



Respectable rebel

Kate Murray talks to George Galloway, the political bruiser who's fast becoming the figurehead of the anti-transfer campaign

Which George Galloway do you think you know? The firebrand anti-war campaigner? The visitor to Baghdad saluting Saddam Hussein's indefatigability? Or the catsuit-wearing Big Brother housemate who made a show of himself on TV?

Well, meet another one. George Galloway, the housing crusader. Love him or hate him, here is a politician of national standing, charismatic and articulate, who has got the housing profession in his sights. Housing is, he says, the biggest single domestic issue for him and his Respect Party. In his east London constituency, Respect has been involved in a series of increasingly high-profile anti-transfer campaigns, which, with characteristic bravado, he portrays as a battle between might and right.

'With the help of a Gestetner duplicator and our foot soldiers we have been David fighting Goliath – and David has been winning,' he says. 'Despite spending what must now be a seven-figure sum to try and stampede the local people in Tower Hamlets into voting for privatisation, [the council] have been defeated in ballot after ballot and those ballots that they have succeeded in are now shrouded in police investigations and intense controversy.'

Mr Galloway is not a politician who harbours much self-doubt. He insists he doesn't regret his appearance on Big Brother despite the ridicule heaped upon him in the aftermath of the show. And he says he doesn't care about his unpopularity with the national press – or that it might affect the way his views on issues like housing are received.

'If I was a woolly jumpered, sandal-wearing ineffective advocate of these causes they might like me. I might be a national treasure,' he says. 'They can live with a loveable eccentric. But I have flattered myself into believing that they think I am really serious and that's why they don't like it.'

Accountability

In his eyes, stock transfer is just plain wrong. 'The most democratic, most accountable and most beneficial form of public housing is council housing. You can elect and unelect your landlord every four years and that simply isn't replicable in even the best so-called registered social landlords,' he says.

'Once you are a tenant of RSL X, if you are lucky you will always be tenant of RSL X except until RSL X transfers itself to super RSL X plus Y. You no longer have any

democratic control, any say in who your landlord is and how your landlord behaves.'

But what about the extra investment stock transfer can bring? If he really cares about poor housing conditions, shouldn't he help tenants get the extra spending that housing transfer can offer?

'It's a bit like saying people should jump out of the 10th floor rather than the 20th – each is bad for them,' he retorts. 'There must be another way and there is another way – it's called the fourth option, democratically controlled public housing with proper investment. It's not just my policy it's the Labour Party's policy. Year after year at the Labour conference they vote for this policy and the government, which is nominally accountable to them, completely ignores it.'

Many in the housing world object to Mr Galloway's choice of the word privatisation to describe stock transfer. But he is unrepentant. 'As whoever it was in Dad's Army used to say: "They don't like it up 'em",' he says. 'Even though they can deploy these huge resources to mislead people, when we call a spade a spade they don't like it. We know why they don't like it – because privatisation is intensely unpopular in this country.'

Talking profit

He is similarly scathing about associations' not-for-profit status. 'Not-for-profit is an illusion because the people at the top of the RSLs profit very nicely,' he claims. 'They have fantastic salaries, fantastic conditions, company cars and all of that – all things that the local council chiefs never dream of having, which is why the council housing chiefs are constantly bailing out to become heads of RSLs.'

Mr Galloway says his view of council housing was shaped by his own experiences, as a child of four who moved from the slums into a council home. Council housing offered, he says, a 'life-changing opportunity' for him as for millions of British people at the time, an opportunity that he fears is now being taken away. Still, despite representing an inner-city Glasgow constituency for 18 years, he admits he did not realise just how bad housing conditions were in places like Tower Hamlets until he was elected as MP for Bethnal Green and Bow in 2005.

'Of course a tale of two cities existed in Glasgow,' he says, 'But I never imagined so graphically that it could exist so close to such wealth and power in London.'

→ Continued on page 21

Even though they can deploy these huge resources to mislead people, when we call a spade a spade they don't like it. We know why they don't like it – because privatisation is intensely unpopular in this country

'Of the 21,000 on the waiting list in Tower Hamlets, I swear to you at least half of them have already been to see me and there are stories that astound me.'

Overcrowding, he says, is rife. One case he's currently dealing with involves 14 people living in a small flat, with family members sleeping in the hall. He's outraged by the disparity between rich and poor, between those living in poor housing and those who can afford the riverside flats that even he, on what he concedes is a big income, could not.

