TOWARD THE METROPOLITAN MINDSET
A PLAYBOOK FOR STRONGER CITIES IN CANADA

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November 2023
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Acknowledgments: Thank you to Karen Chapple and Enid Slack for your thought leadership and incisive comments on previous drafts, Jeff Allen and Irene Chang for your creativity and map-making skills, and Zack Taylor and Jen Nelles for your collegiality and thoughtful remarks at the School of Cities event on city-regions in January 2023. We are also grateful to Anna Lazaris, Lizzy Marcus, and Nour Eliassity for their early research assistance. Most of all, thank you to all our University of Toronto students in PPG2016 Comparative Urban Governance, a course we co-taught at the School of Cities and the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy in Winter 2023, for pushing us to think more clearly about cities and city-regions, and helping us discover and explore examples of effective (and not-so effective) metropolitan governance around the world.

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November 2023
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ISBN: 978-0-7727-1075-8

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mayors and civic leaders across Canada have long argued, quite rightly, that we need to empower our cities. But granting new powers to just one central city and not its immediate neighbours may actually make matters worse. Instead, we need to shift our thinking: from a municipal to a metropolitan mindset.

The metropolitan mindset means moving past the traditional, zero-sum logic that pervades local politics, where city leaders compete with their neighbours for scarce resources, to one that inspires, enables, and sustains collective problem solving across municipal borders. This shift requires extraordinary collaboration between local authorities and all orders of government. But more than that, it requires us to understand, plan, and govern our cities as metropolitan systems. Improving housing affordability, transit and mobility, economic productivity, environmental sustainability, equity, and public health demands paying close attention to metropolitan housing markets, transport networks, labour markets, emissions patterns, income distributions, and social determinants of health — all of which ignore municipal boundaries.

More than half of Canadians live in our ten largest metropolises, generating nearly two-thirds of Canada’s national GDP. Yet despite their social, economic, and environmental importance, these metropolitan areas are governed inconsistently, pushed and pulled by more than 275 separate local governments in five different provinces, and dozens more intergovernmental authorities. The solution is not to replace or consolidate this jurisdictional web with, say, ten mega-governments, one for each metropolitan region. This would be both administratively challenging and unwise. No, the answer is to design better metropolitan institutions through mutual learning, deliberation, and thoughtful consideration of Canada’s distinct institutional traditions and metropolitan histories, to encourage greater collaboration between existing authorities and political leaders.

We need to shift our thinking: from a municipal to a metropolitan mindset.

In the following report, we offer a playbook to cultivate the metropolitan mindset in Canada, in four parts. We begin by providing an overview of Canada’s ten largest metropolitan areas — Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau, Calgary, Edmonton, Québec, Winnipeg, Hamilton, and Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo — exploring their unique geographies and socio-economic profiles. Next, we review the mixed results of past attempts at metropolitan governance in each city-region. Third, we look for inspiration from promising examples of metropolitan problem solving abroad. Finally, we lay out two parallel playbooks — one at the local level, for municipal leaders; and one at the provincial level, where power and resources are concentrated — to inspire concerted collective problem solving, as a starting point for greater dialogue between governments, industry, civil society, and the public about the future of metropolitan governance in Canada.
The local playbook focuses on building trust — the key ingredient needed to move past a scarcity mindset and spur collaboration. This means building dialogue through a multi-sector coalition of supporters, a shared vision of a collective future, momentum for change, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Local leaders need not agree with one another at every step. But they must foster relationships with their neighbours that can withstand disagreement, through mutual respect and a process of give and take.

The provincial playbook is all about raising expectations — making it clear to local municipalities that the metropolitan mindset is critical to provincial prosperity. This means sending a strong signal that municipalities are capable of working together, that the province will be there to support local leaders, and that the provincial interest in metropolitan problem solving is steadfast and will not be derailed by local infighting. The goal is not to impose solutions, but rather to champion and backstop the cause, no matter which way electoral winds blow.

The degree to which local and provincial governments choose to follow these playbooks will no doubt vary from city to city, province to province. After all, the metropolitan mindset is fragile. It does not come naturally, nor easily. It must be carefully tended to by both local leaders and provincial governments. Yet when all is said and done, metropolitan problem solving remains our best hope for collectively addressing our most difficult urban challenges, and thus, for building stronger cities, and a stronger Canada.
Mayors and other civic leaders across Canada have long argued, quite rightly, that building a stronger country will require building stronger cities. As a highly urbanized nation, many of our most pressing challenges are fundamentally urban. Housing unaffordability and income inequality are most severe in our largest urban centres. Record numbers of newcomers continue to settle in cities, putting pressure on local health, education, and social services. More Indigenous Canadians now live in urban areas than in First Nation, Inuit or Metis communities of origin, complicating reconciliation efforts. And the climate emergency will require wholesale decarbonization of urban infrastructure, including building retrofits, energy system upgrades, and investments in clean transportation.

To solve these interrelated crises, we need to shift our thinking, from a municipal to a *metropolitan* mindset. The metropolitan mindset means moving past the traditional, zero-sum logic that pervades local politics, where city leaders compete with their neighbours for scarce resources, to one that inspires, enables, and sustains collective problem solving across municipal borders. This shift requires extraordinary collaboration between local authorities and all orders of government. But more than that, it requires us to understand, plan, and govern our cities as metropolitan systems.

In Canada, we tend to think and act at the wrong scale. City leaders largely focus on the micro level, on local, neighbourhood issues, while provincial and national leaders focus on the macro level, on big picture issues. Our political institutions — municipal, provincial, and federal — perpetuate this hierarchy. What’s missing is the meso scale of the city-region, of the *metropolis*. Improving housing affordability, transit and mobility, economic productivity, environmental sustainability, equity, and public health demands paying close attention to metropolitan housing markets, transport networks, labour markets, emissions patterns, income distributions, and social determinants of health — all of which ignore municipal boundaries.

*The metropolitan mindset means moving past the traditional, zero-sum logic that pervades local politics, where city leaders compete with their neighbours for scarce resources, to one that inspires, enables, and sustains collective problem solving across municipal borders.*
More than half of Canadians live in our country’s ten largest metropolitan areas, generating nearly two-thirds of Canada’s national GDP. These metropolitan areas are governed inconsistently, pulled in different directions by multiple municipal jurisdictions and varying degrees of political cohesion and coherence. Some, like Vancouver and Montréal, have long histories of concerted, if convoluted, metropolitan coordination. Others, like Calgary and Edmonton, are newer to metropolitan problem solving. In all cases, reform never comes easy, particularly in vote-rich suburban communities. Memories and grudges are strong after consolidations or forced restructuring. Yet collaborative arrangements, properly nurtured, can avoid this animosity, and enable systems change.

Systems change begins with a change in mindset. It has become fashionable in recent years, as norms have eroded, for political actors to drive wedges between suburb and city, between rural and urban, rather than seek to unite and overcome common challenges faced by city dwellers who rely on resources and food from rural areas, and rural and remote residents who rely on health, education and professional services from larger centres. The moment we allow ourselves to be divided by grievance politics, we lose the opportunity to tune the shared systems on which we all depend.

The legacy of confederation looms large over our imaginations, limiting us to existing structures and old ways of thinking. When most politicians hear the term “region,” they think about Atlantic Canada, Central Canada, the Prairies, the West Coast, and the North, not the city-regions where most folks live. The constitutional mantra that cities are “creatures of the provinces” may have made sense 155 years ago, when Montréal was a city of only 90,000 residents, and Toronto 44,000. But such provincialism, in every sense of the term, is no longer appropriate, harming our economy, our wellbeing, and our environment. Failing to think at the metropolitan scale is costing us precious opportunity at a time of intersecting crises, when we can no longer afford to be complacent.

