

Regionalism from above: intergovernmental relations in Canadian metropolitan governance

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Zack Taylor

Department of Political Science
Western University
London, Ontario
Canada N6A 5C2

Email: zack.taylor@uwo.ca



Abstract

Robust metropolitan governance is increasingly viewed as necessary to address important economic, social and environmental problems. In this context, this article surveys recent developments in Canadian metropolitan governance. Canada was admired in the post-war period for the effectiveness of its two-tier and unitary metropolitan governments; however, few survive today as urbanisation patterns have become increasingly polycentric and intergovernmental relations more conflictual. Three models have emerged in Canada, sometimes in combination with one another: the multi-purpose regional intergovernmental organisation, the single-purpose metropolitan agency, and the provincial metropolitan policy overlay. Examples of each are discussed, with an emphasis on the interplay of horizontal (intermunicipal) and vertical (provincial–municipal) intergovernmental relations. Ultimately, provincial governments are by virtue of their constitutional authority and spending power the only actors capable of establishing and maintaining durable institutions and policies of metropolitan scope, and they have chosen to do so in Canada’s largest and most urbanised provinces.

Introduction

Economic, environmental and social policy-making is increasingly directed towards the metropolitan scale. There has been considerable experimentation with metropolitan-scale governance and policy around the world in recent years, producing a range of models (Ahrend et al. 2014; UCLG 2017, 2020). Within that context, this article draws on primary and secondary research to describe recent developments in metropolitan governance in Canada. It also situates the Canadian experience within theoretical perspectives on metropolitan governance and multi-level governance, and draws conclusions regarding whether Canada is exceptional or a potential model for other jurisdictions.

Canada was once admired internationally for a particular form of metropolitan governance: a highly integrated, two-tier local government system (Sharpe 1995). Most closely identified with the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto established in 1954, variations of the two-tier metropolitan

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municipality model were instituted elsewhere in Ontario and across Canada between the 1960s and the 1980s.¹ Less visible but no less effective have been unitary municipalities whose territorial jurisdiction encompassed the urban core and its metropolitan hinterland, including Calgary and Winnipeg throughout much of the post-war period, and Halifax, Nova Scotia and London, Ontario since the 1990s. Few such systems survive today and none are likely to be created in the future (Sancton 2009, p. 213). Some became obsolete as genuinely metropolitan authorities as urbanisation overtook their boundaries, while others were abolished in favour of other institutional formats.²

The fading of these municipal models does not mean that Canada has abandoned metropolitan governance. In fact, there has been considerable innovation over the past two decades. This paper describes recent trends and concludes that there is no single model. Rather, it identifies three models that sometimes exist in combination with one another: the regional intergovernmental organisation, the metropolitan single-purpose body, and the provincial metropolitan policy overlay. Each is discussed in turn, with examples. This heterogeneity within a single country is seen as the product of geographical, constitutional and institutional factors. The common thread that ties together the divergent models is the pivotal role of provincial governments within Canadian multi-level governance. Indeed, Canada would not have forms of authoritative and effective metropolitan governance without unilateral provincial intervention, often imposed over the objection of local communities and their elected representatives.

For this reason, Canadian metropolitan governance may be characterised as ‘regionalism from above’ rather than the product of bottom-up, voluntary mobilisation. This pattern comes with both benefits and costs. On the one hand, provincial *force majeure* has at times brought greater policy coherence and capacities to make and implement decisions at the metropolitan scale. On the other, it renders such policies and capacities vulnerable to changing provincial priorities. Meanwhile, without sustained political pressure and fiscal support from provincial governments to incentivise local cooperation, durable and effective metropolitan governance remains elusive. While the Canadian experience is likely not unique, the conjunctural origins of its systems of local government and intergovernmental relations suggest that the potential for transferring models to other national and local contexts may be limited.

¹ Between 1968 and 1974, Ontario unilaterally restructured over a dozen urban counties, including in Ottawa, Hamilton, Waterloo and Sudbury, into ‘regional municipalities’: two-tier local governments whose upper-tier authorities managed infrastructure and social policy, and prepared regional plans (Feldman 1974). Similar two-tier metropolitan governments were also created in Winnipeg in 1961 (Brownstone and Plunkett 1983), Montréal and Québec City in 1970 (Godbout 1971; Sancton 1985). Starting in 1965, British Columbia established ‘regional districts’ – compulsory federations of local governments in what is considered a single-tier system. The regional districts centred on Vancouver and Victoria are two-tier metropolitan governments in all but name (Taylor 2019b, pp. 221–227).

² Indeed, the two-tier bodies established in Ontario and Québec, and by Manitoba for metropolitan Winnipeg, were later amalgamated into single-tier municipal governments without expanding their outer boundaries.

Global context

The question of how best to govern metropolitan areas has grown in importance as the population and economic productivity of nation-states have become increasingly concentrated in large urban settlements. Since the 1990s, urban regions have become recognised as nodes where global flows of ideas, capital and labour come together, making them the economic drivers of national prosperity amid globalisation (Scott 2001; OECD 2006; Polèse 2009; Wolfe and Gertler 2016) and therefore the natural unit of economic policy-making (Cooke and Morgan 1998; Wolfe 2009).³ Globalisation and post-industrialisation have put pressure on local governments and other actors in metropolitan areas to collaborate across municipal boundaries in the interest of collective economic competitiveness (Pastor et al. 2009b; Peirce 1993; Dreier et al. 2014). At the same time, rising socio-economic inequality within metropolitan areas (Walks 2011), and between metropolitan and non-metropolitan hinterlands (Rodríguez-Pose 2018), has put stress on established governance systems and political settlements, prompting demands for greater redistribution of resources across space, and new social and economic policies and institutions tailored to addressing the problems of regions. Moreover, growing pressures on ecosystem services that support urban settlements, due to urban expansion and climate change, have also demanded regional solutions to protect food and water supplies, reduce pollution and carbon emissions, and sustain ecosystems and species habitats (Elmqvist et al. 2013).

