



The Try-Something Fallacy

How good intentions become the excuse for endless control

By J A Griffin

I was speaking with a liberal friend about government overreach, arguing that many policies presented as compassionate, necessary, or enlightened often produce more harm than good. I was not denying that real problems exist. I was not claiming that no one ever needs help. I was not suggesting that every traditional institution is flawless or that society should simply turn away from suffering.

I was making a simpler point.

When government intervenes on a large scale, the damage it can inflict is also large. A flawed policy does not remain confined to a classroom, a committee chamber, or a campaign platform. It extends into homes, schools, businesses, neighborhoods, families, speech, finances, children, and the texture of daily life. It does not merely “try something” in theory. It tries something on living people.

Their reply was the one we have all heard before.

“But we have to try something.”

There it was—the distilled reflex of modern politics captured in a single phrase.

It sounds reasonable. It sounds compassionate. It sounds like the practical voice of those who refuse to remain idle in the face of suffering. A problem exists, therefore action must follow. Someone is in pain, therefore government must act. Something is wrong, therefore power must do something about it.

My response was equally direct.

Why must we try anything at all?

That question unsettles people because it interrupts the rush of emotion. It refuses to let good intentions bypass the discipline of scrutiny. It declines to accept urgency as proof, or compassion as a shield against consequences.



For “trying something” through the machinery of government is not like experimenting with a new recipe or choosing a different route home. Government does not propose; it compels. It taxes, regulates, punishes, licenses, monitors, mandates, bans, subsidizes, and enforces. When government “tries something,” ordinary citizens become the subjects of the experiment. Their resources are claimed. Their options are narrowed. Their children are shaped. Their enterprises are burdened. Their words may be chilled. Their communities may be reordered. Their lives become the testing ground.

Before any voice utters “We have to try something,” the first and proper reply should be calm, clear, and unflinching.

Prove it.

Prove that the problem is precisely what you describe. Prove that your proposed solution will achieve what you promise. Prove that the remedy will not inflict greater injury than the original ill. Prove that those who wield the policy truly grasp the trade-offs. Prove that the intervention has limits. Prove that failure will be acknowledged. Prove that accountability will follow when the promised outcomes never arrive.

The burden of proof rests with those who demand intervention, not with those who insist on restraint.

That proposition should not strike us as radical. It should feel like ordinary common sense. In a free society, power is obliged to justify itself. It cannot simply gesture toward pain and thereby claim dominion. It cannot treat compassion as an unlimited warrant. It cannot declare “Something is wrong” and then assume the right to redesign other people’s lives.

Yet the contemporary leftist outlook often inverts this burden. By “leftist outlook” I do not mean a biological category, a clinical disorder, or a slur directed at every liberal. I mean a habitual way of seeing the world—one that regards government action as morally presumptively good and restraint as morally presumptively suspect. Action becomes evidence of virtue. Skepticism about that action becomes evidence of callousness.

The actual outcomes, if they ever arrive, come later.

And when those outcomes prove damaging, humility is rarely the response. Instead comes the call for more power, more money, more regulations, more experts, more offices, more programs, more pressure, more control.



This is the try-something fallacy.

It begins with a noble impulse, and that is precisely what makes it so seductive. Compassion encounters suffering and seeks relief. Equality confronts unfairness and seeks correction. Safety confronts risk and seeks protection. Progress confronts a flaw and seeks improvement. These instincts are not wicked. A society stripped of compassion grows cold. A society indifferent to fairness grows resentful. A society careless of safety grows reckless. A society hostile to improvement grows stagnant.

But noble instincts become perilous once they are severed from reality.

Compassion without truth becomes manipulation. Safety without limits becomes domination. Equality without wisdom becomes coercion. Progress without humility becomes ruin. The difficulty is not that the modern left lacks moral vocabulary. The difficulty is often that it possesses too much moral vocabulary and too little regard for consequences.

It asks, “What sort of person would refuse to help?”

It does not ask, “What sort of help actually helps?”

That missing question is the fissure through which damage flows.

