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# Building rapid transit in Canada: the problem of governance

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## ABSTRACT

*Canadian cities have seen a boom in the construction of rapid transit infrastructure in recent years, fueled by the rise of financial support for transit from the federal government and the provinces. However, the extent to which individual cities have been able to productively harness this new financial support varies greatly. This study compares the recent development of rapid transit infrastructure in two of Canada's largest metropolitan areas, Toronto and Vancouver. It finds that while both cities have recently developed regional transportation authorities to manage large transit investments, in Toronto the development of rapid transit has been highly contentious, marked by frequent changes in plan and the repeated cancellation and deferral of transit projects, while in Vancouver, the development of rapid transit has been much more consensual and orderly. The study introduces an analytical framework that interprets these different outcomes as the result of dissimilar institutional environments in the two cities, which vary in the extent to which they insulate long-range planning and decision-making from efforts by politicians to harness rapid transit decisions for short-term electoral advantage.*

**Keywords:** rapid transit infrastructure; multilevel governance; metropolitan governance; transportation authorities; Canada; Toronto; Vancouver.

**SUMMARY:** I. INTRODUCTION.—II. URBAN GOVERNANCE IN CANADA'S FEDERAL SYSTEM.—III. THE EMERGENCE OF RAPID TRANSIT CONSTRUCTION IN CANADA.—IV. POLICY VERSUS POLITICS IN TRANSIT GOVERNANCE.—V. GOVERNING RAPID TRANSIT INFRASTRUCTURE IN TORONTO.—VI. GOVERNING RAPID TRANSIT INFRASTRUCTURE IN VANCOUVER.—VII. CONCLUSION.—VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Canadian cities have been building more rapid transit infrastructure than ever before. By international standards, Canada's current rapid transit boom is fairly modest - a dozen or so urban rail lines across several cities have been built over the last decade, with a similar number currently in the design or construction stages. Nonetheless, the potential environmental, social and economic benefits of this transit boom for Canadian cities are significant. The immediate driver of this boom is the rise of intergovernmental funding for transit and other local infrastructure. This funding has mainly come from provincial governments in some of Canada's ten provinces, but increasingly, the federal government is also providing funding for transit infrastructure. How well equipped are governing institutions in Canadian cities to use intergovernmental funding to systematically develop stronger transit systems?

This paper addresses this question with a particular focus on two of Canada's largest city-regions, Vancouver and Toronto. The systematic development of rapid transit requires an institution that can coordinate the authority and resources of multiple actors to integrate transit planning and development across a city-region. In both Toronto and Vancouver, provincial governments have established regional transportation authorities to perform these functions. Nonetheless, outcomes have been quite different. While several new rapid transit lines have been built in Vancouver, largely according to a long-range plan, in Toronto —especially in the core central city— the development of rapid transit has been highly contentious, marked by frequent changes in plan and the repeated cancellation and deferral of transit projects.

The contrast between these two cases illustrates the importance of place-specific political and institutional contexts for the success of metropolitan transit authorities. The policy logic of rapid transit centers on long-range social, environmental and economic returns, but political leaders can also use transit infrastructure issues to advance their short-term electoral fortunes. We see evidence of this behaviour in both Vancouver and Toronto. In Vancouver it emerges mostly at the provincial level, and it is counterbalanced by a long tradition of collaborative regional governance that produces a supportive environment for the development of a regional transportation authority. In Toronto, by contrast, a lack of regional collaboration provides less fertile soil for a regional transportation body, and deep political cleavages in the central city have produced an environment in which local political conflict is structured around competing visions of transit development, and the calculus of short-term political gain consistently trumps longer-term policy considerations.

## II. URBAN GOVERNANCE IN CANADA'S FEDERAL SYSTEM

Canada is a highly urbanized country, with over 70% of its population living in settlements of more than 100,000 residents. The precise structure of local and urban

governance differs widely across the country due to the decentralized character of Canadian federalism. The Canadian constitution does not recognize the local level as an independent order of government; instead, local governments are subordinate to the governments of Canada's ten provinces, which set their structure, functions and fiscal powers. Local governments do, however, share some common fundamental characteristics across the country. They have responsibility for planning, developing and providing services to property, and they deliver local services and amenities such as transportation and transit systems, police (in larger municipalities), and parks and recreation facilities. While some large urban local governments are governed by special-purpose legislation, the additional authority granted by such legislation is typically modest<sup>1</sup>.

