...It's a bit like saying people should jump out of the 10th floor rather than the 20th — it's too high 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 Daily Mail 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."

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

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Respectable rebel

Which George Galloway do you think you know? The chummy arm-in-arm campaigner? The hero to Baghdad saluting Saddam Hussein's indomitability? Or the cult figure wearing big belt buckles who made a show of himself on TV?

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

"With the help of a Gestetner duplicator and our foot soldiers we have been able fighting a battle — and Galloway has been winning," he says. "It's like 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 is now toned down in public investigations and intense campaign."

Mr Galloway is not a politician who harbours much self-doubt. He insists he doesn't regret his appearance on the forlorn householder who broke under pressure in the aftermath of the show. And he says he doesn't care about his portrayal by the national press — or that it might affect the way his views on issues like housing are received.

"It was a walky jumpered, sandal-wearing ineffective politician. I was respectful. I was a hero," he says, "They all live with a believable acoustic. But I have bothered myself 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. The most eloquent andanden your landlords even four weeks and that simply isn't replicable in even the best case of so-called registered social landlords," he says.

"Once you are a tenant of RSL X, if you are lucky you might in are now shrouded in police investigations and intense campaign."

Fighting the battle for 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 un-elect your landlord every four years and that simply isn't replicable in even the best case of so-called registered social landlords," he says.
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.

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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.’