These economic, social and environmental forces have reshaped the governance of national territories in ways that have focused attention on the metropolitan scale. A significant literature has emerged emphasising ‘bottom-up’ local mobilisation and the creation of ‘soft spaces’ of governance directed toward regional objectives, sometimes culminating in the creation of formal task-specific partnerships and organisations (McGuirk 2007; Nelles 2012; Purkarthofer et al. 2021; Allmendinger et al. 2015). The notion of spontaneous, bottom-up mobilisation has held special appeal in the United States, where the federal and state governments have been at best inconsistent participants in local governance. The ‘new regionalism’ movement of the early 2000s advocated for self-interested voluntary cooperation between cities and suburbs based on the emergence of common problems (Savitch and Vogel 2000; Norris 2001; Pastor et al. 2009a). More recently, American literature has focused on local resistance to ‘pre-emption’ by predatory national and state governments in such fields as gun control, environmental protection and immigration (DuPuis et al. 2017; Riverstone-Newell 2017).

Others focus on ‘top-down’ governance restructuring processes orchestrated by the state. In his influential conceptualisation of ‘state rescaling’, for example, Brenner (2004) examines the shifting of functional responsibilities and fiscal resources within and between government levels over the past several decades in response to globalisation. He finds that in Europe and elsewhere in the global North,

³ The terms ‘metropolitan’ and ‘regional’ are used interchangeably to refer to large urban agglomerations and their corresponding commuter catchment areas and housing and labour markets.

national authorities have reorganised or established new metropolitan-scale institutions or policies for strategic economic development, spatial planning and the provision of hard and soft services (see also UCLG 2017). However, top-down governance restructuring need not entail unilateral ‘command and control’ by national governments. Primarily in Europe, but also in Canada, scholars have developed a sophisticated analysis of multi-level collaborations in specific policy areas (Bache and Flinders 2004; Horak and Young 2012), sometimes characterised as strategic ‘meta-governance’, or governing at a distance, by national or supranational authorities (Torfing et al. 2012).

Sellers et al. (2020) argue that the degree to which authority, fiscal resources and political participation – which they term the ‘infrastructure’ of multi-level democracy – are centralised or decentralised in any given country is the product of distinct historical trajectories of state formation, including the timing and sequence of democratisation and bureaucratic development. It follows that the manifestation of the bottom-up and top-down processes is contingent on these social and institutional legacies.

Intergovernmental relations for metropolitan governance in Canada

Sellers et al. (2020) characterise Canada as a ‘civic localist’ jurisdiction with low levels of national government supervision over local affairs, limited national–local policy integration, and local governments which possess modest fiscal and administrative capacities, but which also afford generous opportunities for political participation. However, this characterisation omits the pivotal role of provincial governments in Canadian multi-level urban governance.

Canada’s pattern of multi-level urban governance is the product of three factors. The first is the high level of urbanisation combined with its polycentric metropolitan geography. Canada is a large country, but most Canadians live in only a few large urban regions. Over 70% of the population live in 35 Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs), defined by Statistics Canada as commuter zones with populations of greater than 100,000 (see Table 1). The nine contiguous CMAs centred on Toronto may be considered a single ‘megaregion’. This area, which the Ontario government calls the Greater Golden Horseshoe in its plans, is home to almost 8.6 million people, or 24.4% of the Canadian population. A further 11.7% of Canadians live in Greater Montréal, 7.4% in British Columbia’s Lower Mainland megaregion centred on Vancouver, and 27.1% in the other 23 CMAs. The remainder live in smaller cities, towns and rural areas.