Canadian local governments are funded primarily through a limited range of locally raised revenues, the most important ones being property taxes and user fees. Dependence on these local funding sources increased in the 1990s, when provincial governments facing fiscal constraints dramatically reduced transfer payments to local governments. The degree of local revenue dependence varies widely by province, but it is high everywhere - as of 2010, for example, 91.4% of all local government revenues in the province of British Columbia, and 74.1% in the province of Ontario, came from local sources<sup>2</sup>. Canadian local governments are thus simultaneously fiscally autonomous and fiscally constrained. To a significant degree, fiscal constraint is imposed by the local politics of property taxes, which are highly visible,<sup>3</sup> making them difficult and politically unattractive to increase.

The Canadian federal government has historically had little direct interaction with local governments and limited engagement with local and urban policy issues - although, as we shall see below, this has begun to shift in recent years. By contrast, provincial governments shape the terrain of local and urban governance in many ways. Provincial legislation regulates municipal activity in core spheres of competence such as planning, development, and property services. The majority of intergovernmental funding transfers for local governments come from the provinces. Furthermore, provincial governments have repeatedly encouraged, and sometimes forced, changes to local government boundaries in large urban areas. Many large cities —such as Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa and Winnipeg— have absorbed surrounding land through annexations over time and feature one large, unified unit of local government that covers most of the metropolitan area. By contrast, the three largest city-regions —Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver— are fragmented into numerous municipal units, with supra-local metropolitan governing bodies existing in the latter two cases.

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<sup>1</sup> For a current overview of the legal status of local governments under provincial laws in Canada see: Z. TAYLOR and A. DOBSON, *Power and Purpose: Canadian Municipal Law in Transition*, IMFG Papers on Municipal Finance and Governance, Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, Toronto, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> A. SANCTON, *Canadian Local Government: An Urban Perspective*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Don Mills, 2015, p. 296.

<sup>3</sup> They are «highly visible» in the sense that property owners pay them based on a bill that they receive, rather than having them automatically deducted or added, the way that income taxes or sales taxes are.

Even though provincial governments are deeply involved in local and urban governance, provincial-local relations are quite dis-integrated in comparison with many other advanced democracies. There is no integrated civil service that spans provincial and local levels, so even though the work of local administrators is deeply shaped by provincial regulation, local and provincial bureaucrats have different training, and often very different perspectives. Just as important, in most of Canada local politics is non-partisan, and even where local political parties do exist (such as in Vancouver, and in some large municipalities in the province of Quebec), they are different than provincial parties. As a result, Canada lacks the bureaucratic and partisan ties that can facilitate ongoing inter-governmental coordination of urban policies in many other advanced democracies. On the political side, this makes intergovernmental alignment of spatially targeted policy priorities harder to sustain; on the administrative side, it tends to encourage a greater reliance on unilateral provincial regulation and administrative fiat.

### III. THE EMERGENCE OF RAPID TRANSIT CONSTRUCTION IN CANADA

Provincial planning controls and the periodic top-down restructuring of urban governments have helped to ensure that Canadian city-regions are less institutionally and spatially fragmented than their American counterparts<sup>4</sup>. Yet in broader cross-national perspective, Canadian cities are not very densely populated. Most feature compact older cores that are surrounded by large areas of low-density suburbs developed since the 1950s; larger urban areas tend to be more densely populated than smaller ones<sup>5</sup>. This means that rapid transit infrastructure —especially rail-based infrastructure such as subways and light rail— is only economically and functionally viable in a limited number of large urban areas.

The first urban rapid transit systems in Canada were Toronto and Montreal's subway systems, largely built between the 1950s and the 1970s. While both local governments in both cities funded the initial stages of subway development—in Toronto's cities, borrowing against the future tax returns from property development— later stages in both cases involved major financial contributions from provincial governments<sup>6</sup>. Smaller rapid transit projects were realized in the 1980s in three other Canadian cities—Vancouver, Edmonton and Calgary. In the 1990s Canadian cities continue to grow rapidly in population, but an emphasis on low-density suburban development, combined with

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Z. TAYLOR, *Shaping the metropolis: Institutions and urbanization in the United States and Canada*, McGill-Queen's Press, Montreal, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> J. FILIPOWICZ, *Room to Grow: Comparing urban density in Canada and abroad*, Fraser Institute Research Bulletin, January 2018.

<sup>6</sup> For data on transportation infrastructure investments and sources in post-war Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal (up to 1990), see Chapter 4 of: A. PERL, M. HERN and J. KENWORTHY, *Big Moves: Global Agendas Local Aspirations and Urban Mobility in Canada*, McGill-Queen's Press, Montreal, 2020.

tight fiscal constraints faced by all levels of government, meant that little rapid transit infrastructure was built between 1990 and 2005<sup>7</sup>.