Many urbanists have argued that we need to empower our cities, and we agree. But how? Granting new powers to just one city and not its immediate neighbours may actually make matters worse. Instead, we must empower our city-regions by building stronger metropolitan institutions. In the following pages, we offer a playbook to cultivate the metropolitan mindset, in four parts. We begin by providing an overview of Canada’s ten largest metropolitan areas, exploring their unique geographies and socio-economic profiles. Next, we review the mixed results of past attempts at metropolitan governance in each city-region. Third, we look for inspiration from promising examples of metropolitan problem solving abroad. Finally, we lay out our recommendations for change, including practical first steps, as a starting point for greater dialogue between governments, industry, civil society, and the public about the future of metropolitan governance in Canada.
Canada’s Ten Largest Metropolitan Areas

- **Toronto**
  - Population: 6,202,225
  - Number of Municipalities: 9

- **Montréal**
  - Population: 4,291,732
  - Number of Municipalities: 63

- **Vancouver**
  - Population: 2,642,825
  - Number of Municipalities: 38

- **Calgary**
  - Population: 1,488,307
  - Number of Municipalities: 25

- **Edmonton**
  - Population: 1,418,118
  - Number of Municipalities: 34

- **Ottawa-Gatineau**
  - Population: 1,481,806
  - Number of Municipalities: 30

- **Québec**
  - Population: 639,311
  - Number of Municipalities: 20

- **Winnipeg**
  - Population: 754,678
  - Number of Municipalities: 9

- **Hamilton**
  - Population: 785,194
  - Number of Municipalities: 3

- **Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo**
  - Population: 575,847
  - Number of Municipalities: 6

Design: Irene Chang, Jeff Allen, and Gabriel Eidelman. School of Cities, University of Toronto.
Data Sources: Statistics Canada and OpenStreetMap. Population totals as of 2021.

Toward the Metropolitan Mindset: A Playbook for Stronger Cities in Canada
2. BACKGROUND: METROPOLITAN AREAS IN CANADA

What counts as a Canadian “metropolis”? Cities in Canada are thought of, first and foremost, as municipalities, which colours our understanding of where and how Canadians live. Only 100 municipalities, out of some 3,700 total, have populations greater than 50,000 people. And yet we routinely lump our largest urban centres with small rural municipalities under the label of “communities,” a catch-all term used by other orders of government — e.g., the federal Department of Infrastructure and Communities, the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism, and Heritage — which masks where and how most Canadians live.

Our largest cities are not single communities, but rather part of burgeoning city-regions. The hyphen is significant: it suggests what Kathryn Foster (2000, p. 2) calls the enigmatic “space between” a locality and the larger nation-state. This includes the suburbs, exurbs, counties, “bedroom” communities, agricultural lands, industrial parks, nature reserves, and everything else we might find near and within our major population centres.

City-regions go by many names — metropolises, megacities, metropolitan areas — and multiple definitions, depending on one’s methodological inclination. The most common approach is to group adjacent cities according to economic ties, such as the extent of the regional labour market or commuting patterns. But one might also draw lines based on ecological features, such as the boundaries of regional watersheds, or cultural linkages, such as shared regional identities (e.g., sports fanbases). Fundamentally, city-regions function as integrated socio-economic units, where people, goods, and services flow between connected urban, suburban, peri-urban, and exurban areas. Yet politically, decision making is routinely disconnected, fragmented across multiple governing authorities.

Canada’s largest city-regions are governed inconsistently, pushed and pulled by more than 275 separate local governments in five different provinces, and dozens more intergovernmental authorities.
By population alone, metropolitan areas are often defined as urban agglomerations with greater than one million inhabitants (UCLG 2017). Statistics Canada has its own, more modest definition, known as a Census Metropolitan Area, or CMA. By Canadian standards, a Census Metropolitan Area comprises one or more adjacent municipalities (census subdivisions) with a combined population greater than 100,000 residents (Statistics Canada 2016). According to the 2021 Census, a total of 41 metropolitan areas in Canada meet this threshold. Importantly, this list subsumes many of Canada’s most populous municipalities into larger units of analysis. The Toronto CMA, for instance, includes not only the City of Toronto proper (pop. 2.8 million), but also more than two dozen suburban municipalities, such as Mississauga (pop. 717K) and Brampton (pop. 656K), which, on their own, represent the seventh and ninth largest municipalities in the country. Similarly, the City of Vancouver (pop. 662K) is dwarfed by the combined populations of its fast-growing neighbours, including Richmond, Surrey, and Burnaby (pop. 2 million).

There is value in differentiating large from small. The needs of a “community” of 1,000 people are not equivalent to a city-region of 1 million. So for our purposes, we focus our attention on Canada’s ten largest metropolitan areas — Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau, Calgary, Edmonton, Québec, Winnipeg, Hamilton, and Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo — all with populations greater than 500,000 (Figure 1). Together, these CMAs are home to more than 20 million residents, or 55% of Canada’s national population. What’s more, they account for 60% of Canada’s national GDP, or nearly $1.3 trillion per year (Figure 2).
Greater Toronto is a global powerhouse in banking, financial services, and health sciences. Montréal and Vancouver are hubs for arts, culture, and tourism. Calgary and Edmonton serve as Canadian headquarters for natural resource development and related clean tech, engineering, construction, manufacturing, and logistics activity. Winnipeg is a critical node in North American transportation and distribution networks. Hamilton and Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo punch above their weight in trade and manufacturing, the latter especially in high tech. And Ottawa-Gatineau and Québec, as one would expect, are home to hundreds of thousands of public sector employees.4

Despite their social, economic, and environmental importance, Canada’s largest city-regions are governed inconsistently, pushed and pulled by more than 275 separate local governments in five different provinces, and dozens more intergovernmental authorities. No single municipality is coterminous with the boundaries of its CMA. Only six of the ten central cities in the largest CMAs make up more than half of the metropolitan population (Figure 3). As a result, even the most well-known and respected municipal mayors in the country cannot claim to speak on behalf of their respective metropolitan areas when engaging federal and provincial policy makers.
The solution is not to replace or consolidate this jurisdictional web with, say, 10 mega-governments, one for each metropolitan region. This would be both administratively challenging and unwise. Major changes to institutional architectures create political grievances that can take a generation to work through. No, the answer is to design better metropolitan institutions through mutual learning, deliberation, and thoughtful consideration of Canada’s distinct institutional traditions and metropolitan histories, to encourage greater collaboration between existing authorities and political leaders.
3. LOOKING BACK: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

We’ve known for years that Canada, at its core, is a metropolitan nation. The catalogue of academic and policy studies contemplating solutions to metropolitan problems goes back decades (see Plunkett 1961; Miles 1970). And yet the metropolitan dilemma persists. How should we govern city-regions made up of many cities? As demonstrated in the brief histories presented below, different city-regions have pursued different answers.

BRIEF HISTORY OF METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE IN CANADA

Toronto, Hamilton, and Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo

Nearly every model of metropolitan governance has been tried in the Greater Toronto region, the result of regular provincial intervention (see Frisken 2007; Taylor 2019, chp. 4). Beginning in 1954, the province created the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, or Metro Toronto, a two-tier regional government covering the old City of Toronto and thirteen neighbouring municipalities, eventually consolidated as Etobicoke, York, North York, East York, and Scarborough. At the same time, the province also established the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board (MTPB), with planning authority over 26 local municipalities across the region, covering a geographic area twice the size of Metro. The MTPB was dissolved in 1974, after the Bill Davis-led Progressive Conservative government implemented municipal restructuring plans across the province following the Metro model. The Region of Waterloo replaced Waterloo County, bringing together the Cities of Kitchener, Waterloo, and Galt (reconstituted via a combination of amalgamations as the City of Cambridge), as well as four rural townships. The Regional Municipalities of Halton, Peel, York, and Durham were created to manage skyrocketing suburban population growth immediately outside Metro’s borders, covering 24 lower-tier municipalities, including the newly established City of Mississauga. And the Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth was created to coordinate services across the City of Hamilton and its five surrounding municipalities. Together, these reforms gave rise to a new political geography, colloquially known as the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), characterized by a cumbersome mosaic of local and quasi-metropolitan institutions.

