

What the Bishop of Manchester's 2026 House of Lords Evidence Indicates About Operation Talla

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Introduction

The Bishop of Manchester's contribution to the House of Lords on 3 February 2026 is highly significant because it provides a direct, first-hand parliamentary account from the person who chaired the Operation Talla policing ethics committee.

His remarks do more than confirm that such a committee existed. They explain why it was created, what problem it was intended to address, how senior police leaders were experiencing Government conduct during Covid and what role independent ethical scrutiny was expected to play inside the national policing response.

The relevant passage arose during debate on the Police Reform White Paper, when the Bishop drew upon his own

experience of pandemic policing to warn about the dangers of excessive centralisation and ministerial interference.

The central proposition he placed on the parliamentary record was this:

“During Covid, the Operation Talla policing ethics committee was largely set up under my chairmanship because police chief constables were under such pressure from Government Ministers...”

He then identified the nature of that pressure:

“...who were announcing things, often on social media at nine o’clock at night, saying ‘This is now the law’ when it was not.”

He explained that:

“The police wanted somebody independent who could support them in the face of that kind of ministerial overreach.”

And he concluded:

“So I worry... about the risks of ministerial overreach and the powers being given centrally.”

Those statements are important in several distinct respects.

1. Operation Talla's ethics machinery existed because policing was experiencing pressure from Government Ministers

The first and clearest conclusion from the Bishop's evidence is that the Operation Talla ethics committee was not simply a routine governance body.

According to its chair, it was "*largely set up*" because chief constables were under pressure from Government Ministers.

That is a very important description of the operating environment within which Operation Talla existed.

It indicates that senior police leaders were not merely dealing with the technical implementation of regulations.

They were also navigating a constitutional tension between:

- (1) Government Ministers announcing policy or supposed legal requirements;

and

- (2) the independent responsibility of policing to act according to law.

The committee therefore appears to have been created as a safeguard within that tension.

That bears directly upon any investigation concerned with whether national policing decisions during Covid were

genuinely police decisions, or whether they were affected by wider governmental pressure.

2. The Bishop expressly identified “*ministerial overreach*”

The phrase “*ministerial overreach*” is not an interpretation imposed upon the evidence by an external investigator.

It is the Bishop’s own characterisation.

He used that expression when explaining why the police wanted independent ethical support and then immediately used the same concept to warn about the risks associated with future centralisation of policing.

That matters because it places a significant proposition on the parliamentary record: There were circumstances during Covid in which the chair of Operation Talla’s ethics committee regarded ministerial conduct as exceeding appropriate boundaries.

This is highly relevant to any wider examination of the relationship between Government and policing during the pandemic.

It indicates that concerns about inappropriate governmental influence were not merely external criticisms raised after the event. They existed within the ethical architecture established around Operation Talla itself.

3. The particular form of overreach was Government presenting something as law when it was not

The Bishop gave a concrete example of the problem.

He said Ministers were:

“announcing things, often on social media at nine o’clock at night, saying ‘This is now the law’ when it was not.”

This is especially important.

The issue he describes is not merely poor communication. It is a breakdown in the distinction between:

- (1) Government policy or announcement
- and
- (2) law.

That distinction is fundamental.

Police officers exercise coercive powers under law. If Ministers publicly describe something as law when it is not, operational policing can be placed in an extremely difficult position.

The Bishop’s account therefore indicates that Operation Talla’s ethics machinery was responding to an environment

in which the legal status of Government announcements could not simply be assumed.

That is directly relevant to any investigation examining the relationship between:

- legislation;
- Government guidance;
- central policing advice;

and

what officers were actually instructed to do.

It also has obvious relevance to broader questions about whether administrative or policy positions during Covid were sometimes treated operationally as if they possessed legal force.

4. Chief constables were themselves seeking protection from that pressure

Another important feature is the Bishop's description that:

“The police wanted somebody independent who could support them...”

That is highly significant.

It indicates that the problem was sufficiently serious from the perspective of senior policing that chief constables themselves wanted an external or independent ethical safeguard.

The implication is that they recognised a risk to independent policing decision-making.

The committee's function was therefore not simply to consider abstract ethical dilemmas. It was to provide a form of institutional resilience against pressure from Government.

That is highly relevant to any investigation examining whether individual national policing decisions during Covid were reached autonomously or under external influence.

5. Independence was central to the purpose of the committee

The Bishop's use of the word "*independent*" is particularly important.

He does not say that chief constables wanted another internal policing working group.

He says they wanted:

"somebody independent"

to support them.

That indicates that the committee's value lay precisely in the fact that it was intended to sit outside ordinary command pressures.

The committee therefore appears to have operated as an ethical counterweight.

That gives its minutes, advice, recommendations and correspondence potentially exceptional evidential importance.

If Operation Talla faced a controversial national decision, especially one capable of affecting public access to criminal justice or police recording practices, the ethics committee would have been precisely the kind of body whose involvement would be relevant.

Its records could therefore provide unusually direct evidence of:

- what ethical concerns were identified;
- what competing interests were considered;
- what advice was given to Talla leadership;

and

- whether that advice was followed.

6. The Bishop's evidence reveals an internal constitutional tension within pandemic policing

The Bishop's remarks show that pandemic policing was not simply a unified Government-police exercise.

There was a tension.

- On one side were Ministers pressing rapidly evolving policy positions.
- On the other were chief constables who remained responsible for lawful policing.

Between them sat a need for independent ethical scrutiny.

That is a much more complex picture than the notion of policing merely implementing regulations.