Table 1: Canadian census areas

CMA's grouped where appropriate into contiguous regions	Population	Number of municipal govts	Central city population	Central city as % of CMA population	Region as % of national population	Cumulative % of national population
Greater Golden Horseshoe (Ontario)	9,061,585	58	4,412,688		24.5%	24.5%
Toronto (Ontario)	6,201,994	23	2,794,356	45.1%	16.8%	
Hamilton (Ontario)	785,184	3	569,353	72.5%	2.1%	
Kitchener – Cambridge – Waterloo (Ontario)	575,847	6	256,885	44.6%	1.6%	
St. Catharines – Niagara (Ontario)	433,604	10	136,803	31.6%	1.2%	
Oshawa (Ontario)	415,311	3	175,383	42.2%	1.1%	
Barrie (Ontario)	212,856	3	147,829	69.5%	0.6%	
Guelph (Ontario)	165,588	3	143,740	86.8%	0.4%	
Brantford (Ontario)	144,162	2	104,688	72.6%	0.4%	
Peterborough (Ontario)	127,039	5	83,651	65.8%	0.3%	
Montréal (Quebec)	4,291,732	91	1,762,949	41.1%	11.6%	36.1%
Lower Mainland (British Columbia)	2,934,583	26	908,975		7.9%	44.0%
Vancouver (British Columbia)	2,632,013	21	662,248	25.2%	7.1%	
Abbotsford – Mission (British Columbia)	195,043	2	153,524	78.7%	0.5%	
Chilliwack (British Columbia)	107,527	3	93,203	86.7%	0.3%	
Ottawa – Gatineau (Ontario-Québec)	1,488,307	25	1,017,449	68.4%	4.0%	48.1%
Calgary (Alberta)	1,481,806	8	1,306,784	88.2%	4.0%	52.1%
Edmonton (Alberta)	1,414,215	30	1,010,899	71.5%	3.8%	55.9%
Québec (Quebec)	837,111	29	549,459	65.6%	2.3%	58.1%
Winnipeg (Manitoba)	834,244	12	749,607	89.9%	2.3%	60.4%
London (Ontario)	543,551	8	422,324	77.7%	1.5%	61.9%
Halifax (Nova Scotia)	462,711	2	439,819	95.1%	1.3%	63.1%
Windsor (Ontario)	422,630	8	229,660	54.3%	1.1%	64.3%
Victoria (British Columbia)	391,950	13	91,867	23.4%	1.1%	65.3%
Saskatoon (Saskatchewan)	316,969	24	266,141	84.0%	0.9%	66.2%
Regina (Saskatchewan)	249,217	19	226,404	90.8%	0.7%	66.9%
Sherbrooke (Quebec)	227,398	11	172,950	76.1%	0.6%	67.5%
St. John's (Newfoundland and Labrador)	212,579	14	110,525	52.0%	0.6%	68.0%
Kelowna (British Columbia)	209,415	4	144,576	69.0%	0.6%	68.6%
Kingston (Ontario)	172,546	4	132,485	76.8%	0.5%	69.1%
Greater Sudbury / Grand Sudbury (Ontario)	170,069	3	166,004	97.6%	0.5%	69.5%
Saguenay (Quebec)	161,567	10	144,723	89.6%	0.4%	70.0%
Trois-Rivières (Quebec)	161,295	6	139,163	86.3%	0.4%	70.4%
Moncton (New Brunswick)	157,681	7	79,470	50.4%	0.4%	70.8%
Saint John (New Brunswick)	130,613	6	69,895	53.5%	0.4%	71.2%
Lethbridge (Alberta)	123,847	7	98,406	79.5%	0.3%	71.5%
Thunder Bay (Ontario)	122,294	7	108,843	89.0%	0.3%	71.9%
Nanaimo (British Columbia)	114,505	2	99,863	87.2%	0.3%	72.2%
Belleville – Quinte West (Ontario)	111,184	4	55,071	49.5%	0.3%	72.5%
Kamloops (British Columbia)	109,854	4	97,902	89.1%	0.3%	72.8%
Fredericton (New Brunswick)	107,022	5	63,116	59.0%	0.3%	73.0%
Drummondville (Quebec)	101,610	12	79,258	78.0%	0.3%	73.3%
Red Deer (Alberta)	100,844	1	100,844	100.0%	0.3%	73.6%
Census metropolitan areas	27,224,934	460			73.6%	
Non-metropolitan areas (Canada)	9,388,945	3,077			25.4%	100.0%
Indigenous authorities	378,102					
Canada	36,991,981	3,537			100.0%	

Notes: Indigenous authorities include Indian Reserves and other unincorporated or special-purpose authorities, some of which are located within CMAs. CMA population counts include unincorporated areas. All data are from Statistics Canada (2022).

Outside Atlantic Canada,⁴ which is less urbanised overall, most provinces have metropolitan majorities. The largest CMA or megaregion comprises more than 50% of the population in four provinces – British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Québec – and Alberta’s CMAs together make up a majority in that province (see Table 2). Even those provinces with a dominant metropolitan area also contain multiple sizeable urban centres. While Canada’s rural and northern hinterland is vast, Canada and its provinces are metropolitan societies.

Table 2: CMA and megaregion populations as percentage of provincial populations

Province	# of CMAs	Largest CMA			Largest Megaregion			All CMAs in province		Provincial population
		Name	Population	% of province	Name	Population	% of province	Population	% of province	
British Columbia	7	Vancouver	2,642,825	52.8%	Lower Mainland	2,952,318	59.0%	3,801,318	76.0%	5,000,879
Alberta	4	Calgary	1,481,806	34.8%				3,124,615	73.3%	4,262,635
Saskatchewan	2	Saskatoon	317,480	28.0%				566,697	50.0%	1,132,505
Manitoba	1	Winnipeg	834,678	62.2%				834,678	62.2%	1,342,153
Ontario	15	Toronto	6,202,225	43.6%	Greater Golden Horseshoe	9,063,401	63.7%	11,742,189	82.6%	14,223,942
Quebec	6	Montréal	4,291,732	50.5%				6,136,400	72.2%	8,501,833
New Brunswick	3	Moncton	157,717	20.3%				396,940	51.2%	775,610
Nova Scotia	1	Halifax	465,703	48.0%				465,703	48.0%	969,383
Newfoundland and Labrador	1	St. John’s	212,579	41.6%				212,579	41.6%	510,550

Notes: The small province of Prince Edward Island does not have a CMA. The Ontario and Québec parts of the Ottawa-Gatineau CMA are counted separately. CMA and provincial population counts include Indigenous authorities and unincorporated areas. All data are from Statistics Canada (2022).

