

Global economic outlook and the UK economy

The global economy

- B.3.1. The sovereign debt crisis has eased during 2013 which has been a year of comparative calm after the hiatus of the Cyprus bailout in the spring. The Eurozone (EZ) finally escaped from seven quarters of recession in Q2 of 2013 but growth is likely to remain weak and so will dampen UK growth. The ECB's pledge to buy unlimited amounts of bonds of countries which ask for a bailout has provided heavily indebted countries with a strong defence against market forces. This has bought them time to make progress with their economies to return to growth or to reduce the degree of recession. However, debt to GDP ratios (2012 figures) in Greece of 176%, Italy 131%, Portugal 124%, Ireland 123% and Cyprus 110%, remain a cause of concern, especially as many of these countries are experiencing continuing rates of increase in debt in excess of their rate of economic growth, i.e., these debt ratios are continuing to deteriorate.
- B.3.2. Any sharp downturn in economic growth would make these countries particularly vulnerable to a new bout of sovereign debt crisis. It should also be noted that Italy has the third biggest debt mountain in the world behind Japan and the US. Greece remains particularly vulnerable and continues to struggle to meet Eurozone targets for fiscal correction. Many commentators still view a Greek exit from the Euro as inevitable and there are concerns that austerity measures in Cyprus could also result in an exit. The question remains as to how much damage an exit by one country would do and whether contagion would spread to other countries. However, the longer a Greek exit is delayed, the less are likely to be the repercussions beyond Greece on other countries and on EU banks. It looks increasingly likely that Slovenia will be the next country to need a bailout.
- B.3.3. Sentiment in financial markets has improved considerably during 2013 as a result of a firm Eurozone commitment to support struggling countries and to keep the Eurozone intact. However, the foundations to this current "solution" to the Eurozone debt crisis are still weak and events could easily conspire to put this into reverse. There are particular concerns as to whether democratically elected governments will lose the support of electorates suffering under Eurozone imposed austerity programmes, especially in countries like Greece and Spain which have unemployment rates of over 26% and unemployment among younger people of over 50%. The Italian political situation is also fraught with difficulties in maintaining a viable coalition to implement a Eurozone imposed austerity programme and undertake overdue reforms to government and the economy.

The USA

- B.3.4. The economy has managed to return to reasonable growth in Q2 2013 of 2.5% y/y and 2.8% in Q3, in spite of the fiscal cliff induced sharp cuts in federal expenditure that kicked in on 1 March 2013, and increases in taxation. The Federal Reserve has continued to provide huge stimulus to the economy through its \$85bn per month asset purchases programme of quantitative easing (QE). However, it is expected that this level of support will start to be tapered down early in 2014. It has also pledged

not to increase the central interest rate until unemployment falls to 6.5%; this is unlikely to happen until early 2015.

- B.3.5. Consumer, investor and business confidence levels have improved markedly in 2013. The housing market has turned a corner and house sales and increases in house prices have returned to healthy levels. Many house owners have, therefore, been helped to escape from negative equity and banks have also largely repaired their damaged balance sheets so that they can resume healthy levels of lending. All this portends well for a reasonable growth rate looking forward.

China

- B.3.6. Concerns that Chinese growth could be heading downwards have been allayed by recent stronger statistics. There are still concerns around an unbalanced economy which is heavily dependent on new investment expenditure, and for a potential bubble in the property sector to burst, as it did in Japan in the 1990s, with its consequent impact on the financial health of the banking sector. There are also increasing concerns around the potential size, and dubious creditworthiness, of some bank lending to local government organisations and major corporates. This primarily occurred during the government promoted expansion of credit, which was aimed at protecting the overall rate of growth in the economy after the Lehmans crisis.

Japan

- B.3.7. The initial euphoria generated by “Abenomics”, the huge QE operation instituted by the Japanese government to buy Japanese debt, has tempered as the follow through of measures to reform the financial system and the introduction of other economic reforms, appears to have stalled. However, at long last, Japan has seen a return to reasonable growth and positive inflation during 2013 which augurs well for the hopes that Japan can escape from the bog of stagnation and deflation, and so help to support world growth. The fiscal challenges though are huge: the gross debt to GDP ratio is about 245% in 2013 while the government is currently running an annual fiscal deficit of around 50% of total government expenditure. Within two years, the central bank will end up purchasing about Y190 trillion (£1,200 billion) of government debt. In addition, the population is ageing due to a low birth rate and will fall from 128m to 100m by 2050.

The United Kingdom

- B.3.8. Until 2013, the economic recovery in the UK since 2008 had been the worst and slowest recovery in recent history. However, growth strongly rebounded in 2013, Q1 (+0.3%), Q2 (+0.7%) and Q3 (+0.8%), to surpass all expectations as all three main sectors, services, manufacturing and construction contributed to this strong upturn. The Bank of England has therefore upgraded growth forecasts in the August and November quarterly Inflation Reports for 2013 from 1.2% to 1.6% and for 2014 from 1.7% to 2.8% with 2015 unchanged at 2.3%. The November Report stated that:
- B.3.9 *In the United Kingdom, recovery has finally taken hold. The economy is growing robustly as lifting uncertainty and thawing credit conditions start to unlock pent up demand. But significant headwinds, both at home and abroad, remain and there is a long way to go before the aftermath of the financial crisis has cleared and economic conditions normalise. That underpins the MPC's intention to maintain the*

exceptionally stimulative stance of monetary policy until there has been a substantial reduction in the degree of economic slack. The pace at which that slack is eroded, and the durability of the recovery, will depend on the extent to which productivity picks up alongside demand. Productivity growth has risen in recent quarters, although unemployment has fallen by slightly more than expected on the back of strong output growth.