Over the last 15 years, by contrast, there has been a boom in rapid transit infrastructure in Canada. Several urban rail lines have recently been completed, including significant extensions to existing systems in Vancouver, Edmonton, and Calgary, as well as new light rail systems in Ottawa and Kitchener-Waterloo. Additional urban rail lines are under construction in Montreal, Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, and Ottawa; and several further projects are in the planning stages in numerous cities. Local governments in big cities have often been advocates for these projects, and they often contribute some funding to them. However, as noted earlier, heavy dependence on highly visible property taxes politically constrains local tax capacity, and while Canadian municipalities can borrow for capital expenses (subject to strict provincial limits), they are deeply averse to doing so<sup>8</sup>. In addition, as we will discuss below, local publics in many cities are deeply divided over the merits of large-scale public transit infrastructure. In this context, most of the funding for the rapid transit boom has come from other levels of government—especially the provinces, but also, increasingly, the federal government.

Local governments in Canada own about and maintain about 60% of all public infrastructure in the country. The decline of intergovernmental transfers in the 1990s left many Canadian local governments struggling to maintain existing infrastructure, let alone make major new investments, without imposing politically unpalatable local tax raises. By the early 2000s, this situation produced vigorous intergovernmental lobbying by the municipal sector. Large urban municipalities were particularly vocal in demanding more resources. Many provincial governments responded to these demands by increasing transfer payments to municipalities. At the same time, the federal government—which can use its constitutionally mandated ‘spending power’ to fund activities in policy fields outside its formal jurisdiction—began to develop a series of federal infrastructure funding programs. Most of these programs operate on a matching funding basis, with all three levels of government expected to contribute towards the capital costs of infrastructure projects. The federal Liberals, in power since 2015, have significantly increased funding for these programs, directing much of it towards public transit<sup>9</sup>.

#### IV. POLICY VERSUS POLITICS IN TRANSIT GOVERNANCE

For many Canadian urban policy advocates, the rise of intergovernmental support for transit infrastructure is a profoundly positive and long-overdue develop-

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<sup>7</sup> There were a couple of exceptions to this rule - most notably, a left-leaning government in British Columbia fully funded Vancouver's second urban rail line, the Millennium Line, which opened in 2002.

<sup>8</sup> A. T. TASSONYI and B. W. CONGER, «An exploration into the municipal capacity to finance capital infrastructure», *Research Paper*, 8 (38), 2015, University of Calgary School of Public Policy.

<sup>9</sup> For detailed discussion, see M. HORAK and J. HELMER, «Program Design and Distributive Politics in Canadian Infrastructure Transfers», working paper, Canadian Urban Politics Workshop, April 12, 2021.

ment<sup>10</sup>. There are several often-cited policy rationales for investment in rapid transit in large Canadian cities. After decades of low investment in transportation infrastructure, large Canadian cities struggle with high levels of congestion and its associated economic costs, and high-capacity transit in high-volume transportation corridors can be an efficient remedy<sup>11</sup>. Business groups and governments alike view strong mobility systems, including mass transit, as important ingredients for the global economic competitiveness of Canadian city-regions<sup>12</sup>. The potential environmental benefits of a shift to greater transit use—both in terms of immediate quality of life, and as a means to addressing climate change—are well documented, and also feature prominently in the Canadian policy discourse<sup>13</sup>. Meanwhile, advocates of social equity argue that urban transit can be integral to improving the economic mobility of poorer residents in increasingly unequal cities. A recent analysis of federal transit policy documents in Canada concludes that all these policy ideas (and others) underpin and legitimize federal funding for urban transit infrastructure<sup>14</sup>.

There is, however, also a political logic to decisions on rapid transit infrastructure that is distinct from any substantive policy aims pursued. Large transit projects are highly visible, expensive public interventions in the urban landscape, and as such, they can and do become important instruments of electoral politics. Big transit projects are electorally salient at all three levels of government in Canada, but in distinct ways. For federal and provincial governments, the geographically targeted character of infrastructure investment provides opportunities for governing parties to shore up political support in electorally important constituencies. As Armstrong, Lucas and Taylor have shown, since around the year 2000, a remarkably strong rural-urban divide has emerged in Canadian federal politics, with support for the currently governing Liberal party concentrated in urban areas<sup>15</sup>. In this light, the increased funding for transit under the Liberals since 2015 can be seen as a response to the party's key geographical constituency<sup>16</sup>. At the provincial level, individual large cities often loom large in the electoral calculus. For example, almost half of Ontario's 14 million residents live in the Toronto area; likewise, half of British Columbia's 5 million residents live in metropolitan Vancouver; and over 60%

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<sup>10</sup> See for example N. BRADFORD, «A National Urban Policy for Canada? The Implicit Federal Agenda», *IRPP Insight No. 24*, November 2018.