The second factor is the constitutional division of powers. Provincial governments have broad fiscal and legal autonomy from federal authority, including exclusive and unfettered constitutional jurisdiction over local government institutions. Federal engagement in ‘urban’ issues is restricted to project funding, most of which flows through the provinces. Provincial policy autonomy is also bolstered by weak or no integration between provincial and federal party systems. As a result, provincial government legal mandates and incentives, not municipal initiative or federal *diktat*, determine the form and function of metropolitan governance arrangements.

The third factor is institutional. Canada’s version of the Westminster parliamentary system concentrates authority in the executive, which also benefits from policy support from a sophisticated public service. At the same time, the system of single-member constituencies increases governments’ sensitivity to localised issues and concerns. As it is difficult to form a government without metropolitan votes, metropolitan issues are often highly visible to provincial governments – and with centralised authority and sophisticated bureaucracy, they are well positioned to act on them.

⁴ The provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador.

In this geographical, constitutional and institutional context, intergovernmental relations in Canadian metropolitan governance play out along two dimensions: the horizontal and the vertical. As Table 1 also shows, most metropolitan areas are governed by more than one local authority. While in many cases the core municipality accounts for a majority of the metropolitan population, in several it is a minority player. The more consolidated the metropolitan area, the more political conflict might be expected to play out within rather than between municipalities, simply because there are more institutional players in the game. At the extreme, conflicts over planning and the provision of services would occur entirely within one municipality in a single-municipality metropolitan area. The more municipalities there are in a metropolitan area, and the less that any one municipality dominates in terms of its share of the population, the greater the potential for divergence of municipal interests and intermunicipal conflict. When local governments depend heavily on the property tax, and therefore compete for investment, voluntary collaboration is unlikely to see imposition of localised losses in pursuit of collective benefits – a dynamic that Scharpf (1988, 2006) calls the ‘joint-decision trap’ (see also Taylor 2019a).

This is where the vertical dimension of intergovernmental relations comes in. Provinces can and have used their authority to overcome intermunicipal joint-decision traps when they threaten provincial economic development objectives and the electoral competitiveness of the governing party. Nevertheless, the degree to which provincial governments impose their will on municipalities depends on their assessment of the political costs and benefits of doing so.

The result is a pattern of ‘centralised decentralisation’ whereby provincial governments retain unlimited constitutional authority over municipal affairs, yet generally seek to avoid the fiscal and political costs of direct, sustained intervention. Rather than governing localities or regions directly, they have chosen to transfer fiscal and political risk to municipalities. They have done so by setting the rules of the local game in the form of laws and regulations, institutions, and fiscal incentives. This has entailed a variety of interventions, including imposed restructuring of municipal boundaries, conditional grants, and the establishment of laws and rules that govern municipal borrowing and debt, land-use planning, and the internal processes and structures of local government administration. The character of intervention has differed from one province to the next as each has the constitutional autonomy, without federal coordination, to respond to the idiosyncratic policy demands generated by its urban system. In this sense, provinces may be seen as meta-governors of metropolitan space. The following sections describe models of provincially orchestrated metropolitan governance that have evolved in Canada over recent years.

Model 1: Multi-purpose regional intergovernmental organisations

While in the early post-war period most provincial governments actively restructured local governments to create single- and two-tier local governments of metropolitan scope, attention has more recently turned to ‘thinner’ multi-purpose institutions that facilitate joint planning and the coordination of municipal policies, and sometimes service delivery – what Miller and Nelles (2019) call regional intergovernmental organisations, and Wolman (2019) calls multipurpose special districts. Their membership may be compulsory or voluntary. Compulsory multi-purpose regional intergovernmental organisations are discussed first.

Compulsory bodies

Canada’s best-known compulsory, multi-purpose inter-municipal organisation is the Metro Vancouver Regional District in British Columbia (Tomalty and Mallach 2016; Wolman 2019). A smaller but analogous regional district operates in and around the provincial capital of Victoria on nearby Vancouver Island. Less elaborate and entrenched compulsory bodies also exist in Québec – for Montréal, Québec City and Gatineau – and also in Alberta for Calgary and Edmonton. The Vancouver, Montréal and Edmonton bodies are discussed in this section.

Vancouver The Metro Vancouver Regional District was created in 1967 through the consolidation of several single-purpose metropolitan districts. Municipalities in the Vancouver region have collaborated since the early twentieth century, at first voluntarily and later under compulsory arrangements legislated by the provincial government. An intermunicipal sewer and drainage district established in 1913 created an enduring institutional template characterised by equitable treatment and flexibility (Lea 1913; Taylor 2019b, pp. 96–200). Municipalities contributed funds for regional activities in proportion to benefits received and new members were admitted on the same terms as existing ones. This enabled extension of trunk water and sewer systems to urbanising areas while minimising conflict over the apportionment of costs. In the 1940s the province passed enabling legislation for the creation of intermunicipal regional planning boards structured along the same lines: one for the broader Vancouver region was established in 1949 (Harcourt et al. 2007, ch. 1), leading to the adoption of a regional zoning plan binding on municipalities in 1966.

These metropolitan single-purpose bodies were combined into a multi-purpose body when the provincial government established regional districts across the province between 1965 and 1969 with the aim of improving coordination of planning and servicing. Their boards are composed of municipal council representatives in rough proportion to population but over-representing smaller areas. (People living in areas without incorporated municipal government directly elect representatives to the regional board.) Non-financial decisions are made on a one-municipality, one-vote basis, which ensures that all areas have voice and small municipalities are not dominated by large ones. Financial votes, however,

are weighted in proportion to each municipality's financial contribution to the service provided, which is in turn proportional to the benefit received.