The 1990s brought drastic changes to the municipal sector, part of the Mike Harris-led Progressive Conservative government’s “common sense revolution.” In 1998, the government announced the surprise amalgamation of Metro Toronto, followed by Hamilton in 2001. The mergers were completed in defiance of both local protests as well as the recommendations of the Greater Toronto Area Task Force, an expert panel convened by the previous New Democratic government, which called for creation of a Greater Toronto Council to coordinate regional services across the GTA. In its place, the government created the short-lived Greater Toronto Services Board, with powers generally limited to transportation planning. The government justified its amalgamation agenda based on efficiency gains and cost savings — almost none of which came to pass (Slack and Bird 2013).
Riding an electoral wave of anger toward the Harris government, the newly elected Liberal government completely changed course in the early 2000s, abandoning structural municipal reforms in favour of a regulatory approach. In 2005, it published the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, and passed legislation entrenching its authority over regional land-use planning, including the creation of an urban growth boundary known as the Greenbelt. It also established Metrolinx, a regional transit authority to coordinate transportation planning as far south as Niagara, north to Barrie, and east to Peterborough.

The COVID-19 emergency in 2020 catalyzed the region’s first-ever sustained period of bottom-up, voluntary regionalism. Eleven mayors and regional chairs across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area met regularly to coordinate regional public health response and economic recovery efforts. However, Toronto Mayor John Tory’s shock resignation in February, 2023, torpedoed the group’s momentum. Three months later, the Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government initiated sweeping municipal reforms, including the dissolution of Peel Region, leaving the future of metropolitan governance in the area once again in limbo.

**Montréal and Québec**

The first vestiges of metropolitan governance in the Montréal region go back more than a hundred years (see Sancton 1985). In 1921, the Province established the Montréal Metropolitan Commission (or Corporation, as it was later renamed in 1959), representing fifteen local governments, with a mandate to review municipal finances and authorize debentures, in an effort to equalize fiscal resources and avoid bankruptcies in struggling suburban municipalities. In the 1950s and 60s, post-war population growth in Montréal’s suburbs spurred various proposals for metropolitan reform, but each was held up by long-standing divisions between English and French communities, the political clout of Montréal Mayor Jean Drapeau (1954-57 and 1960-1986), and the cultural shock of the Quiet Revolution.

In 1970, the *Union nationale* government announced the creation of the Montréal Urban Community (MUC). A bill establishing the Québec Urban Community was adopted about the same time, marking the start of a parallel series of institutional reforms in both urban regions. Inspired by metropolitan reforms in France, these *communautés urbaines* reflected the province’s, and particularly the City of Montréal’s, urgency to consolidate police services at a time of tenuous linguistic tensions and terrorist threats, and for suburban municipalities to share policing costs. Although this modified upper-tier government gained jurisdiction over water and wastewater, garbage disposal, construction standards, and air pollution, it exercised minimal authority over important regional concerns such as housing, transit, and land-use planning. The result, concluded Sancton (1985, p.120), was that the MUC was never able “to act as a true government.”

Austerity budgets in the 1990s led the Parti Québécois government to pursue an amalgamation agenda, eliminating or merging 213 municipalities across the province. In 2002, it replaced the MUC with the *Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal* (CMM), or Montréal Metropolitan Community, creating a three-layer institutional structure (see Tomàs 2012). The CMM, chaired by the Mayor of Montréal, would be responsible for regional planning, waste disposal, public transit, economic development, and public housing. All 28 municipalities on the island were merged into a single City
of Montréal, while 27 borough councils were reconstituted to manage local roads, recreation, parks, and community development, yet without taxation powers. Similarly, in Québec, 13 municipalities on both sides of the St. Lawrence River were merged into a single Ville de Québec, with corresponding local boroughs, under the umbrella of the Communauté métropolitaine de Québec (CMQ).

This period of “merger mania” (Sancton 2000) led to widespread protest. In response, the newly elected Liberal government approved a province-wide referendum on de-amalgamation of affected communities. Ultimately, two Québec boroughs and fifteen boroughs on the Island of Montréal voted to de-amalgamate, leading to the creation, in 2006, of an additional intermunicipal structure to coordinate shared services between amalgamated and de-amalgamated municipalities, known as Agglomeration Councils. Today, the Montréal Agglomeration Council operates in parallel with the larger CMM, whose membership totals 82 municipalities across the city-region; while a similar entity operates alongside the CMQ, which includes 28 municipal members on both sides of the St. Lawrence River, as well as the Island of Orléans.

**Ottawa-Gatineau**

Despite its significance as the national capital, metropolitan governance in the Ottawa-Gatineau region has generally followed the lead of the largest cities, Toronto and Montréal, in the two provinces it spans. On the Ontario side, in 1969, the province created the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton, the first of eight two-tier regional governments created across the province modelled on Metro Toronto. The same year, on the Quebec side, the province created the Communauté régionale de l’Outaouais, later renamed the Communauté urbaine de l’Outaouais, to match similar two-tier arrangements introduced in Québec and Montréal. Three decades later, the region was once again restructured following precedents set elsewhere. In 2001, Ottawa-Carleton was amalgamated, much like Toronto in 1998, merging eleven local municipalities into a single City of Ottawa. The following year, the Communauté urbaine was consolidated into a single Municipalité du Gatineau, merging five local municipalities in the process (Tassonyi 2009).

At first glance, the jurisdictional landscape in the area appears cleanly divided between two relatively similar single-tier municipalities, Ottawa and Gatineau. Yet in practice, the two municipalities rarely coordinate policy, operating as “creatures” of quite different legislative frameworks in each province. Add to this an overarching institutional anomaly: the National Capital Commission (NCC). Established in 1959, the NCC is a federal crown corporation with jurisdiction over regional planning in an area roughly coterminous with the CMA, spanning both sides of the provincial boundary between Quebec and Ontario. Although it has no direct say in municipal decision making, the NCC manages buildings and property owned by the federal government, which amount to 11% of all land in the metro area, including nearly 15,000 hectares of parks, such as Gatineau Park, and protected lands and forests known as the National Capital Greenbelt. The NCCs fifteen board members are solely appointed by, and accountable to, the federal government, without any direct representation from local residents or political leaders at any other level. The result, note Gordon and Juneau (2011), “is probably Canada’s most difficult metropolitan region to plan, build, and govern.”
Vancouver

Vancouver’s metropolitan governance regime, typified by voluntary municipal collaboration and flexible service districts enabled by provincial statute, took root in the early 1900s (see Taylor 2019, chp. 6, for a complete history). After a series of disease outbreaks in the late 1800s, the municipalities of Vancouver, Point Grey, South Vancouver, and Burnaby moved to create a Vancouver and Districts Joint Sewerage and Drainage Board, a special-purpose body chartered by the province in 1913. This model became the template for bottom-up metropolitan problem solving still largely intact today. In 1924, the Cities of Vancouver, South Vancouver, and Point Grey came together to form the Greater Vancouver Water District, to deliver drinking water. In 1949, fifteen municipalities agreed to participate in The Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board. In 1966, Burnaby, the City and District of North Vancouver, Richmond, Vancouver, and West Vancouver joined forces to form a Metropolitan Parks District. The list of services coordinated at the metropolitan scale grew as local municipalities devised new mechanisms for collaboration.

Based on the success of the Vancouver model, in the late 1960s, the Government of British Columbia “quietly but forcefully” established a system of flexible, semi-voluntary, multi-purpose regional districts to encourage further regional cooperation in communities across the province (Taylor 2019, p. 224). The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), along with twenty-seven other districts covering the rest of the province, was designed with no fixed service responsibilities; instead, shared services were to be decided on via mutual agreement between member municipalities. In addition to water and sewer, planning, and parks, the GVRD later took on responsibilities for capital borrowing, public housing, pollution control, and waste management. Financial obligations, and political representation, would be determined proportionally, according to population.

Today, the GVRD, since renamed Metro Vancouver, includes twenty-one member municipalities and Tsawwassen First Nation, roughly corresponding to the boundaries of the Vancouver CMA. Its list of service responsibilities has grown to include economic development, 9-1-1 service, climate change, and Indigenous relations. Its membership also makes up the Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation, a separate body which appoints directors to the board of Translink, established in 1998 to operate and oversee the region’s transportation planning and transit services.

