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Too flash by half

By Sue Cameron

Everyone is grateful to "Flash" Gordon Brown for saving the world from financial catastrophe. Yet I am told the prime minister pulled off this feat without turning to Whitehall's own civil contingencies secretariat. Some insiders are wondering why not. The official reason is that the CCS deals with floods and terrorism, that the credit crunch was "purely a financial matter" and that it did "not involve turmoil on the streets". Yet I hear that it so easily could have done.

The CCS was set up by [Mike Granatt](#), then a senior Cabinet Office official, in the wake of the fuel protest and the disaster caused by foot and mouth disease. It was designed to act as an early warning for any super-crises - the kind that run out of control and where none of the usual emergency measures work.

The fuel protest nearly came into this category. The country's petrol stations have enough supplies for three days - it takes 10,000 tanker movements a day to keep them even at that level. Yet if the nation's vehicles all tried to fill up at once, they would need three times as much fuel as they would find at the pumps. Had the petrol protest not been contained, transport would have come to a halt, there would have been huge disruption with businesses and shops - including food shops - closing and turmoil on the streets soon after.

Now, just suppose our major banks *had* collapsed and we had run out of money. No cash would soon have meant no food and as one Whitehall crisis expert put it: "No nosh means riots within 24 hours - dead cert."

[Patrick Lagadec](#), research director of the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris and a consultant on crisis planning, says a "financial tsunami is not really different from a flash flood or a pandemic". He reckons Britain is ahead of the field in terms of crisis planning but adds that politicians here and elsewhere need to be more open to thinking about "impossible" scenarios. "Ministers are more comfortable reassuring people that they have everything under control," he says. How true.