By John Howe

Sir Michael Quinlan, who died in February at the age of seventy-eight, was a towering figure in the world of defence. Deputy Under Secretary for Policy at MoD from 1977 to 1981, and Permanent Under Secretary from 1998 to 1992, he made a remarkable contribution to the intellectual underpinning of defence policy, especially the theory and practice of nuclear deterrence.

In Michael Quinlan, two qualities shone out: acute intellect, and strong concern, rooted no doubt in his Catholic upbringing and faith, to relate the intellectual issues of nuclear deterrence to moral principle.

Joining the Air Ministry at a time when the Air Force carried responsibility for the strategic nuclear deterrent, he early came to grips with the issues of nuclear doctrine and their morality and in a succession of key posts worked out moral and intellectual answers to the problems posed by the fact of nuclear capability. He made a key contribution to the evolution not only of the UK's nuclear strategy but also that of NATO. In a way that may be thought of perhaps as particularly Catholic, he provided a robust intellectual rationale for policy: he married in a remarkable way intellectual rigour, at the theoretical level, with practical skill in managing the affairs of a Department of State and with delivering policies and practical outcomes. His thinking was underpinned by a clear perception of the moral issues, and derived from first principles or something quite close to them. This was his formidable and distinguishing contribution.

He was a powerful and effective negotiator, whose influence in the formulation of NATO's policy for the deployment of intermediate range nuclear weapons in the 1980s, and the subsequent arms control negotiations related to weapons in this category, was crucial.

He was a fine late flowering of the Northcote-Trevelyan Civil Service: a Double First in Classics from Oxford, which gave his prose its distinctive and unmistakable Quinlanesque style - precise, superbly controlled (and marked by a fondness for the ablative of absolute). But if he was in some senses typical of the best administrative class Civil Servants of his day, he had nothing in common with Sir Humphrey: he was not a player of Whitehall politics. He carried a straight bat and was highly respected for that.

He leaves behind writings which encapsulate, admirably and succinctly, his intellectual legacy: including, in 2007, a short book, written with General Lord Guthrie, on the Just War Tradition, and his book on "Thinking about Nuclear Weapons", published very shortly before his death this year. The latter in particular shows the remarkable consistency of his thinking, but also how it did not remain rooted in the Cold War but developed to encompass current developments. After his retirement he was a prolific writer of articles and contributor to academic and public debate.