



Science of red tape SA's main contribution

A FEW weeks ago President Jacob Zuma told a side event to the fifth SA-European Union summit in Brussels that this country's science system was making an important contribution to the world's science and technology initiatives. He quoted particle physics, the exploration of Mars and could have talked about the Square Kilometre Array radio telescope project we share with Australia.

If we are so proud of our achievements in this area, why have we

created an administrative nightmare for those who are trying to make the Technology Innovation Agency, cobbled together out of seven entities and intended to be the country's technology launch pad, work really well?

As long ago as 2008, when the agency was launched, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research said it was worried the Public Finance Management Act would hobble the agency's work. This is because the act specifically precludes it from

making investments of a venture capital nature without an approved relaxation of the Public Finance Management Act. That approval has to come from the Treasury.

If someone turns up with an idea that is scrutinised carefully by the agency and given the green light, it still doesn't mean it will work commercially. That's what venture capital is all about.

So, on one side there is the Treasury doing its best to protect taxpayer money, and on the other an

agency charged with developing the country's scientific and technological capability.

The matter was raised by chairwoman Mamphela Ramphele in the agency's annual report last year. As she so diplomatically phrased it: "The board has been confronted by unintended statutory conflicts that make compliance difficult if not impossible."

Yet it still seems to be one of many being kicked around the dusty corridors of the public service.