While municipal membership in a regional district is mandatory, and participation in some functions is compulsory, municipalities may opt out of some services and only participate in decision-making regarding services they receive. Recognising strong local opposition to incursions into local autonomy, the province initially mandated only a few functions for the regional districts. A few years earlier, in 1959–60, local opposition had sunk a commission's proposal to establish a Metro-Toronto-style two-tier metropolitan government. Nevertheless, the new regional district soon absorbed existing water and sewer special districts, as well as a recently established regional parks district. It also assumed authority over capital borrowing, public housing, labour relations, air pollution control and solid waste management (Tennant and Zirnhelt 1973). Until its mandate for regional planning was abolished in 1983, it also administered a regional plan inherited from the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board, which had been dissolved when the regional districts were created. (As discussed further below, regional districts' regional planning mandate was restored in 1996.) Most recently, Metro Vancouver launched a new investment attraction service in 2019. The provision of water, sewer, waste management and other services is uncontroversial.

Metro Vancouver's activities are primarily funded by user fees. The water and sewer districts charge fees to participating municipalities in proportion to water consumed and liquid waste drained. Solid waste management is financed through tipping fees and energy sales. The housing service is largely funded through rents and subsidies provided by other levels of government. Corporate activities are funded through a requisition from member municipalities in proportion to their share of the region's assessed property value. Dating back to the creation of the sewerage and drainage and water boards before the Second World War, this proportionate, user-pays system is well entrenched and uncontroversial.

Regional planning is regulated by British Columbia's Growth Strategies Act 1996. Under the legislation, a 'regional growth strategy' comes into effect only with the consent of all affected local governments – and there is no legislative requirement that local municipal plans conform to it. As part of the process, each municipality produces a 'regional context statement' explaining how its plan and actions align with the regional strategy. A binding arbitration process is invoked if a municipality disagrees with an adopted regional strategy, or if the regional district rejects a regional context statement. Achieving consensus on planning goals has required side-deals that have arguably undermined broader objectives; however, the public process of negotiating planning goals has cemented the legitimacy of the regional district and its planning function. While sometimes politicised, the regional planning process has led to more coherent long-term growth patterns and greater integration between land-use and infrastructure planning.

Montréal Established in 2001, the Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal (CMM) was designed as a strategic planning and coordinating body rather than a deliverer of services. Like Metro Vancouver, its council is composed of municipal delegates. The core City of Montréal has an assured voice: the regional board is automatically chaired by Montréal's mayor; and the Montréal Agglomeration Council, a sub-regional grouping of municipalities that is effectively controlled by the City, appoints approximately half the board.⁵ The other positions are allocated by balancing sub-regional geographic interests. Most decisions are made by majority, but approval of the metropolitan plan and matters involving infrastructure and facilities of metropolitan scope must be approved with two-thirds support. Approximately three-quarters of the CMM's revenues come from municipalities, the remainder coming from the province.

The CMM's influence has been politically constrained since its inception. It has avoided exercising its authority to establish a revenue-sharing scheme to redistribute local property tax revenues (Lafortune and Collin 2011, p. 407). It has also not assumed the planning authority originally envisaged for upper-tier municipalities (Douay and Roy-Baillargeon 2015, p. 33). Having been imposed by the province, it has no constituency among local politicians, especially in suburban areas, who have no desire to cede control over land use or economic development to a body that appears to be, and in some sense is, a front for the City of Montréal (Tomàs 2012, p. 560). For its part, the Québec government has resisted empowering an institution that could emerge as a rival power base for opposition politicians. Nevertheless, the CMM has presided over several collaborative plans, studies and projects for economic development, a cycling network, islands and riparian areas, agriculture, waste management and flood resilience, and is the conduit for distributing social housing funds to municipalities.

Edmonton The capital region of Alberta is another polycentric metropolitan area, with the central city of Edmonton accounting for 72% of the CMA population. Conflict between the city and neighbouring municipalities has been the norm since the 1940s (Climenhaga 1997). In 2008 the provincial government sought to break the impasse by unilaterally imposing a compulsory Capital Region Board (CRB) and charging it with preparing a regional growth plan with which municipal plans and actions must be consistent. The board is required to approve, among other municipal actions, all proposed development projects that affect more than one municipality, sub-divisions planned to contain more than 1,000 residents, and major industrial developments within 5 km of a city boundary. Edmonton's neighbours resented the CRB because its voting formula gave the City an effective veto. Although a regional plan was adopted in 2009 and approved by the province in 2010, conflict continued, with

⁵ Québec municipal governance is notable for its complexity in the Canadian context. Klein and Tremblay (2010, p. 569) call Montréal's metropolitan governance an "*administrative archipelago*": a four-tier system in which the CMM sits atop 14 two-tier municipal governments (including two agglomeration councils and 12 regional counties) in whole or in part, within which are nested lower-tier municipalities. The Cities of Montréal and Longueuil are in turn divided into boroughs with their own mayors and councillors.

municipalities engaging in tit-for-tat battles over major development approvals, annexation proposals, economic development projects, and even the passing of the organisation's budget (Stolte 2016; Neufeld 2017; Staples 2017). The provincial government intervened again in 2018, renaming the CRB as the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board (EMRB), requiring it to prepare a Metropolitan Servicing Plan, and reducing the size of its board. To mollify concerns about arbitrary decision-making when approving municipal plans, the EMRB is now required to develop a 'regional evaluation framework' that defines triggers for local planning issues to be referred to the board for review and approval. The EMRB has also adopted Vancouver's practice of having municipalities prepare 'regional context statements' that describe how municipal plans are consistent with the regional growth plan. There are signs that the decade-long experience with a compulsory regional board has smoothed intermunicipal friction. The board created a regional investment attraction agency, Edmonton Global, in 2018 and voted to regionalise the public transit system in 2021. It has also voluntarily developed regional policies for agriculture and broadband, and is working on a cost-sharing formula for expenditures that cross municipal boundaries.

