



Worldwide, the improvements in financial conditions are providing support for a rebound in the economic activity and an upgrade in the business conditions. Most purchasing managers indices (PMI) point towards a bottoming in the manufacturing activity with the latest PMI from the Institute for Supply Management (ISM) reaching the highest value since the summer of 2006 for October at 55.7. The improvement reflects an upturn in exports and auto production and further inventory rebuilding. The spread between New Orders and Inventories (both ISM/PMI components) being the highest since 1976 in September; the October reading shows signs of improvement pointing to a slightly lower spread indicating a slow-down in de-stocking activity as inventories are trying to keep up with new orders. The U.S. services sector is showing signs of expansion but the growth is sluggish, with the latest non-manufacturing index (NMI) reading being slightly lower than for the previous month. The U.S. leading economic indicators (LEI) have recorded the sixth consecutive month of improvement in September. We believe, three consecutive months of increases, or three consecutive months of decreases traditionally signal an upturn or a downturn in the economy within three to six months. In its latest quarterly release the US Department of Labor unveiled a quarterly productivity increase of 9.5%, on top of the previous increase of 6.9%; such levels of productivity growth haven't been seen since the fall of 2003 and are characteristic of an end of recession.

Conversely, on the consumer side (ex Asia) spending is lagging on weak fundamentals, in particular real income growth. In addition, the consumer confidence weakened significantly in October, partly because of a seasonal trend (October is the month with the most confidence-reading drops since 1990), but mostly driven by ongoing dismal employment prospects. U.S. unemployment rate reached a 26 year high at 10.2% in October and is still expected to get worse before it gets any better. Largely due to the lack of wage pressure, inflation is subdued, with core (ex food and energy) U.S. personal consumption expenditure inflation reaching recent lows at 1.3% for September. In Canada, the latest employment number surprised on the downside, indicating that recovery on this side of the border is also likely to be slow.

3Q results continue to reflect a recovery in financial conditions with signs of credit stabilization increasingly evident. Sentiment across the global credit markets has calmed with TED spreads (the rate at which banks lend to each other) at approximately 0.22% well off the highs of 4.6% witnessed late September/early October and back to pre-crisis normal levels. In addition, the U.S. 2 year/10 year treasury spread is 2.63% and the U.K.'s 2 year/10 year treasury spread is 3.08% - enabling financial services companies' assets booked at these levels, to be very profitable, so enabling them to absorb anticipated consumer credit losses.

Our concerns (recently borne out by 3Q results) are mostly focused around the later cycle issues facing financial services companies – particularly commercial real estate and unsecured consumer loans/credit card loans. However, commercial real estate exposure is more acutely held by US regional banks – rather than larger more diversified global financial services companies. The number of small U.S. banks failing continues to grow (120 year-to-date) but their franchises are being acquired/absorbed as convergence of the financial services industry accelerates – favouring we believe the stronger, better managed banks. A concern which remains is the extent to which loan modifications are an exercise in loss deferral but for the larger franchises the quantum of proactive provisioning continues to act as a differentiator of quality which we believe has still to be fully appreciated.

3Q results from credit card companies support their executives' earlier indications of improving trends in credit card / consumer loan delinquencies and stabilization in billing volumes.

The U.S. 30 year mortgage market has remained low at 4.98% (it first dropped below the psychologically important 5% in late March before rising to 5.59% in June and fell back in October). The Fed's decision to buy mortgage backed securities and the U.S. Department of Treasury's proposal to assist as many as 9 million homeowners to refinance and/or reschedule their mortgage payments have contributed to a significant pick up in refinancing activity – to the advantage of bank franchises with substantial mortgage operations... In its latest Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC)

Market Commentary



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statement, the Fed reinforced its commitment to purchase US\$1.25 trillion of agencies' mortgage backed securities (MBSs) while marginally reducing the target purchase of agency debt to US\$175 billion by the end of Q1 2010 (a significant part of it has yet to go through). Economic conditions, in particular "low rates of resource utilization, subdued inflation trends and stable inflation expectations" are likely to warrant "exceptionally low levels of the federal funds rate for an extended period" as per the same FOMC statement. U.S. housing inventory is being slowly reduced (7.5 month supply of new houses and 7.8 month supply of existing houses). We believe it is premature to consider a recovery in house prices but a measure of stability from which to build is to be welcomed....particularly for those financial services companies holding structured assets in their portfolios.

The amended Federal Reserve Stats for large domestically chartered commercial banks in the US shows that the quantum of net unrealized losses on available for sale securities peaked in December at -\$87.4 billion ...improving to -\$49.1 billion by end June and as at October 28 was reported as -\$8.5 billion – the pricing of these securities will in our view become increasingly volatile as liquidity now drives more normalized prices but the positive trend is much welcomed. The writing back up of these assets feeds through to the book value and endorses the strategy of many large financial services companies to hold rather than trade such assets.

The VIX (volatility index) is 24.0, below the levels experienced last August/September (and well off the highs of 70-80 witnessed late September/October) and while, by its characteristics, it will remain volatile, it is we believe further evidence of markets reacclimatizing to risk – typically we believe a VIX level below 25 augurs well for quality equities. And credit default swaps across most leading financial companies are trading in a gradually improving range of 1%-2% (compared to 5%-7% late September/early October).

We believe the largest impediment to a sustainable rally remains government intervention, not the global economy. We believe that as signs of stabilization gain traction the market will become more discerning, favouring quality franchises rather than the apparent recovery of weaker franchises. Quality is likely to embrace those franchises with attractive market footprints, stabilizing returns on equity (and credit in the case of financials), efficient operating platforms and robust net margins based on solid core franchises.

Spreads on the closed-end funds are narrowing but remain wide and so in our view are very attractively priced to purchase.

We have also attached a new client-friendly Company Profile.

At the close of business on Fridays and at the end of each month we publish the Net Asset Values of our funds onto our Portland website at <http://www.portlandinvestmentcounsel.com/Funds/WeeklyPricing.aspx>.

The details published last Friday are replicated here below from which you can see we also highlight whether the funds share prices are trading at a premium or discount to their respective Net Asset Value.



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