<sup>11</sup> COUNCIL OF MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR TRANSPORTATION AND HIGHWAY SAFETY, «The High Costs of Congestion in Canadian Cities», report of Urban Transportation Task Force, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See for example: METROLINX, *The Big Move: Transforming Transportation in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area*, 2008; CANADIAN GLOBAL CITIES COUNCIL, *Infrastructure Policy Playbook: 2019 Election, 2019*, <http://agendaforgrowth.ca>.

<sup>13</sup> METROLINX, *The Big Move: Transforming Transportation in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area*, 2008; TRANSLINK, *Transport 2040: A Transportation Strategy for Metro Vancouver*, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> W. TOWNS and D. HENSTRA, «Federal policy ideas and involvement in Canadian urban transit, 2002-2017», *Canadian Public Administration*, 61 (1), 2018, 65-90.

<sup>15</sup> D. A. ARMSTRONG, J. LUCAS and Z. TAYLOR, «The Urban-Rural Divide in Canadian Federal Elections, 1896-2019», working paper, Canadian Urban Politics Workshop, Feb. 8, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> M. HORAK and J. HELMER, «Program Design and Distributive Politics in Canadian Infrastructure Transfers», working paper, Canadian Urban Politics Workshop, April 12, 2021.

of Manitoba's 1.3 million residents live in Winnipeg. Popular support in these large city-regions is critical to provincial electoral success, giving provincial governments strong incentives to consider short-term electoral implications in making decisions about the substance and geographical targeting of transit infrastructure<sup>17</sup>.

At the local level, rapid transit projects are perhaps most politically salient of all. However, they are not an unmitigated political good. Championing rapid transit sometimes rewards local politicians electorally, but transit projects are also often deeply controversial, and debate on rapid transit proposals has loomed large in many recent local elections in Canada. While a variety of particular concerns —routing, cost, local construction impacts— can drive controversy, there is also a deeper underlying divide in public opinion in Canada's large cities about the value of transit investment. It reflects what Doering, Silver and Taylor call a 'core vs. periphery lifestyle' cleavage between residents of dense central neighbourhoods, who are likely to use transit as part of their daily lives, and those who live in less dense neighborhoods dominated by single-family housing, who are much more likely to get around by automobile<sup>18</sup>. The latter are more likely to see big transit investments as a waste of money at best, and at worst, as a threat to their lifestyle. In some city-regions, this core-periphery divide roughly correlates with boundaries between the central municipality and the surrounding suburbs; in others, where a single municipality covers core and peripheral urban forms, the divide is internalized.

Policy rationales and electoral logics have different implications for the governance of rapid transit infrastructure. Effectively pursuing long-range policy goals, such as city-region competitiveness or environmental and social sustainability, requires prioritizing extended time horizons in decision-making on transit infrastructure. It also requires a synthetic approach to governance that coordinates the elements of developing rapid transit —planning, decision-making, financing, and delivery— and integrates these with metropolitan land use and transportation planning. As best-practice international examples (including, notably, that of Madrid) show, a legislatively and fiscally empowered special-purpose metropolitan transportation authority is often an effective vehicle for this. In the largest Canadian cities, which are institutionally fragmented, such an authority would have to span multiple local government units. Since planning and transportation are local responsibilities but provinces set the scope of local authority and contribute funding, long-range transit governance in Canada also requires sustained coordination across levels of government —a task that is particularly important given the low levels of intergovernmental administrative and political integration in Canada.

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<sup>17</sup> For discussion of this same logic in relation to urban growth management, see: G. EIDELMAN, «Managing urban sprawl in Ontario: good policy or good politics?» *Politics & Policy*, 38 (6), 2010, pp. 1211-1236.

<sup>18</sup> J. DOERING, D. SILVER and Z. TAYLOR, «The Spatial Articulation of Urban Political Cleavages», *Urban Affairs Review*, 2020; Note that those who primarily use public transit to get around are a minority, even in the largest and densest Canadian cities. See: TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION OF CANADA, *Urban transportation Indicators: 5th Survey*, 2016.

The electoral logic of big transit investment, by contrast, privileges short-term political considerations and tends to work against sustained intergovernmental coordination, both horizontal and vertical. Insofar as political leaders use public announcements, commitments and positions on transit infrastructure to improve their electoral fortunes, they make their decisions based on a judgment of what will play well with their current support base, rather than what advances long-term policy goals. Future outcomes—such as the actual use-value of the infrastructure— may be heavily discounted. Furthermore, since political actors face a different political calculus depending on the political unit that they operate in—province, core municipality, suburban municipality, etc.— they may resist moves towards intergovernmental coordination that they think might limit their opportunities to respond to their support base. Of course, the existence of a metropolitan transportation governance body can limit the influence of short-term electoral calculations on decisions about rapid transit construction. However, unless such a body already exists, the electoral logic of infrastructure commitments may impede its development. We now turn to case studies of Toronto and Vancouver to explore the interplay between policy and politics in rapid transit development.

