

How to increase wages and tackle inequality are live political and economic debates. Many Australians are feeling the cost-of-living squeeze.

Speaking ahead of a conference in Melbourne this week to revisit the landmark Henderson inquiry into poverty, conducted in the 1970s, former deputy prime minister Brian Howe says the targeted nature of Australia's contemporary social security system goes hand-in-hand with stigmatising welfare recipients.

Howe, a minister in the Hawke and Keating governments, says a universal basic income scheme "topping up" the resources of unemployed and low-income workers would provide them with much-needed confidence and dignity. He is especially concerned about the difficulties and vulnerability of young people trying to get a start in the labour market.

Howe also urges a rethink on housing and home ownership, including more public housing and a combination of public subsidies and private investment for affordable housing and rental schemes.

"Access to housing becomes a major cause of poverty, that's why Henderson had two poverty lines – one a general poverty line, and then a housing costs poverty line," he says.

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Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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