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WHEN the National Parks legislation was debated in the Scottish Parliament, there were several amendments to the law which were rejected. As the local constituency MSP I took part in these debates. One was that the park should be zoned – given that it contains hugely diverse parts – from the Cairngorms to industrial parks and sewerage works. Another sets of amendments sought that the park authority should be accountable to the people. That could have been by a means of local referendum whereby those who actually live in the national park would have a say in the continuance of the park. That would mean of course that the park, containing as it does many appointed members who neither live nor work here, would be subject to local accountability, as are local authorities for example. Unlike all other planning authorities where those who make the decisions are elected, in the park some major decisions are made by those who are unelected and in consequence, unaccountable to the people who are affected by the decisions. Another amendment was that the park board should be able to make decisions with a degree of greater discretion, judging any matters that come before it, against the four aims, on their merits, rather than on the basis of the so called “Sandford” principle, whereby the first stated aim must be given preference. The first aim stated in the law is to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage. In rejecting all of these arguments, the then Scottish Executive stressed that all attempts would be made to ensure that all four aims would be considered seriously and conflict avoided. In particular the fourth aim is to promote the sustainable social and economic development of the communities of the area. Don’t worry they said – it will be all right. Well, over the past 16 years, many many constituents have had cause to express concerns to me that the park authority did not adequately represent that fourth aim – looking after the Fergus Ewing MSP for Inverness and Nairn It’s time to put people first in Cairngorms interests of the people who live and work in the park. And that is, I am afraid, a source of very real friction and frustration on the part of some local residents and businesses. Just in the last few weeks, in my work as the constituency MSP, I have had three clear examples of concerns expressed to me in the last months that the fourth aim is not or may not be promoted adequately. The first was in respect of young people seeking a home of their own in the park. The second was made by those involved in land management and game keeping who are concerned that the current park consultation does not fairly present their case, whilst a blog on the CNPA website appeared to state the contrary view. And third several local business men and women are acutely concerned about the shortage of housing, particularly in Aviemore, but this view appears to be rejected by the park who believe no such problem exists. Businesses tells me that many people who want to work here leave after a short period, because they are unable to find somewhere for themselves and family to stay. Many businesses find it hard to retain or recruit staff because of lack of housing. Finally, the park does need to understand that the issue of second homes is a complex one: many people who buy them retire here, and buy with that purpose in mind. So many second home owners become residents. And many second home owners will provide a great deal of work to the local businesses whether through the building of a house on a plot, or an extension or major improvements. This is a significant part of the local economy. It is a good thing, not a bad one as it sustains many local businesses and jobs. To argue per se that second homes are a bad thing, as the park appears to do, is wholly to misunderstand the local area and its economy. I say that as someone who campaigned successfully to remove the former 50 per cent reduction in council tax for second homes, arguing that they should make the same or similar contribution as everyone else. I have of course raised these issues with the park, but for example, in the case of the gamekeepers concerns, whilst a meeting was, following my intervention, subsequently arranged actually to hear the views of local keepers and others. But in a letter to me the park refused to accept there was anything wrong, and refused to permit the other side of the case to be published on its website. Given that a formal park consultation is ongoing, that does not seem to be balanced or fair. The second principle of natural law is – Audi Alteram Partem – hear both sides of the case! I gather that board members recently visited Aviemore. A bit more realistic understanding of the nature of life and work in the strath, from those of our board members that live elsewhere would be useful. n Fergus Ewing is the SNP MSP for Inverness and Nairn including Strathspey