## V. GOVERNING RAPID TRANSIT INFRASTRUCTURE IN TORONTO

With over 6 million residents, the Toronto region is Canada's largest urban area. It is an economic powerhouse whose population has been growing by more than 100,000 people each year over the last two decades, due mostly to international immigration. At its core is the City of Toronto, a municipality of nearly 3 million that is the product of an amalgamation imposed by the Ontario provincial government in 1997, which combined the old city core and older post-war suburbs into one political unit. The core city is surrounded by five two-tier «regional governments», each with several constituent municipalities, that contain the city-region's sprawling, rapidly growing outer suburbs. The result is a mosaic of 25 lower-tier, four upper-tier, and two single-tier municipalities, each competing for growth and capital funds. There is no multi-functional governing body for the whole region, nor is there any prospect of one emerging in the foreseeable future, in part because the outer suburbs vigorously oppose any institutional links with the core<sup>19</sup>.

Virtually no new rapid transit was built in the Toronto region between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s. By the turn of the millennium, congestion was a big and politically salient problem, and concerns about the environmental impacts of urban sprawl were widespread. In 2005, the provincial government responded to these problems by developing a high-level regional plan aimed at making growth more compact, and in 2006 it established Metrolinx, a regional transportation body. Metrolinx's mandate is

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<sup>19</sup> M. HORAK, «State rescaling in practice: urban governance reform in Toronto», *Urban Research and Practice*, 6 (3), 2013, pp. 311-328.

to manage the provincially-owned commuter rail system<sup>20</sup>, and to plan, finance and develop an integrated regional transportation network<sup>21</sup>. As of 2020, Metrolinx had spent about \$27B building new infrastructure —most of it transit, with about 90% of funding coming from the province, and about 10% from the federal government<sup>22</sup>. The results include a rail link from downtown Toronto to the airport, the reconstruction of the central train station, some improvements to existing suburban commuter rail lines, and two bus rapid transit lines in the outer suburbs of the Toronto region. However, within the central City of Toronto itself, where relatively high density and a growing population make significant rapid transit expansion both feasible and necessary, Metrolinx has faced huge challenges actually bringing any projects to completion during its fifteen years of existence.

The agonizingly slow progress of rapid transit in the City of Toronto largely reflects the fact that competing rapid transit proposals have become a key tool in the city's electoral politics, a politics that is significantly organized around the lifestyle divide between the core and the inner suburban neighborhoods. In 2007, under the mayoralty of David Miller, the city and its local public operator, the Toronto Transit Commission, unveiled 'Transit City', a plan for six light rail lines in various parts of the city. The plan was generally positively received as well conceived and appropriate to the city's transit needs, and the provincial government soon pledged to fully fund it. However, before any construction commenced, the 2010 election brought in a new mayor, Rob Ford, who rode to power on a wave of inner suburban discontent, pledging to 'stop the war on the car'<sup>23</sup>.

One of Ford's first initiatives as mayor was to declare that he intended to cancel the Transit City initiative, which he claimed would take road space away from drivers. Of the six light rail lines, he proposed to retain only one, the Eglinton-Crosstown line. Instead, he proposed a new subway line through the inner suburban area of Scarborough, where he had strong electoral support. Even though Canadian mayors do not have executive powers and require council approval for all initiatives, Ford's opposition to the plan effectively stopped its development. Aside from continued work on the Eglinton-Crosstown, little took its place. The proposed Scarborough subway line—which soon became a potent political rallying cry in the inner suburbs— has been debated exhaustively by successive city Councils; it remains unbuilt. Meanwhile, Toronto's current Mayor John Tory proposed yet another different (and ultimately unrealized) rapid transit line as part of his 2014 election campaign. The Eglinton-Crosstown line is finally nearing completion after 12 years of construction and repeated budget

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<sup>20</sup> Metrolinx does not manage local transit services in municipalities, which are run by individual municipalities. By far the largest of these local services, is the core city of Toronto's Toronto Transit Commission.

<sup>21</sup> GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO, *The Metrolinx Act*, 2006 [2021].

<sup>22</sup> METROLINX, *2020-2021 Business Plan*, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> D. SILVER, Z. TAYLOR and F. CALDERÓN-FIGUEROA, «Populism in the city: The case of Ford Nation» *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 33 (1), 2020, pp.1-21.

revisions<sup>24</sup>, and in 2020 Metrolinx began building another of the six light rail lines proposed in 2007.