Calgary and Edmonton

Provincial plans for metropolitan governance in Calgary and Edmonton have largely evolved in tandem, though local solutions have varied. During the first half of the 20th century, the default approach to metropolitan planning in both cities focused on ad hoc municipal annexation. As populations grew, and new settlements mushroomed, municipal boundaries were extended accordingly. The Royal Commission on the Metropolitan Development of Calgary and Edmonton, better known as the McNally Commission, formalized this approach as official government policy for both cities in 1956.
In Calgary, annexations continue to this day. But whereas the Calgary “unicity” once encompassed virtually the entire built-up urban area, rapid growth through the 1990s in distant, yet economically integrated, municipalities of Airdrie, Chestermere, High River, and Okotoks began to complicate annexation plans. So in 1999, Calgary mayor Al Duerr convinced representatives from fifteen neighbouring municipalities to meet informally to discuss common concerns, leading to the formation of the voluntary Calgary Regional Partnership, formalized in 2004 and funded by provincial grants and municipal membership fees (Miller 2016). The Partnership served as the primary forum to negotiate the Calgary Metropolitan Plan. However, negotiations routinely broke down, forcing the province to intervene in 2016 by establishing a compulsory Calgary Metropolitan Planning Board.

Edmonton’s regional development pattern was circumscribed much earlier than Calgary due to the region’s polycentric growth, including abutting industrial zones and bedroom communities on several sides, and Enoch Cree Nation next door. Despite McNally’s recommendations, the centre city was only partially consolidated with its older, poorer inner suburbs, leaving the plum industrial tax base in county hands. In 1950, several Edmonton area municipalities came together voluntarily to create the Edmonton Regional Planning Commission, partially funded by the province. The Commission, perceived as wasteful and ineffective, was disbanded in 1995 by Premier Ralph Klein’s government on the premise that growth management stifled the marketplace. Before its dissolution, members laid the foundation for further voluntary cooperation, initially under the banner of the Capital Region Forum, later rebranded as the Alberta Capital Region Alliance. But the Alliance ultimately proved toothless and unable to make hard decisions given its consensus voting structure. Edmonton city council voted to leave the Alliance in 2006.

In 2008, the province stepped in at the request of then Mayor of Edmonton Stephen Mandel, unilaterally imposing a Capital Region Board with a mandate to prepare a regional growth plan for twenty-five member municipalities to follow. The Board, renamed the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board in 2017, and rescaled to 13 member municipalities with populations of 5,000 or more, has since approved a 30-year land use plan and growth strategy, helped establish a regional economic development agency, Edmonton Global (modelled on Montréal International and Toronto Global), and incubated the Edmonton Metro Transit Services Commission, which failed to launch in 2022.

Winnipeg

The Winnipeg experience with metropolitan governance began with wild swings in provincial agendas. In 1961, the Progressive Conservative government imposed a two-tier metropolitan government — similar to Metro Toronto, but directly elected — to lead infrastructure investment in suburban areas. The result, coupled with stagnant population growth, was a decline of living standards in the central city. So less than a decade later, in 1970, the newly elected New Democratic government instituted an opposite solution, abolishing the two-tier metro government and merging the Corporation of Greater Winnipeg and its twelve constituent municipalities into a single City of Winnipeg, in an effort to equalize services (Brownstone and Plunkett 1983).
Winnipeg’s “unicity” model persisted until the 1990s, when Winnipeg’s mayor began meeting with heads of council in surrounding rural municipalities, leading to the formation of the Capital Region Partnership, a voluntary forum to discuss issues of common interest, namely, land-use planning, infrastructure development, and environmental protection. The Partnership, formalized in 2006 with the passing of the Capital Region Partnership Act, began “essentially as a talking shop” for its 16 member municipalities (Taylor 2020, p. 26). But over time, despite not possessing any formal governmental powers, it matured to produce a regional growth strategy and joint-procurement corporation, leading to its rebranding as the Winnipeg Metropolitan Region (WMR). Most recently, in 2022, the Government of Manitoba established the Capital Planning Region Board, a statutory body that builds on the WMR’s foundation, with representation from all 18 member municipalities, as well as up to four provincial appointees, and a mandate to draft and approve regional land use plans to which member municipalities must comply.

**THERE IS NO SINGLE CANADIAN MODEL**

Canada’s history of metropolitan governance is complex and constantly evolving. The one constant of metropolitan reform, paradoxically, has been continual change. In every case, attempts at metropolitan reform have followed one of five basic approaches:

- The “unicity” model, evident in Calgary (as well as Halifax, Canada’s 12th largest CMA), which seeks to consolidate an entire geographic region into a single, amalgamated political unit, making regional government largely unnecessary.

- The “comprehensive regional authority” model, used today in Vancouver, Montréal, Québec, and to a lesser extent, Edmonton, which involves the provincial government establishing a region-wide decision making body — e.g., regional districts, regional governments, metropolitan boards, or metropolitan communities — with multiple functions or responsibilities, to which municipalities must either contribute or conform.

- The “single-purpose authority” model, wherein a new formal entity is established with a mandate to manage or deliver a single service or responsibility across municipal boundaries. For example, regional transportation planning in Vancouver, Montréal, and Toronto is led by dedicated regional transit agencies established via provincial legislation.

- The “province as de facto regional government” model, as seen with Ontario’s land-use planning and growth management regime for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, in which the province executes region-specific decisions by legislative or regulatory means.

- The “voluntary participation” model, whereby municipalities themselves enter into formal or informal partnership, in a bottom-up effort to encourage intermunicipal dialogue and joint problem solving. These arrangements can lead to intermunicipal service agreements or joint ventures, or act as the starting point for further integration via a comprehensive or compulsory governance arrangements, as seen with the transition of Winnipeg’s Capital Region Partnership into the Capital Planning Region Board.
All told, “there is no single Canadian model” of metropolitan governance (Taylor 2020, p. 39). City-regions are often subject to multiple, overlapping governance arrangements, a consequence of both local political circumstances and the ebbs and flows of provincial (dis)engagement. For instance, the Montréal Metropolitan Community, a comprehensive regional body, coexists with single-purpose bodies such as the provincial ARTM transit agency (*Autorité régionale de transport métropolitain*). Edmonton Global, the region’s investment attraction agency, operates in parallel with the Metropolitan Region Board, which focuses on land use planning and regional growth management. And Metro Vancouver includes the self-governing Tsawwassen First Nation, following a comprehensive treaty negotiated between the First Nation, the Government of Canada, and the Province of British Columbia in 2009.⁸

Nor should there be one single metropolitan blueprint. What’s needed is not a harmonization or streamlining of governance approaches, but rather greater coherence, collective action, and mutual learning, to help inspire continual improvement and innovation. The question thus becomes, what changes should come next?

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**All told, there is no single Canadian model of metropolitan governance.**

**City-regions are often subject to multiple, overlapping governance arrangements, a consequence of both local political circumstances and the ebbs and flows of provincial (dis)engagement.**
4. LOOKING FORWARD:
WHERE DO WE NEED TO GO?

Before charting a new course for Canadian city-regions, one should look outside Canada for guidance, both to the scholarly literature as well as real-world examples of effective metropolitan governance around the world.

THE EVIDENCE ON METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE

Empirically, the international evidence is clear: metropolitan-level problem solving, decision making, collaboration, and coordination can lead to improved quality of life, in a number of ways.

First, well-functioning metropolitan governance arrangements can deliver more efficient services, due to economies of scale, pooled resources, and greater policy capacity. The potential for agglomeration benefits are highest in the provision of hard infrastructure services, such as solid waste, roads, and highways (Aldag et al. 2020; Bel and Sebo 2021). Horizontal coordination between municipalities also improves “vertical” intergovernmental relations — between different orders of government: municipal, provincial, and federal — by simplifying funding and related reporting programs.

