Dan’s Chrissy gift?

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December 20 deadline for grog-shop licensing decisions

TERRITORIANS will find out if a Dan Murphy’s can open in Darwin days before Christmas, after controversial new grog-shop licensing laws came into effect on Friday.

Changes to the Liq­uor Act were rushed through the NT parliament last week in a bid to effectively circumvent the independent Liquor Commission’s rulings and result in a decision, once and for all, on the future of four longstanding grog-shop applications, including­ Dan Murphy’s.

This means the Director of Liquor Licensing, armed with sweeping new powers, must hand down a decision within 30 days and isn’t required to consider community impact, despite having the authority to allow the applicants to move where they want the store to go and vary conditions on the licence.

The 30-day timeframe include­s weekends and public holidays, which makes the deadline December 20.

Territorians may never find out the reasons behind the decisions­, as there is no requiremen­t for the director to release their deliberations.

It may not be the end of the road for those four grog-shop applications, as the decisions can be taken to the Supreme Court.

The four grog-licence applications that will be decided on are the Dan Murphy’s superstor­e near Darwin Airport, the reinstatement of takeaway alcohol sales in the Tiwi Islands community of Pirlangimpi, an application by Liquorland to set up at the Oasis Palmerston Shopping Centre and a proposed takeaway alcohol outlet in Durack.

The laws have created a rift between the government and the Liquor Commission, with chairman Richard Coates describin­g the move as a kick in the guts and revealing last week that he and other members of the commission’s 15-person board had considered resigning.

Apart from handing significant power to one bureaucrat, the new laws also remove the requirement for “natural justice­” – in other words, procedural fairness.

Opposition Leader Lia Finoc­chiaro has described removing­ this “fundamental part of our entire legal system” as an “extraordinary step”.

“Natural justice is about right of reply, fairness, having a fair hearing, a fair opportunity,’’ she said. “Why did the government feel it was so necessary to remove the rules of natural justice from this provision, particularly given we are dealing with such a small number of applicants?