It may be puzzling that the Ontario provincial government, which has a long history of unilateral top-down governance of local affairs, has tolerated this impasse. However, local governments have authority over planning and transit matters, so they could make any unilateral provincial move to build rapid transit difficult. That said, the current provincial government under the leadership of Doug Ford (not incidentally, Rob Ford's brother) has adopted a very top-down approach to Toronto governance matters, including rapid transit<sup>25</sup>. In 2019, Ford added to the instability in rapid transit planning in Toronto by proposing a new \$28.5B rapid transit plan that includes the Scarborough subway, as well as a completely new subway line in the core (a version of which has long been endorsed by city planners), and an extension to the Eglinton-Crosstown<sup>26</sup>. The province has proposed to fund 60% of the costs and has asked the federal government to commit the rest, but in reality the plan currently remains unfunded.

The electoral politics of rapid transit has thus undermined the realization of rapid transit in the core City of Toronto. While a regional transportation agency with inter-governmental support and an independent fiscal base might provide a counterweight to these political dynamics, Metrolinx is not (yet) such an agency, and the province has resisted strengthening its institutional foundations. When it was established in 2006, the agency was governed by a board dominated by municipal appointees. However, the Toronto region has few mechanisms and institutions for inter-municipal collaboration, and the board was prone to endemic infighting over priorities. As a result, the province restructured the board in 2009, and local appointees were replaced by provincial appointees<sup>27</sup>. It is not clear whether balancing local and provincial appointees on the board was ever considered. On the fiscal front, for years Metrolinx officials have lobbied the province for dedicated revenue sources (such as a gas tax) for capital costs<sup>28</sup>. To date, provincial capital funding has come from general revenues, which makes it subject to the political vicissitudes of annual budgets. A dedicated revenue source would introduce stability and predictability, but successive provincial governments have refused to introduce one for fear that dedicated taxes would be politically unpopular. As a result, Metrolinx is an instrument of the provincial government, rather than a fully empowered autonomous regional transportation body.

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<sup>24</sup> One recent estimate puts the price tag of the Eglinton-Crosstown —without its originally planned and later scrapped airport extension— at \$9.1B. INFRASTRUCTURE ONTARIO, «Eglinton Crosstown LRT», 2021.

<sup>25</sup> The most controversial intervention under the current provincial government came in 2018, when the province unilaterally cut the size of Toronto's city council by 50% in the middle of a municipal election campaign.

<sup>26</sup> J. LORINC, «Doug Ford draws a subway map», *Spacing Magazine*, April 11, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> R. FERGUSON and T. KALINOWSKI, «Politicians Shunned in Transit Planning Overhaul», *Toronto Star*, March 31 2009.

<sup>28</sup> METROLINX, *Investing in our region, investing in our future*, 2013.

## VI. GOVERNING RAPID TRANSIT INFRASTRUCTURE IN VANCOUVER

Vancouver is an urban region of about 2.7 million residents on the south-west coast of British Columbia. Like the Toronto region, Vancouver has experienced rapid population growth fueled by immigration in recent decades. The core municipality of Vancouver, with about 650,000 residents, is smaller relative to the city-region than is the case in Toronto, and largely contains old and relatively dense residential neighbourhoods. The rest of the urban area is divided into 20 municipalities that feature a mix of suburban development and agricultural land, and that vary widely in population. Unlike the Toronto region, Vancouver does have a regional government, called Metro Vancouver. It is governed by a board of directors drawn from elected officials appointed by their municipal councils. Established in the 1960s as the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), Metro Vancouver is a regional government that grew in significance over time as municipalities opted to share more services. Responsible for regional planning and a variety of shared services to property (water, waste management, regional parks), it is widely recognized as a successful model of bottom-up regional governance<sup>29</sup>.

The fact that Vancouver has a well functioning regional government and a long history of regional planning has given it significant advantages in terms of governing the development of rapid transit infrastructure<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, planning for a 'liveable region' has a long history in Vancouver, and a discourse of environmental sustainability is deeply ingrained in local civic and political culture. For several decades, regional planners have guided development in the urban region into nodes that could be serviced by rapid transit, and plans for a light rail transit system have existed for a long time. As a result, there is less scope for fundamental disagreement about where rapid transit should be built than in Toronto, where mid-century traditions regional land use and transit planning were distant historical memories by the time that Metrolinx was created. Furthermore, the fact that municipal political leaders are used to working together through Metro Vancouver's board has fostered a culture of political compromise that blunts the political impact of local differences in preferences. These elements have helped to ensure that the development of rapid transit infrastructure is much less affected by local electoral dynamics in Vancouver than it is in Toronto. Nonetheless, as we will see, especially at the provincial level, an electoral logic of decision-making that privileges short-term political considerations has also complicated the governance and development of rapid transit in Vancouver.