Second, metropolitan governance can lead to better land-use and transportation planning, and thus improved social and environmental outcomes. Regional solutions help rectify or eliminate negative externalities, such as spillovers and “free rider” problems, through strategic planning. For example, OECD research suggests that city-regions with functional metropolitan governance bodies have better transit, growth management, and environmental policies (Ahrend 2014). Metropolitan areas also have been shown, at least in the United States, to have lower per-capita carbon emissions than rural areas (Brown et al. 2009), while metro coordination can also help manage air and water pollution.

The international evidence is clear: metropolitan-level problem solving, decision making, collaboration, and coordination can lead to improved quality of life.
Third, metropolitan governance can improve economic competitiveness. Metropolitan areas are generally more productive than smaller cities and rural areas (Ahrend et al. 2017). Moreover, metros are increasingly recognized as important hubs in the globalized knowledge economy. Specialized firms and talent cluster together at the regional, not local scale, meaning that metropolitan-level collaboration is an essential driver of innovation and growth (Wolfe and Gertler 2016; Florida et al. 2017).

Fourth, metros can improve social equity. Whether higher income groups concentrate in the central city, or the opposite, in outlying suburban municipalities, redistributive policies at the regional scale can help alleviate inequities affecting vulnerable or underserved populations (Altshuler et al. 1999). From a fiscal perspective, taxes can be redistributed from stronger tax bases to weaker tax bases, or correct for inequitable tax burdens, such as when suburban residents use services in the core without paying taxes there. From a social perspective, planning for services such as social housing, public health, and recreational programming can better target marginalized populations across municipal borders. This is particularly important in the current policy environment where governments at all levels must demonstrate their commitment to Indigenous reconciliation, keeping in mind that the traditional territories of many First Nations, such as the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Coast Salish peoples in the Vancouver metro area, and the Blackfoot, Cree, and Métis Nations in the Winnipeg metro area, rarely, if ever, align with formal municipal boundaries.7

The trouble, of course, is that the theoretical benefits of metropolitan governance do not arise automatically. Designing and operating effective metropolitan governance arrangements is notoriously difficult. As Enid Slack and Rupak Chattopadhyay (2013, p. 7) remind us, “neither theory nor practice tells us clearly which model of governance is best for metropolitan areas.” But not for lack of trying. Although no city-region anywhere in the world has “solved” the metropolitan dilemma, there are certainly shining lights that all Canadian city-regions can learn from.

INTERNATIONAL EXEMPLARS

Manchester, United Kingdom

For more than three decades, the ten local authorities that make up Greater Manchester (pop. 2.8 million) have developed a primarily “bottom-up” form of metropolitan governance centred on the pursuit of economic development, despite multiple municipal restructuring initiatives undertaken by central government. In 1974, the national government announced a sweeping reorganization of all local governments in England, Wales, and later, Scotland, including the formation of the Greater Manchester County Council (GMCC). The GMCC served as an upper-tier regional government, responsible for transportation and strategic planning across ten consolidated lower-tier governments, fashioned from 68 former local authorities. Just over a decade later, in 1986, the Thatcher government abolished the “met” system across the country, in the name of “streamlined” government. Yet local leaders’ experiences working across municipal boundaries “provided a future template” for continued regional coordination (Harding 2020, 12).
Following the breakup of the GMCC, separate statutory authorities were created to preserve coordinated management of the airport, road transportation, policing, fire, and waste disposal services, augmented by the establishment of a formal, yet voluntary Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA). Over time, the Association widened the scope of its authority to focus on regional economic development, leading bids for major international events, such as the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, and forming several joint ventures, such as the City Pride Partnership, Marketing Manchester, the Manchester Investment Delivery Agency Service (MIDAS), and Manchester Enterprises (Cowie et al., 2015). Perhaps the Association’s most creative (and profitable) demonstration of metropolitan collaboration was the creation of Manchester Airports Group, which owns and operates not only Manchester airport, but also London Stansted and East Midlands airports, located in other parts of the UK.

The AGMA’s willingness to “get into business together” both fortified Manchester’s metropolitan identity and encouraged pragmatism, rather than political conflict. Importantly, many of the Association’s joint ventures did not begin with consensus. The MIDAS investment agency, for example, started with contributions from just three local districts, before its successes convinced all ten local governments to sign on (Harding 2020). When the national government revived the idea of metropolitan government, first with the creation of the London Greater Authority in 1999, and later, in 2011, the creation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, local leaders were ready to hit the ground running. Combined Authorities were effectively created as “empty shells,” with powers and resources agreed on via intergovernmental agreement. The trust built through thirty years of voluntary metropolitan cooperation made the 2014 Greater Manchester Agreement, which devolved considerable powers and fiscal authority to the Combined Authority, far easier to reach.

Denver, USA

The roots of metropolitan thinking in the Denver region (pop. 3 million) go back to 1955, with the voluntary establishment of the Inter-County Regional Planning Association, formed to manage the region’s rapid post-war population growth. In 1968, the Association was expanded and renamed the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG), encompassing Denver and five surrounding counties (Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Douglas and Jefferson), along with, in 1969, a companion Regional Transportation District formed to operate a regional transit network. Today, the DRCOG continues to serve as the region’s formal Metropolitan Planning Organization, required by the US government to access federal transportation funding.8

Early collaboration efforts, principally motivated by top-down federal incentive programs, were “by-and-large not successful” (Jonas et al. 2014, p. 2451). Suburban municipalities routinely resisted integration of transportation, water, and sewage infrastructure based on “home rule” provisions in the Colorado state constitution. As a result, sprawl, traffic congestion, smog, and water scarcity worsened through the 1990s, threatening the region’s economic prosperity and leading to calls from the business community for a more collaborative and orderly approach.
In response, the Denver Chamber of Commerce independently convened the Metro Mayors Caucus, a private forum of 32 (now 39) mayors, to exchange ideas and explore collaborative solutions. In a few short years, the Caucus helped develop and drive adoption of the “Mile High Compact,” a voluntary agreement signed in 2000 by 46 communities, representing 90 percent of the MPO area, which endorsed the DRCOG’s “Metro Vision” regional plan and establishment of an urban growth boundary (Rosan 2017, chp. 3).

The metropolitan mindset in Denver crystallized as the dominant mode of thinking during Mayor John Hickenlooper’s term in office (2003-2011). Motivated by economic development pressures to attract corporate head offices and a push to grow the economy via transit-oriented development, business and community leaders came together to support a regional public transit plan, dubbed “FasTracks.” The plan, which called for a 122-mile (196 km) extension of light and commuter rail routes across the metropolitan region, received widespread buy-in from the business community, which played a crucial role in generating public support for the scheme. Alongside federal grants, the $4.7 billion transit initiative was funded by a regional sales tax approved via ballot measure by 57% of voters (Jonas et al. 2014). Despite subsequent cost overruns, FasTracks successfully generated six new rail lines and one rapid bus line that have made “a recognizable impact on Denver’s land use and urban form” (Ratner and Goetz 2013, p. 45).

Helsinki, Finland

Metropolitan governance in the Helsinki region (pop. 1.5 million) has been driven by a combination of bottom-up, voluntary cooperation between municipalities, and top-down, strategic interventions by the central government (Haila and Le Galès 2004). Dramatic population growth in the metro area in the early 2000s, especially in Helsinki’s three neighbouring suburban municipalities (Espoo, Vantaa, and Kauniainen), prompted local calls to work across municipal boundaries, particularly in areas of economic development, social equity, and housing and infrastructure (Giersig 2008). Fiscal concerns as well as pressure from business groups led to various metropolitan arrangements focused on innovation, arts and culture, and the environment. Some, such as the so-called Helsinki Club (Helsinki Klubi), an informal network of metro mayors, business, and civil society leaders focused on international competitiveness, were short-lived. Others, such as the Helsinki Region Cooperation Assembly (HSYK), established in 2005 based on a voluntary cooperation agreement between all fourteen municipalities in the broader Helsinki region, continues to operate today (Rubbo 2018).

