

Statement from Bill Browne, Director, Democracy & Accountability Program at The Australia Institute:

1. How concerning is it that VROs have been used in this way?

In recent years, Australian governments have unreasonably restricted and punished non-violent protests – especially those that target powerful corporations. The use of restraining orders outside of their original purpose is another worrying example of the right to free speech and protest being curtailed in Australia.

2. What do you think of Woodside doing this?

Non-violent protests are a basic democratic right and an expression of the will of the public. Since, as I understand it, the bail conditions the protesters were subject to already restrict them from approaching or contacting Ms O'Neill, the main reason for seeking the VRO seems to be to curtail the protesters' free speech.

3. Are you surprised that these orders have been granted?

4. Is this a broader issue and if so, how concerned should we be?

Elected representatives are meant to represent Australians, not corporate interests, but politicians across Australia have increased penalties for non-violent protests against big business.

Australians must be vigilant against heavy-handed government restrictions, because unlike most Western democracies Australia has few formal protections of freedom of expression.

Australia Institute research identifies worrying incidents of speech being suppressed, including workers being blocked from flying union flags on work sites, public servants being punished for expressing personal political views and critics of the Morrison Government having their personal information leaked to journalists.

Australia needs better protections for protesters, including federal protections of protest rights.