Despite the historical strength of regional governance in Vancouver, until 1999 public transit in the region was delivered by the provincial government. The first two rapid

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<sup>29</sup> D. K. HAMILTON *Measuring the Effectiveness of Regional Governing Systems*, Springer, New York, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> The fascinating history of provincially facilitated regional planning and governance in Vancouver, which goes back to the 1940s, is discussed in detail in Chapter 6 of Z. TAYLOR, *Shaping the metropolis: Institutions and urbanization in the United States and Canada*, McGill-Queen's Press, Montreal, 2019.

transit lines built in the city —completed in 1986 and 2002, respectively— were fully funded by the provincial government. In the late 1990s, seeking a way to fund faster development of transit infrastructure, the province established TransLink, a regional transit agency that (much like Toronto’s Metrolinx) is tasked with planning, developing and operating regional transit services. TransLink is governed by a Mayors’ Council with mayors from all 21 municipalities, with voting weighted by population, and a governing board dominated by municipal appointees<sup>31</sup>. TransLink is thus under local control and, while disagreement among representatives of different municipalities is not uncommon, the Council has on the whole been a well functioning body.

TransLink was from the beginning in a stronger institutional position than Metrolinx. While Metrolinx only manages commuter rail services and not local transit systems, TransLink manages all transit systems in the Vancouver area through contracts with independent operators. In fiscal terms, the legislation that created TransLink<sup>32</sup> allowed it to levy a fuel tax in the Vancouver area, and also gave it access to a share of local property taxes, both of which provide the agency with substantial operating revenue. However, for capital investments —and the construction of rapid transit lines in particular— the agency has remained heavily dependent on provincial and (in some cases) federal funding. Compared with Toronto, the Canadian federal government has been much more involved with funding rapid transit infrastructure in Vancouver, contributing roughly 1/3 of the cost to the Canada Line (completed in 2008), the Evergreen Line (completed in 2016), and the Broadway extension of the Millennium Line (under construction).

TransLink’s efforts to secure more fiscal autonomy for capital projects have repeatedly run up against electoral concerns at the provincial level. For example, in 2000, TransLink’s Mayors’ Council proposed a vehicle registration levy to help fund capital works; facing an election (which it lost badly), the same left-leaning provincial government that created TransLink rejected the levy in an effort to shore up its support among vehicle owners<sup>33</sup>. After TransLink approved an increase in the dedicated gas tax levy in 2011, the Liberal party of British Columbia ran a successful election campaign promising to require a referendum on any new TransLink taxes; in 2015, voters defeated a 0.5 cent regional sales tax proposed by the Mayors’ Council to fund two new rapid transit lines. While the referendum requirement has since been scrapped by the current provincial government, TransLink’s ability to fund capital works remains very limited.

Electoral considerations are also evident in the choice of technology for Vancouver’s new rapid transit lines. While Metro Vancouver and TransLink planners have consistently endorsed light rail technology, the provincial government has consistently (and

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<sup>31</sup> M. HARCOURT, K. CAMERON and S. ROSSITER, *City Making in Paradise: Nine Decisions That Saved Vancouver*, Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, 2007; T. WALES, *The Road Less Traveled: TransLink’s Improbable Journey from 1999 to 2008*, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> GOVERNMENT OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, *The South Coast British Columbia Transportation Authority Act*, 1999 [2021].

<sup>33</sup> T. WALES, *The Road Less Traveled: TransLink’s Improbable Journey from 1999 to 2008*, 2008.

unilaterally) chosen a more expensive Canadian-made monorail technology called SkyTrain. Used in Vancouver's first rapid transit line, SkyTrain has proved popular with riders. In 1998, the provincial government unilaterally chose SkyTrain technology again for Vancouver's second rapid transit line, significantly increasing its cost, and ensuring that the full length of the line was not completed until 2016<sup>34</sup>. TransLink tried to push once again for light rail on a new line to the suburb of Surrey. In 2018, Doug McCallum successfully ran for mayor of Surrey on a platform of opposition to the light rail line in favour of a more expensive SkyTrain line<sup>35</sup>. Once he was elected, Surrey council voted against the light rail option and endorsed a SkyTrain instead. TransLink was left with little choice but to accept the change. The provincial government could have vetoed it but did not want to lose political support and seats in the affected localities. The cost of the project has approximately doubled as a result, to about \$3BN, and it is likely that it will be built in two phases, over a much longer timespan than initially contemplated<sup>36</sup>.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The renewed availability of intergovernmental funds has fueled the recent rise in rapid transit construction in Canada. Money is essential; but money alone does not build a functional rapid transit system. As the cases of Toronto and Vancouver show, the relative effectiveness with which rapid transit funding has been deployed in Canadian cities varies greatly. While Vancouver has been quite successful in moving ahead with a long-range program of rapid transit development, in Toronto—and especially in its urban core—rapid transit development has been chaotic and highly controversial, prone to frequent delay and reversal.

