Written evidence from Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne – RIS0050

I write to confirm my key points, which draw on my decade of Foreign Policy report writing in the European Parliament and a further four years in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly. My experience as chair of an ad hoc Select Committee in our House followed on from those immediate past fourteen years’ experience; which followed a decade of committee experience in the Commons.

In summary, I see a number of hurdles in the approach our own House has adopted to examining and reporting on subjects chosen by the whole House as worthy of the time and money these Committees and their reports consume.

1/ The approach of the Clerks was unusual when compared with the other parliaments in which I have sat. The experience was almost one of hostility. In the EP and in the CoE the clerking for a Report is a highly satisfactory experience whereby the Chair or the Rapporteur work in a close and positive professional partnership, with shared and agreed goals. The relationship in our House seems less than a happy one and seemingly with a significantly confrontational flavour.

2/ In our House the Report has no form; no length and no House agreed length or number of words. Reports then can meander, since with no length nor structure members tend to continue their particular points perhaps beyond usefulness. Reports should have all have the same structure, length and shape.

3/ Our Reports are literally written by the committee, line by line. Thus ensuring that anything of real substance gets watered down or altered. If we are to convince governments and outside institutions we must be clearer. The reports should be drafted by the Chair with genuine support from the Clerks and the committee votes but does not edit line by line, word by word as we do in our House.

4/ The Committee should have a decent length of time to carry out its work, but not the very long period we allow ourselves now. Shorter is better, and will allow more topics to be examined, more reports issued and thus create a stronger image and more effective outcomes for the House.

Thank you for carrying out this study.

April 2018