A bad solution is not superior to no solution. Sometimes a bad solution deepens the original problem. Sometimes it fosters dependence where independence once stood. Sometimes it rewards the very conduct it claims to remedy. Sometimes it penalizes those who were already acting rightly. Sometimes it drains the institutions that once sustained the social order. Sometimes it transforms a passing difficulty into a permanent bureaucracy.

Action is not the same as improvement.

This matters because contemporary politics has grown addicted to the optics of compassion. It prizes the policy that appears kind, the speech that sounds caring, the press conference, the slogan, the task force, the emergency decree, the public vow that someone, somewhere, is finally doing something.

Yet appearing kind and acting wisely are not identical.



A policy may sound humane and still be reckless. A program may be marketed as compassionate and still injure the very people it professes to serve. A reform may be presented as justice and still breed disorder, bitterness, waste, dependency, or fear. Good intentions do not nullify bad results.

There is, moreover, a quiet vanity in the phrase “we have to try something.” It permits people to feel morally engaged without bearing full responsibility. It lets them stand on the side of virtue while shifting the difficult inquiries onto others. Question the cost and you are greedy. Question the incentives and you are heartless. Question the trade-offs and you are pessimistic. Question the unintended consequences and you are alarmist. Question whether government possesses the competence to solve the problem and you are cynical. Question whether the remedy may harm those it claims to help and you are accused of opposing help itself.

In this way compassion is transmuted into a weapon.

It ceases to be genuine concern for another human being and becomes an instrument for acquiring power. The person who suffers becomes useful. His hardship becomes exhibit A. His difficulty becomes a moral prop in the case for expanded authority. The policy may fail him in time, but by then the machinery has already expanded.

The pattern repeats across every domain. A crisis emerges—or is proclaimed. The public is informed that ordinary limits must be set aside. The compassionate stance is defined as immediate action. The cautious stance is defined as cruelty. Then the policy class moves swiftly, often before evidence has settled, before costs are tallied, before dissent is heard, and before ordinary citizens have had time to ask what is being taken from them in the name of rescue.

Later, when the harm becomes unmistakable, those who championed the policy seldom apologize. They explain. They reframe. They assign blame elsewhere. They insist it was underfunded, sabotaged, misunderstood, or insufficiently pursued. The failure of intervention becomes the rationale for further intervention.

This is one of the profound paradoxes of the leftist outlook: it interprets every failure of control as evidence that control must be enlarged.

It seldom pauses to consider the simpler explanation—that the control itself was the problem.



That is why the assertion “we have to try something” merits skepticism. Not because every proposal is mistaken. Not because government can never act. Not because all change is harmful. But because the phrase so often evades the very questions responsible citizens must ask at the outset. It converts urgency into evidence. It converts feeling into proof. It treats the mere existence of a problem as license to seize authority.

That is not compassion.

That is urgency wearing a halo.

A mature society does not mistake motion for wisdom. It recognizes that some problems require action, yet it also recognizes that restraint can itself be an act of moral seriousness. There are moments when the wisest course is not another statute, another program, another mandate, another panel of experts, or another federal bureaucracy. There are moments when the most humane thing government can do is cease making the injury worse.

This does not mean that individuals should remain idle. It means that government is not the only, nor even the primary, vehicle of action. Families can act. Congregations can act. Neighborhoods can act. Charities can act. Enterprises can act. Neighbors can act. Parents, teachers, and ordinary citizens can act through obligation, habit, generosity, discipline, and love.

The state is not society. Government is not synonymous with care.

This is one of the truths that an artificial age labors to obscure. Organic culture is slow, local, personal, and imperfect. It is woven through family, faith, custom, memory, friendship, duty, labor, and responsibility. It does not always photograph well in official reports. It cannot always be quantified in government statistics. It does not fit neatly inside a grant application or a campaign slogan.

Yet it is how real human beings live.

Government programs look cleaner on paper. They can be titled, budgeted, staffed, announced, measured, branded, and defended. They create the illusion of seriousness. They allow leaders to appear decisive. They give the public the comforting sense that something is being managed.