We can understand these contrasting outcomes as a function of the different ways in which the competing logics of long-range policy goals and short-term electoral calculus interact in different institutional and political settings. In large, institutionally complex city-regions, the effective pursuit of long-range policy goals through a systematic program of rapid transit development is necessarily a matter of governance, rather than government, since the necessary resources and authority are distributed among multiple agents—both horizontally (among local government units) and vertically (among levels of government)<sup>37</sup>. Coordinating the resources and authority of these agents requires

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<sup>34</sup> Z. TAYLOR, *Shaping the metropolis: Institutions and urbanization in the United States and Canada*, McGill-Queen's Press, Montreal, 2019, p. 238.

<sup>35</sup> Ironically, Surrey voters had rejected the proposed sales tax for transit infrastructure by a wide margin three years earlier.

<sup>36</sup> K. CHAN, «It's official: TransLink's Mayors' Council suspends Surrey LRT in favour of SkyTrain», *Daily Hive*, November 15, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed, even this conception of the governance landscape is simplified since it does not consider non-governmental actors—be they private partners in construction partnerships or stakeholders—who also have important roles to play in infrastructure development.

an institutional framework that can bring them together. This is especially important in the Canadian context, where political and administrative integration across levels of government is weak. In both Toronto and Vancouver, provincial governments created dedicated regional transit agencies to perform this integrating function. However, the degree to which these agencies have developed as effective coordinating vehicles for the planning, financing and delivery of large-scale regional transit infrastructure has varied with the pre-existing institutional and political landscape.

In Toronto, a lack of existing intermunicipal collaboration at the city-regional scale has helped to ensure that Metrolinx has remained an agent of the provincial government, rather than a fulcrum for regional coordination. In the core City of Toronto, rapid transit has become a highly charged and divisive issue that political leaders use to appeal to different voting publics. The result has been endless controversy and revisions of infrastructure plans at the expense of actual infrastructure development. While a more fiscally autonomous Metrolinx might have more ability to stabilize the shape of rapid transit plans in Toronto, thus far the provincial government has been unwilling to grant it significant dedicated sources of revenue for capital expenses. In Vancouver, by contrast, a long history of regional planning and collaboration provided more fertile soil for the development of TransLink as an effective agent of rapid transit development. Even here electoral logics —mainly, but not only, at the provincial level— have shaped outcomes, incentivizing the province to favour expensive technologies while limiting TransLink's revenue raising capacity. Nonetheless, relative to Toronto, Vancouver has been quite successful at growing its rapid transit infrastructure.

The analysis developed here has implications for our understanding of the dynamics and the promise of multilevel governance in large metropolitan contexts. In recent years, scholars of Canadian urban politics have emphasized how multilevel interaction shapes policy processes and outcomes. Successfully coordinating power across levels of government to address important urban policy issues necessitates the creation of stable institutions that can facilitate joint action over time, especially in a political system like Canada's where broader political and administrative integration across spatial scales is weak<sup>38</sup>. But the conditions that shape the prospects for such coordinating institutions are not very well understood. The present study suggests three insights in this regard. First, the prospects for stable coordinating institutions are shaped by a policy-field-specific interaction of policy and political logics. In the field of transit infrastructure, the policy logic is one of systematic decision-making with a view to long time horizons. However, the high political salience and visibility of big transit investments makes them susceptible to a logic of short-term electoral returns that can undermine the construction of necessary coordinating institutions. Second, electoral considerations can influence decision-making both within political units (as evidenced by the saga of changing

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<sup>38</sup> M. HORAK, «Conclusion: Understanding multilevel governance in Canada's cities», in M. HORAK and R. YOUNG (eds.), *Sites of Governance: Multilevel Governance and Policy Making in Canada's Big Cities*, McGill-Queen's Press, Montreal, 2012, pp. 339-370.

rapid transit plans in the City of Toronto), and across levels of government (as in the case of provincial favouring of SkyTrain technology in Vancouver). Finally, the relative ease or difficulty of pursuing long-range policy objectives in the face of short-term electoral dynamics is shaped by the institutional and political character of particular metropolitan environments, specifically whether networks and habits of horizontal and/or intergovernmental cooperation already exist, and can serve as foundations and anchors for the development of new coordinating institutions.

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