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William Beveridge's violin [1]

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By now almost everyone has heard that Child Benefit is going to be means-tested. We?ve also heard the middle class has responded to the move with ?outrage.? [3] We might also haveheard the world?s smallest violin [4] somewhere in the background of a BBC interview [5] where a married mother complains of the manifest injustice that her six-figure income is structured so that her state aid will be taken away, whereas other families' six-figure incomes are not. She is not alone. Tonight, parents everywhere will cry out for Leviathan's intercession, hoping government will hearken to them in the spirit of fairness and equality? and, perhaps, with a little cash.

The refrain is a familiar one, and reminds me of a time I went down to Occupy London Stock Exchange ? the cleaner, British version of Occupy Wall Street. I attended a talk there once on the subject of work, and the attendees ? about twenty of them ? began the session by stating their employment, only to follow with aggressive complaining about how their work represented their abject mistreatment by the ?system." ?The terms of my employment are unfair,? said one; ?my work is not valued,? said another, an unpaid intern in an art gallery. ?I am not paid enough for what I do,? said a third.

A range of employment ? builder, cleaner, lecturer, doctor, student, protester (really?), freelance writer, freelance landscape architect ? was represented. But the solution which the twenty of them agreed in council was not, as one might think, to go out and find another job, or to change careers to one which provided steadier work than freelance journalism, art internships or landscape design in central London. Instead, it was agreed that their labour should be withdrawn for a day on 30 November (even those who were self-employed): they would go on strike and seek a political solution in the longer term.

None of which, of course, does anything to solve the particular problem each of them faced: that their incomes were unsatisfactory compensation [6], in their eyes, for the marginal disutility of their labour.

Life is hard, goods and services are expensive, and competition in the labour market is ferocious. Nonetheless, except in cases of egregious civil rights violations, politics is almost never the best answer for improving one?s lot, particularly when one wants to make meaningful improvement on a middle-class financial position in a developed industrial state.

We each possess a degree of influence over our own lives which is far greater than that of any redistributive policy. What job to accept, what job to keep, what job to quit -- whether we can afford to have children, and how many. What these choices have in common is that they are ours alone. So should be the consequences. Viewed this way, spending life begging the government to save you is merely a waste. But asking your fellows to subsidise your expensive decisions ? especially when you can afford to shoulder the

burden yourself ? is simply rotten.

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