican ad maker who was involved in former Lt. Gov. Abel Maldonado's brief and unsuccessful campaign for governor, said Kashkari is "doing a spectacular job of what anybody in a nearly impossible race in California for governor has to do."

"Is it enough to win the race?" Davis said. "Maybe not. But man, I don't even know the guy, and I certainly give him a gold star for effort and for trying."

Before his first guest hosting appearance, Kashkari said he was advised by Mark Standriff, a former radio personality and former spokesman for the California Republican Party, to "be on high energy" and to repeat the same points during each show, as any one listener is unlikely to tune in for all three or four hours. (Standriff was hired in April by Mayor Ashley Swearengin as a media spokesman for the city of Fresno.)

Skip Essick, the program director at KMJ in Fresno, said Kashkari "could be a really good talk show host," and at KFBK (1530 AM), Charles told Kashkari, "If this politics thing doesn't work out, we should talk."

This is high praise from a station where a producer, during a live interview in February, hit the "dump" button after Kashkari, describing his experience at the U.S. Treasury Department, called himself "the guy you send in when, pardon me, the s--- is hitting the fan."

"We don't cuss on the air," producer Julie Kingsley told him.

In his most recent spate of radio appearances, Kashkari mixes policy with self-deprecating humor. He is a "poor substitute" for the regular host, he said, or he finds the experience "way more stressful" than running

for governor. On KFBK, Kashkari voiced a shout-out to his girlfriend, who lives in New York.

Kashkari's callers are variously supportive and critical, and Kashkari does not always know ahead of time which. He was asked on KABC in Los Angeles if he has the fortitude to "take on the unions," and he found another caller unsatisfied with his argument that immigration is primarily a federal issue.

Kashkari told his questioner that he sees the matter "a little bit differently," but he is not always so forgiving.

On KMJ, Kashkari suggested someone haranguing him on Twitter may be a 15-year-old "borrowing his mom's iPhone."

"Feel free to tweet at me all day," Kashkari said, "But just first do your homework, because I don't want to be responsible for you having to repeat the ninth grade yet again."

Charles and Essick both said they offered Brown equal time on the radio. But Brown is 20 percentage points ahead of Kashkari, according to the most recent Field Poll. Other than raising money, he has largely ignored the campaign.

Dan Newman, a political spokesman for Brown, said in an email that Kashkari's radio push "seems like a clever tactic for (a) candidate who's new to California and public policy."

Brown, Newman said, "has a fairly busy and demanding day job" that takes precedence.

But Brown has not always been so dismissive. In the 1990s, he hosted a program on the liberal Berkeley radio station KPFA five days a week, interviewing poets, activists and intellectuals. And Brown was governor before, from 1975 to 1983, when he did a series of guest spots similar to the ones Kashkari is doing today.

On KMJ in 1981, Brown took calls from listeners and invited guests to join him over the course of three hours. Former Vice President Walter Mondale called in.

They spoke for a few minutes, ending when Brown told Mondale he had other callers to move on to.

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