

Rathbone Multi-Asset Strategic Growth Portfolio

Monthly update May 2020

Overview

Stock markets continued to push higher in May. As many investors became more optimistic about the global economy bouncing back quickly, 'value' companies had an accelerating resurgence. Despite this late surge, in America these companies that are hugely dependent on better economic growth to increase profits still lagged 'growth' businesses over the month. 'Value' companies' share prices made big gains, but they have had – and continue to have – pretty hefty falls too.

It's important to keep share price moves in a wider context, especially today. Share prices are shifting much further much quicker than we have seen for many years. And the moves are both up and down. That can lead some to champion the return of certain stocks or to call the recovery of others that, when you zoom out just a little bit, looks a little less convincing.

Europe is perhaps the most conspicuous story of the recent value rotation, with its stock markets spiking higher. Yet many of the EU's export customers are in the emerging world. We all have a Western slant on the world, and that hasn't gone away during the pandemic. As COVID-19 starts to recede from the developed world many have been quick to claim global victory. Yet there are so many more billions of people in the emerging world who are entering the fight we are still now trying to finally win in the West. And they are doing it with vastly less of everything: technology, funding, savings and infrastructure.

We're as optimistic as we can be, yet we are realistic about the chances of a second wave of the virus. China has already had to shut down parts of Beijing because of a resurgence more than a month after they believed they had eradicated it. Last month, we noted that there was a very real risk of nations coming out of lockdown too fast without sufficient tracing systems starting to experience sharp spikes in new cases and deaths, forcing them to return to lockdown. China could not be accused of any of these mistakes, yet it succumbed. If a country with widespread testing, tracing and iron-clad quarantine laws can experience a second wave, the UK, US and Europe are also vulnerable. As is anywhere else.

If this comes to pass, we think it would be a massive shock for stock markets. They could test new lows. It would be havoc for businesses too, putting the fight back months could push many into bankruptcy and stress governments' finances to the limit. This is why we're reticent to jump on the value train. Instead, we're sticking first and foremost with solid companies with minimal debts, good cash flow and business models that should continue to grow (or hold up better than most) even if more economic disruption comes down the pipe. Yet we aren't perma-pessimists, we're not waiting for inevitable gloom. We've also built up our investments in companies that have a value edge to them. Companies with healthy balance sheets and reliable earnings, yet that should catch more of the economic upwind should the world defeat the virus and break out into the sunny uplands.

Trades

As part of our move towards quality companies with a value edge, we took profits from **ASML**, the Dutch company that designs the machines that make computer chips, and from laboratory and food safety business **Eurofins Scientific**. Both businesses have had a good pandemic, so we thought it best to cash in some of the gains and spread the money among other holdings that have a more cyclical leaning. These top-ups included **Aptiv**, which supplies the parts for infotainment systems and other electronic gear that goes into 21st century cars; metals behemoth **Rio Tinto**; and European ticketing business **CTS Eventim**.

We sold **Micro Focus International**, a legacy business computer systems provider that we have held for several years. We got this one completely wrong, as the company has gone from trouble to misery. We had hoped that it would right itself in time; however, the pandemic has changed the landscape. Now, it seems more likely that companies will be buying up brand new technology to aid flexible working than patching up the old, stable systems they have. That bodes ill for Micro Focus.

We sold the last of our **Commonwealth of Australia 4.75% Bonds 2027**, which we bought back in 2017 as a more attractive risk-off hedge given the US was heading into an interest-rate-hiking cycle (remember those days?). This trade had done its job, so we replaced it with **Japanese Government 0.1% Bonds 2023**. The yen remains a safe haven currency (the opposite of the pound, which plummets when markets run scared), so it should provide handy protection in the event of any sell-off.

In case of inflation taking off in the shorter-term because of the sheer weight of fiscal and monetary stimulus, we decided to swap our fixed rate **UK Treasury ¾% Bonds 2023** and **UK Treasury 0.5% Bonds 2022** for **US Treasury Inflation-Protected Securities (TIPS) 0.125% Bonds 2024**, which have coupons that rise in line with US CPI inflation.

We sold some of our **iShares FTSE 250 ETF** to reduce our exposure to the UK. Earlier in the year we had increased our investments in the UK. However, following the UK's haphazard handling of the pandemic and the looming risk that Brexit is pushed through in an overly hard and very mistimed fashion we felt it prudent to cut our losses. We put that money into the **SPDR Russell 2000 US Small Cap ETF**, the **JPMorgan Japan Equity Fund** and the **JPM Japanese Investment Trust**.

Given that stock markets are back near all-time highs and volatility has fallen back (the cost of options rises and falls with market volatility), we've been buying up more protection. Last month, that meant **UBS S&P 500 Put Contracts** that were priced to kick in should the benchmark US equity index fall by 25% or more.

Outlook

We're broadly positive about how things are shaping up at the moment – although it would be nice if some states in the US got a better handle on their infection rates.

As the world comes out of lockdown, shops, bars and restaurants are beginning to reopen in a reasonable fashion. Better yet, early signs show that quite a few people can't wait to get back out there and spend. This appetite is pivotal for the global recovery because it creates the demand for all the jobs needed to get people back to work. Then we will have to wait and see whether the precautions and safety measures work or whether the pandemic starts to surge once more.

Stock markets are high enough that it implies that everybody thinks the recovery is going to be tickety-boo. We truly hope so, but it seems unlikely to us. We believe it will be bumpy and halting, particularly when it gets to the point when the training wheels have to come off the economy. There has been a truly extraordinary tsunami of stimulus from government and central banks, yet that stimulus cannot be sustained indefinitely. Tapering it off and then hiking the taxes to pay for it without upending businesses and households will be the tough gig of 2021 and beyond.

Not only that, we believe there will be deep and lasting changes in how we live and work and also in supply chains and financial markets. During the long hours of lockdown we've been reading a lot, asking a lot of questions in virtual meetings and discussing how tomorrow will look different to today. We're putting together a short report on our ideas that we will share with you soon. In the meantime, stay safe and keep spending if you can! The economy depends on it.



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