The breakthrough came in 2007, when the national government formally adopted a “metropolitan policy” for the capital region (Metropolipolitiikka). The policy formed the basis for regular intergovernmental dialogue via a Metropolitan Policy Committee which meets four times a year, comprised of eight cabinet members, including the Minister of Environment and Minister of Local and Regional Government, and the mayors of Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen, as well as a representative of the ten smaller municipalities from the wider metropolitan area (Finland 2023).
The direct line to national decision makers galvanized intermunicipal cooperation, as metropolitan mayors must strategize collectively to successfully advocate for and negotiate with the central government on issues of common concern. Over time, these conversations resulted in the negotiation and signing of a legal accord between metro mayors and the central government known as the MAL agreements, which integrates land use, housing, and transport into a single metropolitan plan (Duman et al. 2022).

The initial MAL agreement, signed in 2016, commits municipal members to shared housing, transit, and emissions targets, as well as performance indicators; the national government, in turn, provides financial subsidies to incentivize continued collaboration. The framework was renewed in 2019 as a 12-year agreement, to be reviewed every four years (HSL 2019). Enshrined in the agreement is a commitment to construct 16,500 new housing units per year, as well as build more social housing across the city-region — a consensus position among all governments and political parties (Kadi and Lillius 2022).

San Francisco, USA

Coastal municipalities in the San Francisco Bay Area (pop. 7.5 million) — made up of San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and 98 surrounding local municipalities, plus nine county governments — share several long-term climate risks, sea level rise chief among them. Yet for many decades, extreme fragmentation of local authority stifled metropolitan solutions (Scott 1985). As a result, the State of California recently stepped in to convene a number of regional initiatives, with a particular focus on climate adaptation and resilience. Most notable is the Bay Area Regional Collaborative (BARC), a consortium of regional and regionally-oriented state agencies, including the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Association of Bay Area Governments, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Bay Area Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC).

Established in 2004, BARC’s mandate is “to advance collaborative, interdisciplinary work on a range of regional issues that cannot be fully addressed by any one agency” (BARC 2023). Currently, the Collaborative has begun consulting community partners to develop a regional adaptation plan to help manage drought, heat, wildfire, sea level rise and flooding across the Bay Area. This builds on public education, priority setting, and funding strategies developed by the BCDC, whose mandate was expanded in 2008 to include climate preparedness. It also draws from complementary philanthropic endeavours, such as the “Bay Area Challenge: Resilient By Design” initiative, a year-long design challenge funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and other civil society groups, which brought local residents, public officials, and technical experts together to design nine demonstration projects.

Based on these successes, California continues to target climate policy at the metropolitan scale. For example, the 2022 Climate Resilience Districts Act empowers cities, counties, and special districts to combine forces to establish “climate resilience financing districts,” in order to undertake adaptation and resilience projects that respond to wildfires, extreme heat, flooding, and sea level rise (State of California 2022).
Although by no means exhaustive, the international examples above each illustrate that there are many creative, coherent, and effective ways of manifesting the metropolitan mindset. It is, in fact, possible for local actors to successfully work together, with the support of other orders of government, as well as business and community leaders, on issues such as economic development, transportation, housing, and climate resilience.

Obviously, there is no single metropolitan blueprint that all city-regions followed. In Manchester, the metropolitan mindset was spurred by concerted voluntarism, which led to unique business ventures and laid the groundwork for new and productive metropolitan governance arrangements. In Denver, the critical ingredient was buy-in from business and civil society leaders, which helped garner public support for Mayor Hinckenlooper’s ambitious transportation agenda. In Helsinki, integrated planning takes place at the metropolitan scale through formal, negotiated agreements between local and central governments. While in San Francisco, the combination of state-level standards and a consortium model of regional agencies better equip the Bay Area to prepare for shared climate risks.

None of these approaches should be considered a panacea. In all four cases, metropolitan thinking took time to grow and evolve according to different cultural, geographic, historical, and political factors — and the results have not always been perfect. Still, they serve as promising examples of what is possible with the right ingredients. How, then, should we put these lessons into practice at home in Canada?

Although no city-region elsewhere in the world has “solved” the metropolitan dilemma, there are certainly shining lights that all Canadian city-regions can learn from.
5. THE PLAYBOOK: HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

Cultivating a metropolitan mindset can be led either from the top-down or bottom-up, but works best in tandem. When imposed by fiat, provincial meddling can create resentment among local leaders told to sit at a table and “play nice.” Conversely, when local leaders organize themselves at the regional scale, yet are ignored or overruled by provincial governments, the mindset stalls. The wisest course requires running two parallel playbooks: one at the local level, for municipal leaders; and one at the provincial level, where power and resources are concentrated.

LOCAL PLAYBOOK: BUILD TRUST

Trust is key to moving past a zero-sum, scarcity mindset to one of collaboration and coalition building. Although local leaders need not agree with one another at every step, they must focus their energies on building relationships with their neighbours that can withstand disagreement, through mutual respect, and a process of give and take.

1. Build dialogue

Most central city mayors “look up, before looking out,” concentrating their advocacy efforts on convincing senior governments that the needs of their city are somehow unique or more important than their metropolitan peers. Inevitably, this alienates neighbouring communities. Rather than expect everyone to follow their lead, central city mayors should personally engage their suburban counterparts on a regular basis. Such outreach helps uncover shared problems and opportunities for collective problem solving, and thus identify the makings of a shared regional identity.  

2. Build the coalition

Engagement goes beyond elected officials. Mayors should seek out in respected and influential leaders in business, academia, civil society, and adjacent communities that have shown a commitment to regional thinking. These often include leaders of regionally attuned chambers of commerce, such as the Greater Vancouver Board of Trade and the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montréal, or heads of civil society groups that operate at the metropolitan scale, such as United Way Greater Toronto, as well as academic thought leaders.
3. Build a shared vision and momentum

The new “coalition of the willing” should seek to articulate a broadly shared vision, ambitious and aspirational, either through extensive public consultation, or a “blue ribbon panel” exercise. This can build from something simple, such as agreeing to a unified regional brand. Next, metropolitan stakeholders should identify a few relatively quick wins to build momentum in common areas of interest, such as economic development, transit, culture, infrastructure, event attraction, or regional parks. In short, co-create something that avoids major controversy and fosters trust.

4. Build capacity

Even voluntary efforts require consistency, administrative support, regular contact, relationship building, convening capacity, and public visibility. This requires coalition members to commit ongoing resources, both time and funds. Taking the opportunity to define the protocols and terms of engagement from the bottom-up avoids having structures imposed from above, but does require initiative. If municipalities can get started, provincial (and even federal partners) can then layer on support.

5. Build results and reporting

The coalition partners should agree on key strategic outcomes and direct administrative officials to collect data and measure progress. Are rents becoming more affordable? Are emissions falling fast enough? Are commutes getting better? Measuring progress — and being honest about stumbling blocks — can stimulate problem solving and sustain the urgency to act collectively to address common obstacles.

Local leaders must focus their energies on building relationships with their neighbours that can withstand disagreement, through mutual respect, and a process of give and take.
PROVINCIAL PLAYBOOK: RAISE EXPECTATIONS

Provincial governments should always respect local autonomy. Yet provinces must also send a strong signal to their municipalities that the metropolitan mindset is critical to provincial prosperity. The goal is not to impose solutions, but rather make expectations clear that metropolitan problem solving is a provincial priority that will not be derailed by local infighting.

1. Define expectations

Premiers should give direction to key ministers to articulate a set of standards and policy frameworks that lay out expected metropolitan outcomes, including environmental, social and economic goals, based on integrated land use and transportation planning, efficient growth infrastructure optimization, regulatory alignment, and service integration and innovation.

2. Support local problem solving

Relevant ministries should seek input from local leaders and encourage municipalities to work together to solve metropolitan problems themselves, without provincial intrusion. If solutions are imposed from above, especially early on, this can lead to resentment and intransigence. Lend a hand before reaching for a hammer.

