

A show of disunity at California GOP convention

It was a double indignity for Neel Kashkari this weekend when not just one but two fellow Republicans on November's statewide ballot declined to endorse his campaign to oust Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown.

When Kashkari reached for an analogy Saturday to describe the party fracture, he invoked the Costa Concordia cruise ship that ran aground off Italy in 2012, killing 32 people.

"When a ship hits the rocks, it's a human tendency to run for a lifeboat," he said. "I understand that. I'm trying to keep everyone in the ship, and right the ship, and get the ship moving again."

Such was Kashkari's fate as California Republicans met in Los Angeles for a convention that was supposed to celebrate the party's unity.

The gathering opened on a sour note Friday, when the evening's keynote speaker, state controller candidate Ashley Swarengin, told reporters she was still mulling whether to vote for Kashkari or Brown. "I'm looking at the two candidates like other Californians are," she said.

And Pete Peterson, the Republican running for secretary of state, said in an interview that he was not endorsing Kashkari — or anyone else on the statewide ballot — and did not plan to vote a straight party ticket.

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The extraordinary display of disunity led Ron Nehring, a former state Republican chairman and underdog candidate for lieutenant governor, to vent his fury in a profanity-tinged email to party brass just before midnight Friday, after news organizations began reporting the dust-up.

"This does NOT help the party, and it distracts from the efforts made to convey a positive theme," Nehring wrote. "The coverage is not of a party expanding its reach. It's about a party that isn't unified because its candidates can't get it together and get on the same page."

Party leaders played down the disagreement. "A lot is being made out of a few tea leaves there," said state party vice chair Harmeet Dhillon.

But for both Swarengin and Peterson, distance from the party could prove to be an asset in a state that has largely favored Democrats for two decades.

Swarengin, the mayor of Fresno, said California "needs some independence when it comes to watching the treasury."

Swarengin has rebuffed Kashkari's efforts to campaign together and broken with him on his signature issue, the bullet train that Brown wants to build between Los Angeles and San Francisco. She supports the project as an economic boost for the Central Valley; Kashkari calls it "the crazy train."

The friction is also partly personal: Kashkari irked Swarengin by not giving her advance warning that he was going to spend a week posing as a homeless man in Fresno in an effort to spotlight poverty and joblessness on Brown's watch.

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For his part, Peterson said he was declining to publicly back Kashkari because a secretary of state needs to run state

elections in a nonpartisan fashion. He also suggested that Republicans should reclaim the progressive reform traditions of the Theodore Roosevelt era.

"I'm not running for a lifeboat," he said.

But befitting tradition, the convention, at a hotel near LAX, was dominated by the party's conservative wing. A tea party caucus ran a \$10-a-ticket raffle for a shotgun. A person in a pink pig costume walked the corridors with a "No More Environmental Pork" sign in protest of Proposition 1, a \$7.5-billion water bond measure.

Nearly 400 delegates and guests gathered for a luncheon speech by U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, the Kentucky Republican laying the groundwork for a presidential run. He said he'd heard that Republicans might have suffered a few recent losses in California, drawing chuckles from a crowd that's grown accustomed to getting clobbered.

"I'm glad you still have your sense of humor," Paul said. "If we want to win again, we've got to be a bigger, better, bolder party."

Kashkari also urged the party to reach beyond conservatives. His campaign displayed rainbow-flag signs outside the banquet room and co-hosted a reception with gay and Latino Republicans.

But party leaders omitted Kashkari from a flier promoting the convention. It featured photos of Swearingin, Paul and U.S. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield). McCarthy was the headline speaker Saturday night; Kashkari was relegated to lower-profile proceedings Sunday morning.

"Hopefully you won't be too hung over, and you'll get up in the morning and come," Kashkari told a roomful of volunteers Saturday.

But the conflict among candidates marred the weekend. In his email, Nehring said it was impossible "to elevate the perception of the party while diminishing its top of the ticket."

"The party and its candidates rise together," he wrote. "Or in today's coverage, fall together."

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