Voluntary bodies

Several provincial governments have also provided legal or material support to voluntary intermunicipal organisations. By their very nature, voluntary bodies cannot make binding decisions, nor are they likely to make decisions that determine 'winners and losers' across their membership. However, they can function as a venue for ongoing interactions that institutionalise relationships, promote common understandings of problems, and build trust, potentially leading to the creation of authoritative compulsory bodies.

Winnipeg, the capital of Manitoba, offers an example of a voluntary intermunicipal 'talking shop' that may soon be replaced by a compulsory regional intergovernmental organisation with specific operating mandates. A similar voluntary partnership organisation existed in the Calgary region of Alberta between 1999 and 2016, when the province imposed a compulsory entity identical to Edmonton's, described above.

While the City of Winnipeg dominates its region, there has been persistent interest in improving the coordination of municipal economic development and infrastructure decisions. In 2006, the provincial government established the Capital Region Partnership with 18 member municipalities and a mandate to discuss and develop regional solutions for land-use planning, infrastructure development, environmental protection, and water quality and supply. While the statute enables the province to establish specific mandates for the organisation, initially it avoided controversy by choosing not to do so. The partnership adopted a broad-brush Regional Growth Strategy in 2016 (Thompson 2016) and created a joint-procurement corporation in 2018. In 2018 it rebranded itself as the Winnipeg Metropolitan Region, signalling the growing willingness of member municipalities to work together for

common objectives, provided that all parties benefit. In 2021, the Manitoba government passed legislation that would establish, pending the issuing of companion regulations, a compulsory regional planning board, modelled on Alberta's metropolitan boards, charged with adopting a binding regional land-use plan and promoting cooperation on infrastructure and services. Granted natural person power and authority to expropriate property, borrow and lend money, and "*exercise any other powers that are necessary to carry out its mandate*" (Government of Manitoba 2022, s.10.2(2)(f)), the board would wield broad authority over the region's development. Whether municipalities will tolerate this impingement on their planning authority remains to be seen (Zerucha 2020).

Model 2: Metropolitan single-purpose bodies

A more limited form of metropolitan governance is the single-purpose body. Provincial governments have established agencies to prepare long-term transportation plans, administer electronic fare systems, and operate transit services in each of Canada's 'big three' metropolitan areas – Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver – and, as noted, Edmonton's municipalities have agreed to create one. While not discussed here, the same four regions have also created regional agencies for international place marketing and foreign direct investment attraction, in Vancouver under the umbrella of the Metro Vancouver regional district. A comparison of Vancouver's Translink and Toronto's Metrolinx transit agencies illustrates the contradictory tendencies at work in vertical and horizontal intergovernmental relations.

Vancouver Until Translink's creation in 1999, local transit had been a service of British Columbia's provincial hydroelectric power utility. The regional district had long demanded control over local transit, as well as regional roads and bridges, but the province had little interest in giving municipal elected officials control over a budget that was substantially subsidised by the province. A compromise was worked out whereby a new arm's-length agency was created, partially supported by property and fuel taxes. Its board was initially composed of municipal elected officials, but in 2007 the province declared this dysfunctional and replaced it with a citizen board with members appointed by the province and member municipalities' mayors. As chief funder of transportation projects, the provincial government has consistently prioritised projects responsive to electoral benefits rather than technical needs identified by the regional district. For example, in the 1980s the British Columbia government nullified the regional zoning plan and constructed rail access to a new port through high-quality farmland (Taylor 2019b, pp. 232–242). More recently, the mode, route selection, and financing of a new SkyTrain line connecting downtown Vancouver to the airport were driven as much by the intergovernmental politics of hosting the 2010 Winter Olympics and the premier's desire for a legacy project before leaving politics in 2011, as by forecast needs and technical requirements (Siemiatycki 2007).

Past provincial governments have also politicised transit for electoral gain. The governing Liberals' 2013 election platform promised a referendum on any new transportation taxes in Greater Vancouver

(Liberal Party of British Columbia 2013, pp. 17–18). In 2015, voters defeated a ten-year transportation plan developed by Mayors' Council, its C\$7.7 billion price tag due to be funded by a 0.5% sales tax increase (Lesch 2019). The provincial government of the day did little to defend the plan, and taxpayers' rights groups successfully portrayed it as a tax grab by an unaccountable agency. Provincial insistence on a tax increase referendum – unprecedented in post-war Canada – fits poorly with its unilateral decision-making on highway and bridge infrastructure. No referendum was required for the government's replacements of the Port Mann Bridge, which opened in 2012, and the Massey Tunnel, which broke ground in 2017. Both projects cost, or are forecast to cost, almost as much as the mayors' ten-year plan and were opposed by Translink and Metro Vancouver for undermining the adopted growth management strategy, which is not binding on the provincial government.