3. Offer to devolve and deal in

Telling local governments to share amongst each other worsens the default scarcity mindset. Instead, provinces should sweeten the pot by offering to share new revenue streams that support expanded mandates. This does not require new money, just novel approaches. For example, download provincial highways to a metro authority using current budget envelopes, with options for roadway pricing, and watch the art of the possible unfold. In all likelihood, this will unlock movement on further cost and revenue sharing opportunities.

Provincial governments should always respect local autonomy. Yet provinces must also send a strong signal to their municipalities that the metropolitan mindset is critical to provincial prosperity.
4. Enshrine the mindset

The premier and key ministers should champion, rather than enforce, the mindset by convening regional summits, funding capacity building programs, or endorsing existing voluntary arrangements. In cases where there is local appetite, provincial leaders should explore creating new, formal metropolitan institutions through which responsibilities, resources, and authority can be added incrementally over time (e.g., regional districts in British Columbia). In all cases, longevity is key: set multi-year timetables for regional meetings, and stagger any appointments to metropolitan bodies so that they span local and provincial election cycles.

5. Schedule regular tuneups

There are many different instruments under provincial purview— legislation, regulation, intergovernmental agreements, even regional Charters — that could help cement metropolitan collaboration. Provinces should recognize that whatever tools they land on, none will be perfect on the first try. Build in a regular review process to ensure that structures and authorities are continually fine-tuned, and avoid scheduling these reviews around election time, when tribalism and parochialism are at their strongest.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CO-CREATION

The degree to which local and provincial governments choose to follow these playbooks will no doubt vary from city to city, province to province. In metros where city leaders find ways to build trust and cohesion through dialogue, relationship-building, or innovation, but are met with provincial ambivalence — or worse, hostility — metropolitan problem solving is likely to be short-lived. The same is true in the reverse: strong provincial action without local buy-in will poison the prospect of durable systems change (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Scenario analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local leadership</th>
<th>Provincial engagement</th>
<th>Local resentment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Status quo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We might call this the “myopic mindset,” as without local interest or provincial engagement in metropolitan solutions, little is likely to change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Provincial ambivalence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for creativity and local innovation, as the stakes are lower and purely voluntary. But without provincial buy-in, will likely stall out or get stuck in marginal pursuits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Co-creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal conditions for cementing a metropolitan mindset at multiple orders of government, allowing for more rapid iteration and concerted collaboration in the pursuit of shared objectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ideal co-creation scenario is rarely achieved in full. Among Canada’s largest metros, Vancouver’s experience with metropolitan governance perhaps comes closest, the result of more than a century of incremental steps — from the creation of voluntary, special-purpose, inter-municipal authorities in the early 1900s, to the establishment of regional districts in the 1960s, to the establishment of Translink and the Mayor’s Council on Transportation in the late 1990s. As Taylor (2019, p. 227) notes, though generally deferential to municipal autonomy, the province “has decisively, if not always overtly, intervened to promote inter-municipal cooperation” when required, such that “the Vancouver region’s governance system is singularly successful at managing inter-municipal conflict.”

Calgary and Edmonton generally fall within the category of provincial ambivalence, with periodic bursts of local leadership despite inconsistent engagement by the provincial government. During the Kenney government, for example, both Calgary and Edmonton’s Metropolitan Region Boards were at real risk of being neutered or even eliminated by the province as “red tape cutting” measures. More recently, Calgary Metro Region Board has taken encouraging steps to establish a voluntary regional economic development agency modelled on Edmonton Global, with buy-in from Calgary Mayor Jyoti Gondek. Meanwhile, Edmonton has advanced the idea of an Edmonton Region Hydrogen Hub, with participation from two First Nations. The stakes, however, are still relatively small — and without more vocal provincial support, metropolitan momentum seems limited.

Montréal and Québec’s merger (and de-merger) mania of the 1990s and early 2000s resulted in widespread local resentment and alienation, exacerbated by tensions between English and French communities. This follows a long tradition in Quebec of sweeping structural reforms via provincial fiat going back to the 1920s. More recently, though, as the dust has settled on the creation of Communautés métropolitaines in both metros, there are signs that the metropolitan mindset may be surfacing. For example, Montréal recently hosted the fifth edition of the “Montréal Agora,” a regional summit of elected officials, business leaders, civil society groups, and policy experts brought together to update the Metropolitan Planning and Development Plan and link land use, transportation, and environmental sustainability plans across the metropolitan area.

By contrast, Greater Toronto remains mired in the status quo. From gridlocked traffic to overflowing shelter systems, and a core transit agency in a fiscal death spiral, conditions are dire. Instead of addressing these challenges head on, metropolitan institutions are in decline. The Premier has more say over major transit investments than local authorities. The GTHA Mayors and Chairs group, which convened regularly during the COVID-19 crisis, stopped meeting. At the same time, the Government of Ontario moved to dissolve the Region of Peel and flirted with relaxing protections around the Greenbelt. Canada’s largest metropolitan system is in trouble, and that’s a problem for every Ontarian — and, to some extent, for every Canadian.

Ideally, a robust culture of collaboration would be co-created as a grand bargain between municipal and provincial leaders. But barring perfect conditions, someone has to make the first move. Although it is possible for communities to organize and furnish change from the bottom up, not only through formal local and regional alliances, but also informal arrangements supported by civil society, voluntary regional mechanisms alone are usually low-impact. Ultimately, it falls to provincial governments to catalyze the metropolitan mindset, either by strengthening existing bottom-up initiatives, or by taking initiative themselves, pulling on constitutional levers to align and improve metropolitan outcomes.
6. CONCLUSION

Political scientist Andrew Sancton (2009) once observed that “the term ‘metropolitan governance’ now has virtually no political salience in Canada.” Sancton’s observation continues to hold true. Save for a few exceptions — transit planning in Greater Montréal and Metro Vancouver, land use planning in the prairies, and economic development collaboration in Greater Toronto — the metropolitan mindset has rarely taken root in Canada’s major cities. This must change.

The metropolitan mindset is about rejecting the zero-sum game so common in municipal politics. At the local level, this means focusing on trust and relationship-building: building dialogue, a multi-sector coalition of supporters, a shared vision of a collective future, momentum for change, and a commitment to continuous improvement. At the provincial level, this means raising expectations: making it clear that urban problems are best addressed at the metropolitan scale; that municipalities are capable of working together; that the province will be there to support local leaders, either by sharing resources, devolving authority, or building capacity; and that the provincial interest in metropolitan problem solving is steadfast, no matter which way electoral winds blow.

We have emphasized the primacy of provincial and local jurisdictions for practical and constitutional reasons. But there is nothing stopping the federal government from adopting a metropolitan mindset as well — in fact, it is well suited to the task. Data collection and reporting on cities has long been undertaken by Statistics Canada at the CMA level. Regional economic development agencies tend to focus on the larger population centres, and could seek to more explicitly align with and accelerate shared metropolitan economic initiatives. And more recently, Infrastructure Canada has signalled that transit investments may be funded at the metropolitan scale. One could thus imagine the federal government reimagining its role in the federation (Eidelman 2020), articulating a policy of “metropolitan federalism” that aligns federal infrastructure and housing investments with local and provincial metropolitan playbooks. Similar innovative thinking could also lead to more meaningful inclusion of Indigenous governments in metropolitan governance.

Metropolitan problem solving represents our best hope for collectively addressing our most difficult urban challenges.
Sometimes all it takes is a hard conversation to shift perspectives, create shared meaning, and build momentum. In 2016, the Capital Region Board convened a task force to inform the development of Edmonton’s regional growth plan. During a long debate about how to proceed, one exasperated urban planner pulled out his smartphone and read aloud the Wikipedia entry for “metropolitan area”: “a densely populated urban agglomeration and its surrounding territories sharing industries, commercial areas, transport network, infrastructures and housing” (emphasis added). He asked, “isn’t this what we’re talking about?” In the pensive silence that followed, the room settled, heads slowly nodded, and within a year the regional plan was reborn as a Metropolitan Growth Plan. Old animosities among mayors of adjacent suburbs and counties who had previously rejected the Edmonton brand — preferring instead the generic descriptor Capital Region (of which there are dozens in the world) — dissipated as the metropolitan mindset took root. A year later, with the province’s support, the board rebranded more confidently as the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board.

