By Zachary Spicer

Review by Richard Harris
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The need for coordinated government of cities and the adjacent rural areas has never been greater. Urban areas have expanded and sprawl discontinuously, so that rural and urban spaces become intertwined. At the same time, commuters and weekend trippers make a mockery of boundaries. But city and county governments are often separate and poorly coordinated. In Canada, the only provinces where regional governments are the norm are B.C. and Quebec; in Ontario there are ten, leaving eighteen places where the administrative line between city and country is sharp. The Boundary Bargain, by Zachary Spicer, considers the resultant problems, and possible solutions.

Early chapters consider the issues at stake and the history of city-rural government in Ontario. Spicer then presents three case studies, representing a range of experience: London-Middlesex, Guelph-Wellington, and Barrie-Simcoe. These studies employ newspaper reports, together with interviews with local politicians and senior administrators. Spicer finds that the administrative divide is problematic, except where, as in Simcoe, rural government is content to remain urban, allowing the city to annex urbanizing territory. He concludes by suggesting how coordination can happen, ranging from informal cooperation through the establishment of special districts to single-tier consolidation.

Spicer’s treatment is thorough and the presentation clear. Table 6.1 conveniently summarizes major findings. Interviewees are not named, but can be identified by comparing dates in the text with a listing in the Appendix. Given all that we hear about large metropolitan areas, including the debates about amalgamation and (in Montreal) de-amalgamation, it is refreshing to learn more about the issues faced by smaller urban centres. Altogether, The Boundary Bargain is a welcome addition to McGill-Queen’s new book series on urban governance.