Toronto The Ontario government had operated GO Transit, a regional commuter rail and bus service, since the 1960s, while local transit was provided by a patchwork of municipal special-purpose bodies with little coordination. GO Transit operations were transferred to the new Metrolinx agency in 2006, which was also charged with preparing a long-term transit investment plan. As in Vancouver, its board was initially composed of municipal representatives. Declaring them to be motivated by parochial interests, the province has appointed the entire board since 2009 (Tremblay-Racicot 2018). Metrolinx plays no role in local transit operations. While it administers a regional fare card, the province has avoided the conflict that would come with imposing a zoned fare system and formula for sharing revenue across local transit providers: engaging in intergovernmental fights over operational coordination offers no political upside for the provincial government. Indeed, Metrolinx's primary interactions with local transit authorities concern capital projects, not operations. This makes sense considering the province's core fiscal and political interests: it pays most of the capital costs of new facilities and therefore has a strong interest in deciding which ones get built and in which locations, and reaping any electoral reward. To this end the previous Liberal provincial government greenlit expensive subway projects in parts of Toronto where forecast ridership would suggest surface light rail as a more rational choice (Pagliero 2018); and also to an electorally vulnerable suburban district north of the city (Howlett 2006). Similarly, the current Conservative government is planning a new highway through ecologically sensitive areas on the northwest flank of the Toronto region, contrary to the long-term provincial transportation plan (Editorial Board 2021).

Model 3: Provincial metropolitan policy overlays

Provincial statutes and policies pertaining to metropolitan areas are not generally thought of as a form of metropolitan governance because they do not, in the first instance, involve local institutions. Nevertheless, binding provincial policy 'overlays' that direct or coordinate the activities of local governments within a metropolitan area represent a potential alternative to restructuring local governments or establishing new multi- or single-purpose metropolitan authorities. The most elaborate

Canadian example is Ontario's multi-part policy framework for the broader region centred on Toronto, which the province refers to as the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The closest analogues to this approach in other provinces are British Columbia's province-wide Agricultural Land Reserve and Québec's agricultural zones, which override local zoning to prohibit the urbanisation of rural agricultural land; and Alberta's regional land-use frameworks, whose content is more aspirational than directive.

As noted earlier, between the 1940s and early 1970s the Ontario government responded to Toronto's sustained rapid metropolitan growth by restructuring local government or creating specialist single- and multi-purpose agencies. Since then, and especially since the late 1990s, the dominant approach has been direct provincial intervention in the form of land-use planning directives to which local government plans must conform (Taylor 2019b, ch. 4). The current framework was established in the mid-2000s after considerable debate and conflict over rural land protection and worsening traffic congestion. Building on previous provincial rules governing land-use change on the Niagara Escarpment, a landform on the western flank of the Greater Toronto region, and the environmentally sensitive Oak Ridges Moraine, in 2005 a new provincial government enacted a more expansive Greenbelt. This was supplemented by legislation enabling the creation of provincial plans with which municipal plans must be consistent. The first such plan was the 2006 Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. This was supplemented in 2009 by a sub-region-specific plan targeted at the sensitive Lake Simcoe watershed north of Toronto.

These provincial plans collectively constitute an elaborate policy overlay that constrains and directs municipal activities. The plans map zones to which specific policies apply, including restrictions on conversion of land to urban use in some, and minimum density requirements in others. Municipalities are also required to direct more intense growth to a network of 'urban growth centres' and transit station areas. While this regional provincial policy framework remains in effect, its implementation through amendment of municipal plans has been slow and uneven (Allen and Campsie 2013, pp. 33–34). Its long-term impacts on land development patterns and transportation behaviour are unknown as no recent systematic analysis has occurred (Siemiatycki and Fagan 2019; IMFG 2019). The Conservative government which took power in 2018 is considered more pro-development and pro-market. It has amended provincial plans in ways that arguably weaken their protection of ecologically sensitive and agricultural lands, and has repeatedly exercised a heretofore rarely used power to override local zoning to enable the conversion of rural land to urban uses (CBC News 2021). Nevertheless, this new government has neither abolished nor rewritten the provincial policy overlay; its basic structure and content remain intact.

Ontario's establishment of such an extensive policy overlay represents the exception rather than the rule in Canada. It certainly was not inevitable: as long ago as 1996 a commission of inquiry recommended the creation of a multi-purpose, regional district-style entity for Greater Toronto with

authority over regional planning and large-scale infrastructure systems (Ontario 1996). However, the Conservative government of the day instead chose to amalgamate two-tier local governments in Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton and let the market sort out inefficiencies. It was only after obvious market failures (and their political costs) began to accumulate that the government took steps toward providing strong regional policy direction (Eidelman 2010). This appears to reflect the provincial government's inescapable political and economic interests in the Greater Golden Horseshoe region, which contains a majority of the province's population and generates a disproportionate share of its economic output. In recent decades it has also been the location of the vast majority of the province's population and employment growth. Few now advocate for locally controlled metropolitan institutions akin to those in Montréal and Vancouver, perhaps because the painful conflicts over municipal restructuring in the 1990s have rendered institutional changes politically impossible. It may also be that the policy overlay has produced acceptable outcomes for voters and politicians. Yet this has come at a cost. In the absence of regional institutions to broker agreement on goals and means to achieve them, Ontario's top-down, hierarchical model pits municipalities against each other as they compete for growth, inhibiting the development of horizontal relationships that might lead to voluntary collective action.

