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A view from the outside; an ambassador sees the NH primary close-up

By KEVIN FORD
For PoliticsNH.com

MANCHESTER Jan. 27 -- There are few better examples of American democracy than the New Hampshire primary, and today, Ambassador John Wood of New Zealand hit the streets of Manchester for a close up look at this quadrennial phenomenon.

PoliticsNH.com caught up with Wood as he struggled with the rest of the politically hungry trying to get into the Merrimack Diner in Manchester this afternoon. While he waited in the lobby for a table and a chance to meet with local voters, Wood remarked on the scene outside.

"It's personally very exciting," said Wood as he spied supporters of Rep. Dennis Kucinich and Ret. Gen. Wesley Clark vie for space on the corner of Elm and Merrimack. "There's a hypothetical possibility that one of these gentleman could be the next President of the United States."

Wood said he's been in New Hampshire for several days, "touching base" with the Democratic candidates, as well as representatives of President Bush. He also met earlier this morning with Secretary of State Bill Gardner.

The ambassador said he's mainly interested in letting the candidates know where New Zealand stands on trade issues, as well as their role in the rebuilding of Iraq and Afghanistan. "As this administration undertakes steps toward trade liberalization, we want to continue that process with them," said Wood.

He said that the small towns and cities of New Hampshire resemble those of New Zealand, and that Kiwis share a love of the retail politics that Granite Staters have grown accustomed to.

"The primary here in New Hampshire is much more like how it's done in our country than the rest of the U.S.," said Wood. "It's a different way of conducting politics."

He said the cities and towns of the Granite State are "about the same size" as those in New Zealand, and candidates for Parliament take advantage of that by meeting directly with voters in restaurants and town halls similar to those in New Hampshire.

According to Wood, the biggest difference between elections here and in his country is time. The election cycle for New Zealand 's Parliament lasts only six weeks and the country has none of the state and local organizations that are so integral to American politics.

"And we have stricter limits as to how much money you can spend," he said.

While Rep. Kucinich spoke with diners in a back booth and cameramen from CNN and The New York Times tried to get in their lunch orders at the counter, Wood said the primary reminded him of home.

"The atmosphere is very familiar," said Wood, "except for the weather of course. It's summer in New Zealand now. Nice time to be there."