But life is not healed by appearances.



A society that substitutes bureaucratic intervention for organic responsibility ultimately produces frailer citizens and more powerful administrators. It trains people to look upward for salvation rather than outward toward one another and inward toward their own duties. It teaches them to view hardship as a policy failure, risk as oppression, disagreement as harm, and dependence as kindness.

Then, when the social fabric begins to unravel, the very architects of its weakening return with yet another plan.

We have to try something.

No. We have to think first.

We have to ask what kind of civilization we are fashioning when every difficulty becomes pretext for concentrating power at the top. We have to ask why restraint is portrayed as immoral while reckless intervention can shatter lives. We have to ask why those most eager to redesign society are so rarely the ones who bear the cost when the design collapses. We have to ask why ordinary citizens are expected to trust institutions that seldom confess error.

And above all, we have to reclaim the moral authority to say no.

No, you may not treat compassion as an unlimited warrant.

No, you may not experiment upon society simply because your intentions sound noble.

No, you may not label restraint as cruelty when your remedy is unproven, costly, coercive, and destructive.

No, you may not pretend that doing something is automatically superior to doing nothing.

Sometimes doing nothing is not neglect. Sometimes it is wisdom. Sometimes it is the refusal to deepen a wound. Sometimes it is the recognition that government is not divine, experts are not infallible, and human beings are not raw material for political experiments.

This is not a plea for passivity. It is a plea for ordered, grounded action—action that begins near the ground, respects human nature, weighs trade-offs, can be reversed when it fails, and does not sacrifice family, neighborhood, school, church, enterprise, or citizen in service to an abstraction.



The leftist outlook frequently mistakes opposition to its preferred remedy for indifference to the problem. That error is politically convenient. It allows the interventionist to occupy the moral high ground without ever demonstrating the wisdom of the intervention.

But genuine concern for a problem does not require surrendering one's judgment to the first plan that arrives.

Real compassion demands judgment.

It demands the courage to declare that some solutions are foolish, some reforms are exercises in vanity, some programs are grabs for power, some emergencies are exploited, some experts are mistaken, some institutions are corrupt, and some acts of restraint are more merciful than the frantic urgency of those desperate to be seen doing something.

The question is not whether society should ever act.

The question is whether action remains accountable to truth.

When moral ideals are detached from reality, they invert into their opposites. Compassion becomes control. Safety becomes surveillance. Progress becomes destruction. Equality becomes coercion. Democracy becomes managed consent. And “we have to try something” becomes the courteous phrase that opens the door to all of it.

A free people must learn to hear that sentence differently—not as proof of compassion, not as proof of seriousness, not as proof that the speaker has earned authority, but as the beginning of rigorous examination.

What exactly are you trying? Who will pay? Who will decide? What are the trade-offs? What happens if you are wrong? Who is accountable? When does it end? And why should your desire to act override my right to be left alone?

These are not cruel questions. They are civilized questions. They are the questions that stand between a free society and a managed one.

The artificial world is constructed by those who are forever trying something. They try to remake language, childhood, sex, family, nation, history, borders, merit, memory, justice, and truth itself. They try to engineer compassion, manufacture equality, program tolerance, and redesign culture from above.



And every time the results disappoint, they do not reconsider the premise.

They demand another attempt.

More control. More theory. More correction. More artifice.

Organic culture, by contrast, endures through a different wisdom. It does not assume every problem can be solved by force. It does not treat every imperfection as license for revolution. It understands that civilization is not a machine to be endlessly redesigned by those intoxicated with their own benevolence. It is an inheritance to be tended, repaired, defended, and handed onward.

There are things government can do.

There are also things government should never touch.

The capacity to discern the difference is one of the hallmarks of a serious civilization. When that distinction vanishes, politics becomes a permanent emergency, and every emergency becomes an opportunity for greater control.

So the next time someone says, “But we have to try something,” the answer should be calm, direct, and immovable.

No.

First, you must prove that your something is good.

Because a bad solution is not better than no solution.

And doing something is not the same as doing good.

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