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Northern Ireland Representation at Westminster:  
Speaker's Conference

1. In March 1977, before the conclusion of the Lib-Lab pact, agreement was reached between the British Government and the six Official Unionist Party representatives at Westminster on the establishment of a Speaker's Conference in order to increase the number of Northern Ireland seats at Westminster. This agreement came at a time when the Government were attempting to assemble sufficient votes to defeat a Conservative/SNP vote of no confidence arising out of the Scotland and Wales Bill. Following consultation between the political parties at Westminster, the Speaker announced on 19 July 1977 the formation of a Conference with the following terms of reference

"To consider and make recommendations on the number of parliamentary constituencies that there should be in Northern Ireland"

The Conference consisted of the Speaker, Messrs. Molyneaux, Powell and Fitt, and representatives of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal parties. It began work on 27 July 1977.

2. The Conference had a total of eight meetings (in private) and reported in a letter dated 13 February 1978 from the Speaker to the Prime Minister that it had resolved to recommend that there should be an increase in the number of parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland to 17 but that the Boundary Commission should be given power to vary that number, subject to a minimum of sixteen and a maximum of eighteen.

3. Three further stages must be gone through before this recommendation can be put into effect

(a) Legislation to amend the House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act 1949 must be enacted. (It is understood that this legislation will be very simple.)

- (b) the Boundary Commission must establish the constituency boundaries;
- (c) the report of the Boundary Commission must be embodied into Orders-in-Council

It is apparently not necessary that these stages be gone through in strict consecutive order.

4. The British Government announced in both Houses of Parliament on 19 April that it accepted the recommendation of the Speaker's Conference and would introduce the necessary legislation as Parliamentary circumstances permitted. It is understood (Hansard for that day is strike-bound) that the Prime Minister suggested in the Commons that the Boundary Commission need not wait until after legislation has been passed before starting on its work.

5. In any event the time required by the statutory procedures of the Boundary Commission is such that the next General Election will take place on the existing 12-seat basis.

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