

# The Australian

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## Primary mauling could be the making of Romney

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**THERE is nothing quite like watching the Republican primary race unfold up close. It resembles a session of parliamentary question time that carries on for weeks at a time. Except here, it's Republican ripping into Republican who's ripping into yet another Republican. And so on.**

Six candidates slogging it out makes for one heck of a brawl. And yet there is a virtue in this political spectacle. Being attacked by your own side may just be the best way to keep a candidate honest. The frontrunner, Mitt Romney, who won Tuesday's primary vote in New Hampshire, may end up being a better presidential candidate because the contest so far has been anything but a slam-dunk win for him.

Good primary races work like disinfectant. They flush out the incompetent, the weak, the disorganised, the political infants and the flawed. Michelle Bachmann, a Tea Party favourite but never a serious contender, was pole-axed after coming last in the Iowa caucus. But not before doing her bit by landing some blows against fellow candidate Newt Gingrich. At a Republican debate in Iowa, the congresswoman from Minnesota attacked the former House Speaker for accepting payments from Freddie Mac of at least \$US1.6 million (\$1.5m). Gingrich was a long-time critic of the mortgage giant. Once a frontrunner, Gingrich never recovered.

And when Jon Huntsman Jnr, former governor of Utah and former ambassador to China, finally calls it a day, we will remember when it started to go badly for him -- at the Republican debate in Manchester, New Hampshire, last Saturday when he broke into Mandarin. At least Kevin Rudd had a Chinese delegation in the APEC audience in 2007.

No one can say this primary has been a done deal for Romney. He won the Iowa caucus by eight votes. In national polls, he hasn't jumped past 25 per cent support. Yet, in New Hampshire he did what he needs to do nationwide in November: keep the conservative base happy and bring independents in from the cold. With other Republicans still in the race, some too close for Romney's comfort, the former governor of Massachusetts is a better Republican for it. Not outstanding. Not even great. He is, as Wall Street Journal columnist Kimberley Strassel called him, Mr Good Enough. Good enough to take on Obama. Not a certainty to defeat him, you understand. But better than the other candidates.

That said, the other candidates are helping Romney muscle up for the November presidential election. When Gingrich derided Romney as a "Massachusetts moderate" he did Romney a favour. Each time the phrase is repeated, the former governor is reminded that he needs to get the Republican base out to vote in places far beyond left-liberal Massachusetts.

Even Ron Paul, the kooky little wizened guy from Texas with fringe views on foreign policy, is doing a good job keeping Romney honest. Paul is one of the few candidates who seems to believe what he says. And when it comes to economics -- less spending, lower taxes -- what Paul says makes eminent sense. So much so that he has earned high praise from libertarian think tank the Cato Institute. That he sounds like a real person probably explains why he is picking up a sizeable protest vote among Republicans and independents. Just by being there, Paul sends an important message to the next Republican nominee. People like authenticity. And as some comedians have pointed out, Romney's biggest battle may be against Romney given the conflicting policy positions he has taken over the years.

Rick Santorum, the former congressman from Pennsylvania, is also helping Romney out. The only candidate with real grassroots appeal, the grandson of an Italian immigrant coalminer is known for his socially conservative views and is probably best placed to tap into the blue-collar vote that Obama has spurned. Santorum is a reminder of the need for Republicans to energise Reagan Democrats -- low-income voters who voted Republican when the right candidate came along. Having voted for Obama as a hope-and-change agent, many of these voters have demonstrably turned away.

And no wonder. The Democrat President has put on hold the Keystone XL pipeline, a massive crude oil pipeline a Canadian company wants to build from Alberta, Canada, to Texas and beyond. With a 27 per cent unemployment in the construction industry, here are thousands of shovel-ready jobs Obama once promised. Instead, Obama sided with his environmental flank, signalling to workers to look elsewhere for a president committed to jobs and economic growth. But in a country with voluntary voting, it takes more than a Massachusetts technocrat to bring these voters to the ballot box. In 2008, Romney was just that -- a boring technocrat. Four years on, he's a better candidate and at the end of the primaries he may be better still if he draws on the best of other candidates. He needs to run a visionary campaign, rather than just hand out his curriculum vitae, impressive though it is. It's great he understands private equity having run Bain & Co. It's grand that he's been a governor. It would be even better if Romney could articulate precisely how he intends to start unwinding Obama's entitlement society in 2013. When the Republican talks about Obama's quest to turn the US into a European model of socialism, he's on to something. Obama has effectively nationalised AIG, the nation's biggest banks, car companies, auto insurance companies, the mortgage industry and even the reverse-mortgage industry.

Margaret Thatcher fought a creeping form of socialism in Britain by making a Labour Party defeat a moral imperative, not just an economic one. She did it by explaining that choice in a free society implies responsibility on the part of the individual. A moral being is one who exercises his own judgment in choices on matters great and small. Insofar as his right and duty is taken away by the state or the party, his moral faculties atrophy. Romney needs to do the same because there is a moral imperative to ousting Obama, overhauling the tax code to reduce taxes for all income groups, cutting spending, returning businesses to private hands and encouraging private risk-takers.

Romney's phrases about loving America, and making the US great again don't get the political pulse racing. Yet, when it's done well, politics infused with morality is a vote-changer. Ronald Reagan did it. So did Thatcher.

If Romney cannot pitch this as a moral battle, then voters will start believing disgruntled progressives such as Matt Taibbi at Rolling Stone magazine who predicts a Romney v Obama showdown later this year will be a case of "a private equity parasite who has been a lifelong champion of the Gordon Gekko greed-is-good ethos versus a paper progressive who in 2008 took, by himself, more money from Wall Street than any two previous presidential candidates, and in the four years since has showered Wall Street with bailouts".

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