The evidence suggests that chief constables were having to resist, interpret or scrutinise Government pressure in real time.

This is especially important in the context of Operation Talla because Talla was the national coordinating structure.

If ministerial pressure was being experienced at chief constable level, then the relationship between Government and national Talla command becomes a central evidential question.

7. The Bishop's 2026 warning shows that he regarded the problem as important enough to remain relevant years later

The context of the Bishop's remarks is also revealing.

He was speaking in 2026, not during the emergency itself.

He chose to invoke Operation Talla while Parliament was considering future policing reform and increased centralisation.

He said:

“So I worry... about the risks of ministerial overreach and the powers being given centrally.”

That tells us something about the lasting significance of his experience.

He did not treat what happened during Covid as an historical curiosity.

He used it as a warning for future policing governance.

That strongly indicates that the episode had constitutional significance in his own assessment.

8. He directly links the Operation Talla ethics body to today's National Police Ethics Committee

The Bishop also described the Operation Talla arrangement as:

“a precursor to the present committee.”

The “*present committee*” he had just identified was the National Police Ethics Committee for England and Wales, of which he was co-chair.

That creates an important institutional lineage:

Operation Talla policing ethics committee -to - National Police Ethics Committee.

This suggests that the experience of ethical governance during Covid had sufficient importance to influence later national policing ethics structures.

That in turn strengthens the case for examining Operation Talla’s ethics records as a serious body of institutional evidence rather than incidental meeting papers.

9. His invocation of Peelian principles is highly relevant

Before describing Operation Talla, the Bishop referred to the Peelian principle that policing is:

“a civilian force: it is people, the citizenry, policing themselves.”

This framing matters.

He positioned his warning about ministerial overreach within the constitutional principle that policing derives legitimacy from the public and must retain independence.

The concern, therefore, was not merely administrative efficiency.

It concerned the character of policing itself.

When read together, his remarks amount to a coherent proposition: Central governmental power can place pressure upon policing; independent ethical structures are necessary to protect policing from overreach; and that protection is part of maintaining Peelian policing principles.

10. Relevance to Operation Talla command and decision-making

The Bishop's evidence makes the role of Talla's ethics committee potentially central to understanding how difficult national decisions were handled.

If Talla leadership faced Government pressure, then three questions naturally become important:

- What decisions were referred to the ethics committee?
- What ethical advice was given?
- What happened to that advice?

The existence of the committee suggests that Talla itself recognised that certain decisions required more than operational or legal analysis.

They required ethical scrutiny.

This is particularly relevant where national policing policy affected citizens' access to police services, recording of allegations, exercise of discretion, enforcement priorities, or treatment of controversial subjects.

11. Relevance to the “*guidance to not record*” issue

The Bishop's remarks are especially pertinent when placed alongside evidence concerning national policing guidance.

His evidence establishes that:

- Government Ministers were applying pressure to senior policing;
- the legal status of what Ministers were saying was not always what Ministers represented it to be;

and

- an independent ethics body was created substantially because of that problem.

Those propositions make the ethics committee highly relevant to any investigation into how a national position such as “*guidance to not record*” arose.

The crucial question becomes:

Was that position subjected to the independent ethical scrutiny which Operation Talla had specifically created to protect policing from external pressure and overreach?

The importance of that question flows directly from the Bishop’s evidence.

12. Relevance to police independence

The Bishop’s account is also significant because it speaks directly to police independence.

His description shows that chief constables did not regard ministerial statements as automatically determinative of police action.

Instead, they sought independent support.

That reflects a fundamental constitutional principle: Government may make policy, but police must act according to law and independent professional judgment.

The Bishop’s evidence shows that this distinction was not theoretical during Covid.

It was operationally live.

13. Relevance to the wider investigation

For the purposes of the wider Operation Talla investigation, the Bishop's evidence adds several important factual propositions:

- The national pandemic policing environment included direct ministerial pressure upon chief constables.
- That pressure was sufficiently significant to contribute to the creation of an independent ethics committee.
- The chair of that committee later described the relevant Government conduct as “*ministerial overreach*”.
- The overreach included Ministers publicly saying something was law “*when it was not*”.
- Senior policing wanted an independent body to help it withstand that pressure.
- The experience was sufficiently important that the Bishop used it in Parliament years later as a warning against excessive centralisation of policing.
- And the Talla ethics structure became a precursor to the present National Police Ethics Committee.

Taken together, these points provide a materially important insight into the institutional environment within which Operation Talla operated.

Conclusion

The Bishop of Manchester's contribution is significant because it places on the parliamentary record a first-hand description of Operation Talla from the perspective of its ethical governance.

His evidence indicates that Talla operated in an environment where Government Ministers were applying pressure to chief constables, where Ministers were at times publicly presenting matters as law when they were not, and where senior policing considered an independent ethical safeguard necessary to protect itself against what the Bishop expressly called "*ministerial overreach*".

That evidence materially deepens the context in which Operation Talla should now be examined.

It shows that questions concerning central influence, police independence, law versus Government instruction, ethical safeguards and the boundary between political direction and policing judgment were not invented retrospectively.

They were part of the operating environment recognised by those involved at the time.

For our investigation, the most important consequence is straightforward:

The Operation Talla ethics committee was not peripheral to the national Covid policing architecture. It existed substantially because the boundary between Government power and independent policing had already become a live problem.

That makes its complete documentary record, its minutes, papers, advice, recommendations and referrals, potentially one of the most important evidential sources available for understanding Operation Talla.

The source document is available for inspection at:

https://ethicalapproach.co.uk/Lords_2026_02_03p_260827_140013.pdf