It inspires another flight of rhetoric. 'We live in a place which is stricken by poverty, even though it is bounded on either side by the gleaming spires of capitalism at Canary Wharf and the City of London, the richest square mile in Europe. Between these two points huddle in the shadows, in the cold, the most overcrowded and the poorest people in England and this is unacceptable,' he says.

'The people on their way to the jamboree at the Olympic games will have to pass through this. Perhaps they'll put screens up to shield their eyes from that which lies on either side of the main road, but we're determined to tear those screens down.'

Wealth divide

The striking divisions between the haves and the have-nots are, according to Mr Galloway, fuelling much of the tension and hatred plaguing our communities. It's not surprising that resentment over a lack of housing, both from alienated young people or from 'poor whites angry about their lot in life' spills over. 'Ministers expend hot air talking about extremism when the alienation that produces extremism increases daily from the foreign policy that the government follows and the social and economic policies they follow,' he says.

The solution, he claims, is a massive house building programme, like that carried out by 'that great Bolshevik revolutionary' Harold Macmillan in the 1950s. 'It would solve many if not most of the race questions that bedevil us,' he says. He's not holding his breath though, not even with a change of prime minister on the horizon.

'I'm the populariser of the phrase that Brown and Blair are two cheeks of the same arse. I stand by that,' he insists. 'I don't think it will be any different at all [under Brown] unless enough political force can be mustered to push Brown into different positions and that is what Respect is trying to do on the war, on housing, on all the other aspects of economic and social policy. We are trying to force New Labour back onto Labour territory and if it will not move to say we are the alternative.'

In the meantime, the housing profession now has Mr Galloway on its case. 'Housing is absolutely dominant as a domestic political issue,' he says. And he ends with a plea to those still working in the council housing sector. 'If they see life as merely about maximising their own personal income then they will jump ship, but if they think as I do they should join our campaign for a proper re-energising of the council housing sector. I suppose I'm appealing to their better nature.'

Tower Hamlets: the transfer battleground

Tower Hamlets was where Defend Council Housing was born back in 1998 and today stock transfer is as bitterly fought there as ever.

The borough has now seen 33 transfer ballots on different estates. Twenty – representing 40 per cent of the borough's homes – have produced yes votes, while in 13 tenants have said no. The local authority says transfer has now brought investment of £422 million into housing in the borough.

Anti-transfer campaigners claim the tide is turning in their favour after a number of recent no votes. Four estates, including the 1,600-home Ocean estate, said no last autumn, although in November the authority announced two further estates had voted yes.

Even where tenants have backed transfer the disputes have gone on, amid allegations of voting irregularities, intimidation and even fraud.

Last week, campaigner Carole Swords was granted an injunction preventing the transfer of the Parkside estate to Old Ford Housing Association.

The council had declared that tenants backed transfer by a margin of seven votes, but hundreds of tenants called for the result to be overturned claiming that many had not had the chance to vote. George Galloway has also called on ministers to investigate the transfer of the Holland estate to Eastend Homes, which he has described as a 'national scandal'.

Tower Hamlets has said there is 'no evidence whatsoever of fraud'.

Respect says last year's council elections, which saw cabinet member for housing David Edgar lose his seat, were a referendum on the authority's housing choice programme. 'He [Mr Edgar] tried to make Tower Hamlets a laboratory for New Labour's housing experiments and the people threw him out,' Mr Galloway says.

He claims that the anti-transfer 'hardy foot soldiers' have had a budget of just a few hundred pounds to make their case. He puts yes votes down to that imbalance in resources, plus an 'element of despair' felt by tenants about the appalling conditions on some estates.

But he claims tenants who have transferred have 'complained bitterly' of life after transfer. 'The huge investment promised by RSLs is always more disappointing in the eating than on the plate,' he says.

The huge investment promised by RSLs is always more disappointing in the eating than on the plate

That's not the view of those who have been involved in transfers in the borough. Steve Stride, chief executive of Poplar HARCA, which has taken on nine estates in transfers from Tower Hamlets Council between 1999 and 2006, says transfer has transformed estates that had been suffering from under investment and decay for years.

'Poplar HARCA has invested £250 million in eight years in improving 5,000 homes, 800 new homes, 10 neighbourhood centres and a multi-million pound regeneration programme. We have been able to transform people's quality of life,' he says.

Mr Stride is unhappy with the legacy of the fierce anti-transfer campaigning the borough has seen.

'Living and working in Tower Hamlets, I see the tragedy of those estates that were misled by George Galloway and Defend Council Housing who have little hope of any real investment and the major community change that Tower Hamlets so desperately needs.'



George Galloway urges residents on the Ocean estate to vote against stock transfer and (above) the ballot in progress