Conclusion

This brief overview indicates that the format of metropolitan governance varies across provincial and urban contexts. This is because provinces' constitutional jurisdiction over local government and land use is absolute; the federal government plays no role in this domain. The province has set the parameters of urban development in Toronto, Canada's largest urban region, through a land-use policy overlay under which local governments manage the detail. In Montréal, Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton, provincial governments have taken a devolved approach by creating compulsory multi-purpose regional intergovernmental organisations governed by boards whose members are delegates of member municipal councils. There is variation in what these organisations are empowered to do. The Alberta, British Columbia and Québec bodies are designed to be strategic planners and coordinators rather than direct service providers. Metro Vancouver's extensive operating responsibilities for water, sewer and solid waste management are the exception, and may be the product of its idiosyncratic history, whereby planning responsibilities were grafted onto pre-existing operating functions, not the other way around. Other multi-purpose bodies exist in Victoria (British Columbia) and Québec City, and may soon be joined by Winnipeg (Manitoba). These arrangements are accompanied by single-purpose metropolitan bodies for transit in most cases and sometimes also for economic development.

In sum, we see considerable evidence of regional rescaling as provinces have established new capacities to govern expanding and increasingly polycentric metropolitan spaces in the form of compulsory multi-purpose regional intergovernmental organisations, single-purpose bodies and provincial policy

overlays. Despite Sellers et al.'s (2020) characterisation of Canada as a country in which oversight of local government is weak, in practice the provincial government has been the key actor in each case. Provinces have exclusive constitutional authority over municipal affairs and the political incentive to exercise it. Only they can establish and empower metropolitan-scale policies and institutions. Provincially imposed institutions, mandates and fiscal incentives become the 'rules of the game' for local action and interaction within polycentric regions. The fact that they were in most cases imposed over significant local objection is evidence of provincial governments' authority and political capacity to exercise it. In Canada, metropolitan governance is 'regionalism from above'.

Imposing policies or institutions is not enough. Provincial governments must use carrots and/or sticks to sustain effective metropolitan governance. Ontario favours the stick: detailed policy mandates binding on municipalities, combined with unilateral use of its spending power to advance infrastructure projects of its choosing. The other provinces rely more on carrots: institutional structures and fiscal incentives. While compulsory membership of institutions brings municipalities to the regional table, the way in which representative decision-making and funding are structured determines the degree to which institutions facilitate the development of the trust and reciprocity required to pursue joint projects, especially those that distribute costs and benefits unevenly between localities. The institutions profiled in this paper each have carefully crafted representation to balance sub-regional interests, together with voting formulas that ensure adopted initiatives have broad support. In Montréal, Edmonton and Calgary the central city is given an effective veto, however super-majority requirements prevent it from acting unilaterally. Coalitions spanning the core city and suburbs are essential. Yet the Montréal and Edmonton experiences show that such representational balancing may be an insufficient condition for collective action. Rather, it is provincial funding that has incentivised collective action. Alberta subsidises the Edmonton board's operation, including the preparation of mandated planning exercises. Metro Vancouver and the CMM administer social housing programmes largely funded by provincial governments. It is no surprise that such initiatives are considered the most successful by local observers. Without provincial incentives, representative structures designed to promote consensus may be used instead to protect parochial interests, as seen with the CMM board's decision to avoid exercising its revenue-sharing mandate.

Institutional design is key to understanding the long-term development of Canada's most mature and influential metropolitan body, the Metro Vancouver regional district. After decades of intermunicipal collaboration through the sewerage and drainage and water districts, members voluntarily added additional functions, most recently economic development. The accumulation of small successes generated comfort with larger collective initiatives. Metro Vancouver's success at managing conflict and facilitating collaboration may be credited, at least in part, to its design features, some of which were inherited or adapted from precursor institutions: proportional formulas for board representation and financial contributions, combined with flexible participation in regional services and, more recently,

the consensual regional planning process (backed by binding arbitration in case of disagreement). Having evolved over a considerable length of time, collaborative problem-solving has become self-reinforcing in Metro Vancouver. Yet it is often overlooked that this dynamic emerged after sustained intervention by the provincial government. Over decades, the British Columbia government intervened at decisive moments with political, legal and financial support that incentivised collective action through regional institutions. Metro Vancouver's consensual governance system is the legal creation of the provincial government and its continued effectiveness and, ultimately, its existence depend on the province's continued support.

Herein lies the paradox of Canada's 'regionalism from above'. Provincial governments have been the essential force in the development of metropolitan governance in Canada's metropolitan areas. They have chosen to do so through 'centralised decentralisation' or 'metropolitan meta-governance', deploying their unfettered constitutional jurisdiction over local government and considerable fiscal resources not towards governing metropolitan areas directly, but instead toward creating the conditions for local problem-solving in the regional interest – within provincially imposed parameters. The case studies presented here suggest mixed results. Edmonton, Calgary and Winnipeg show early signs that, as in Vancouver, voluntary problem-solving may emerge from the institutional foundations laid by their respective provincial governments. Yet provinces have also used their legislative authority and spending power to pursue their own political agendas, especially regarding land-use planning and infrastructure projects, in ways that are perceived as arbitrary by local actors. It is an open question whether this is 'the cost of doing business' – that is, whether occasional arbitrary provincial interventions are a price worth paying for authoritative metropolitan governance in which local governments have voice and discretion. Given how recently some of the institutions discussed were created, only time will tell.

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