In short, the metropolitan mindset is fragile. It does not come naturally, nor easily. It must be tended to, both by local leaders and provincial governments. Yet when all is said and done, metropolitan problem solving represents our best hope for collectively addressing our most difficult urban challenges, and thus, for building stronger cities, and a stronger Canada.
NOTES

1. The OECD and European Commission refer to metropolitan regions as “functional urban areas,” according to this methodology (Dijkstra et al. 2019).

2. In 2001, Statistics Canada reported data for a new unit of analysis, “major urban regions,” of which they identified four: the “Extended Golden Horseshoe,” comprised of Toronto and adjacent CMAs of Oshawa, Hamilton, and St. Catharines-Niagara, plus Kitchener, Guelph, and Barrie; “Montréal and Adjacent Region,” including the Montréal CMA and several surrounding municipalities; the “Lower Mainland and Southern Vancouver Island,” made up of the Vancouver, Victoria, and Abbotsford-Mission CMAs; and the “Calgary-Edmonton Corridor,” encompassing both CMAs and several census agglomerations in between, such as Red Deer (see Statistics Canada 2002). However, these geographies were omitted in subsequent census years.

3. This is consistent with the OECD’s (2012) definition of metropolitan areas, which follows the same population threshold. There are, in fact, eleven CMAs with populations greater than 500,000. But for simplicity, we’ve limited our analysis to the top ten. We mean no disrespect to our friends in the London CMA (pop. 543,551), Canada’s eleventh largest metro area.

4. For more maps and data about Canada’s metropolitan areas, visit metromindset.ca

5. Similar bodies were later set up in Calgary, and across the province, using the Edmonton model (see Gordon and Hulchanski 1985).

6. The Tsawwassen First Nation Final Agreement legally recognizes the First Nation’s right to self-government, ownership, and management of traditional lands, and clarifies the Nation’s authority and responsibilities in delivery of health, education, and other public services, including services provided by the GVRD (see Tsawwassen First Nation 2009).

7. See native-land.ca

8. Since 1962, the US government has required federal transportation funding to flow through Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), which vary in scope and authority across the country (see Sciara 2017).

9. Remarkably, strongest support for the FasTracks program and related tax revenues came from residents in conservative-leaning, suburban communities.
10. Also notable is the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council (YTV), a metro-wide public agency with responsibilities for public transport, water, and waste management originally established in 1974, as part of efforts to create a formal metropolitan government for the Helsinki region. Those plans failed due to local resistance, but participating municipalities nevertheless agreed to a new shared service authority in charge of public transport and waste management. The agency now operates as separate entities, the Helsinki Regional Transport Authority (HSL) and the Helsinki Region Environmental Services Authority (HSY) (Giersig 2008, p. 195).

11. The acronym MAL stands for the Finnish translations of land use (maankäyttö), housing (asuminen) and transport (liikenne). The MAL framework has since been extended to urban regions across the country (Association of Finnish Municipalities 2022).

12. For example, the 2019 MAL agreement sets a goal to increase the proportion of social housing to 35% of all new housing development in the Helsinki region. The national government pays a start-up grant to municipalities of €10,000 per social housing unit; if municipalities reach this goal, they receive further financial support for related infrastructure projects (Kadi and Lillius 2022, p. 17).

13. See www.resilientbayarea.org

14. During his time as Mayor of Edmonton, one of the authors of this report spent hundreds of hours of his busy schedule personally driving out to meet his counterparts in surrounding municipalities — a sign of respect he referred to as “Camry diplomacy.”


Statistics Canada. 2022. “Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at Basic Prices, by Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) (x 1,000,000) [Data table].” Table 36-10-0468-01. https://doi.org/10.25318/3610046801-eng


# APPENDIX 1: DATA TABLES

## Table 1. Canada’s ten largest census metropolitan areas by population

Source: Statistics Canada 2023b.  
Note: Total governments in Toronto CMA includes four upper-tier municipal governments not listed by Statistics Canada.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CMA</th>
<th>No. of municipal governments</th>
<th>Combined population (2021)</th>
<th>Share of Canadian population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6,202,225</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montréal</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>4,291,825</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2,642,825</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottawa-Gatineau</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1,448,307</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,481,806</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1,418,118</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Québec</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>839,311</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnipeg</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>834,678</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>785,184</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>575,847</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>279</strong></td>
<td><strong>20,560,033</strong></td>
<td><strong>55.4%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Table 2. Economic contributions of Canada’s ten largest census metropolitan areas

Source: Statistics Canada 2022; 2023a. Compiled by Jeff Allen, School of Cities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CMA</th>
<th>Labour Force (2021)</th>
<th>% of National Total</th>
<th>GDP (2019, millions)</th>
<th>% of National GDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>3,347,860</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>$442,180</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montréal</td>
<td>2,310,440</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>$233,996</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>1,468,220</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>$163,475</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottawa-Gatineau</td>
<td>801,005</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>$88,664</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>825,630</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>$111,259</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>772,075</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>$91,568</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Québec</td>
<td>453,375</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>$48,544</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnipeg</td>
<td>448,445</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>$46,301</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>406,505</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>$37,578</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo</td>
<td>311,910</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>$33,538</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,145,465</strong></td>
<td><strong>57.7%</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,297,103</strong></td>
<td><strong>60.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3. Central city population as share of CMA population

Source: Statistics Canada 2023b. Compiled by Jeff Allen, School of Cities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CMA</th>
<th>Municipal population (2021)</th>
<th>CMA population (2021)</th>
<th>Central city share of CMA population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>2,794,356</td>
<td>6,202,225</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montréal</td>
<td>1,762,949</td>
<td>4,291,732</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>662,248</td>
<td>2,642,825</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottawa-Gatineau</td>
<td>1,017,449</td>
<td>1,488,307</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>1,306,784</td>
<td>1,481,806</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>1,010,899</td>
<td>1,418,118</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Québec</td>
<td>549,459</td>
<td>839,311</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnipeg</td>
<td>749,607</td>
<td>834,678</td>
<td>89.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>569,353</td>
<td>785,184</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo</td>
<td>256,885</td>
<td>575,847</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>10,679,989</strong></td>
<td><strong>20,560,033</strong></td>
<td><strong>51.9%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 2: CMA PROFILES

Toronto
Census Metropolitan Area

Proportion of Population in Central City: 45.1%
Number of Municipalities: 24
Population (2021): 6,202,225
Land Area: 5,903 km²

Map built by Irene Chang and Jeff Allen at the School of Cities, University of Toronto
Data Sources: Statistics Canada (2021) & OpenStreetMap. Base map tiles from Stamen Design
To ward the Metropolitan Mindset: A Playbook for Stronger Cities in Canada
Toward the Metropolitan Mindset: A Playbook for Stronger Cities in Canada
Calgary
Census Metropolitan Area

Proportion of Population in Central City: 88.2%
Number of Municipalities: 9
Population (2021): 1,481,806
Land Area: 5,099 km²

Map built by Irene Chang and Jeff Allen at the School of Cities, University of Toronto
Data Sources: Statistics Canada (2021) & OpenStreetMap. Base map tiles from Stamen Design
Edmonton
Census Metropolitan Area

Proportion of Population in Central City: 71.3%
Number of Municipalities: 34
Population (2021): 1,418,118
Land Area: 9,416 km²

Map built by Irene Chang and Jeff Allen at the School of Cities, University of Toronto
Data Sources: Statistics Canada (2021) & OpenStreetMap. Base map tiles from Stamen Design

Toward the Metropolitan Mindset: A Playbook for Stronger Cities in Canada 45
Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo
Census Metropolitan Area

Proportion of Population in Central City: 44.6%
Number of Municipalities: 6
Population (2021): 575,847
Land Area: 1,092 km²

Toward the Metropolitan Mindset: A Playbook for Stronger Cities in Canada