- B.3.10. Growth is expected to be strong for the immediate future. One downside is that wage inflation continues to remain significantly below CPI inflation so disposable income and living standards are under pressure, although income tax cuts have ameliorated this to some extent. A rebalancing of the economy towards exports has started but as 40% of UK exports go to the Eurozone, the difficulties in this area are likely to continue to dampen UK growth.

Forward guidance

- B.3.11. The Bank of England issued forward guidance in August 2013 which said that the Bank will not start to consider raising interest rates until the jobless rate (Labour Force Survey/ILO, i.e., not the claimant count measure) has fallen to 7.0% or below. This would require the creation of about 750,000 jobs and was forecast to take three years in August, but revised to possibly Q4 2014 in November 2013. The UK unemployment rate currently stands at 2.5 million, i.e., 7.6 % on the LFS/ILO measure. The Bank's guidance is subject to three provisos, mainly around inflation; breaching any of them would sever the link between interest rates and unemployment levels.
- B.3.12. This actually makes forecasting Bank Rate much more complex given the lack of available reliable forecasts by economists over a three-year plus horizon. The recession since 2007 was notable for how unemployment did not rise to the levels that would normally be expected in a major recession and the August Inflation Report noted that productivity had sunk to 2005 levels. There has, therefore, been a significant level of retention of labour, which will mean that a significant amount of GDP growth can be accommodated without a major reduction in unemployment.

Credit conditions

- B.3.13. While the Bank Rate has remained unchanged at 0.5% and QE has remained unchanged at £375bn in 2013, the Funding for Lending Scheme (FLS), aimed at encouraging banks to expand lending to small and medium size enterprises, has been extended. The FLS certainly seems to be having a positive effect in terms of encouraging house purchases although levels are still far below the pre-crisis level. The FLS is also due to be bolstered by the second phase of Help to Buy aimed at supporting the purchase of second hand properties, which is now due to start in earnest in January 2014. While there have been concerns that these schemes are creating a bubble in the housing market, the house price increases outside of London and the south east have been minimal. However, bank lending to small and medium enterprises continues to remain weak and inhibited by banks still repairing their balance sheets and anticipating tightening of regulatory requirements.

Inflation

B.3.14. Inflation has fallen from a peak of 3.1% in June 2013 to 2.0% in December 2013.

AAA rating

B.3.15. The UK has lost its AAA rating from Fitch and Moody's but that has caused little market reaction.

Capita Asset Services forward view

B.3.16. Economic forecasting remains difficult with so many external influences weighing on the UK. Major volatility in bond yields is likely to endure as investor fears and confidence ebb and flow between favouring more risky assets, i.e., equities or safer bonds.

B.3.17. There could well be volatility in gilt yields over the next year as financial markets await the long expected start of tapering of asset purchases by the Fed. The timing and degree of tapering could have a significant effect on both Treasury and gilt yields. Equally, at the time of writing, the political deadlock and infighting between Democrats and Republicans over the budget, and the raising of the debt limit, has only been kicked further down the road, rather than fully resolved. Solving these issues could have a significant effect on gilt yields during 2014.

B.3.18. The longer run trend is for gilt yields and PWLB rates to rise, due to the high volume of gilt issuance in the UK, and of bond issuance in other major western countries. Increasing investor confidence in economic recovery is also likely to compound this effect as a continuation of recovery will further encourage investors to switch back from bonds to equities. The overall balance of risks to economic recovery in the UK is currently evenly weighted. However, only time will tell just how long this period of strong economic growth will last as it remains exposed to vulnerabilities in a number of key areas.

B.3.19. The interest rate forecasts in this strategy are based on an initial assumption that there will not be a major resurgence of the Eurozone debt crisis, or a break-up of the EZ, but rather that there will be a managed, albeit painful and tortuous, resolution of the debt crisis where Eurozone institutions and governments eventually do what is necessary, but only when all else has been tried and failed. Under this assumed scenario, growth within the Eurozone will be tepid for the next couple of years and some Eurozone countries experiencing low or negative growth will, over that time period, see a significant increase in total government debt to GDP ratios.

B.3.20. There is a significant danger that these ratios could rise to the point where markets lose confidence in the financial viability of one or more countries. However, it is impossible to forecast whether any individual country will lose such confidence, or when, and so precipitate a resurgence of the Eurozone debt crisis. While the ECB has adequate resources to manage a debt crisis in a small Eurozone country, if one or more of the large countries were to experience a major crisis of market confidence, this would present a serious challenge to the ECB and to Eurozone politicians.

B.3.21. Downside risks currently include:

- UK strong economic growth is currently very dependent on consumer spending and recovery in the housing market. This is unlikely to endure much beyond 2014 as most consumers are up to maximum on borrowing and wage inflation is less than CPI inflation, so disposable income is being eroded.
- A weak rebalancing of UK growth to exporting and business investment causing a major weakening of overall economic growth beyond 2014.
- Weak growth or recession in the UK's main trading partners, the EU and US, depressing economic recovery in the UK.
- Prolonged political disagreement over the US Federal Budget and raising of the debt ceiling.
- A return to weak economic growth in the US, UK and China causing major disappointment in investor and market expectations.
- A resurgence of the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis caused by ongoing deterioration in government debt to GDP ratios to the point where financial markets lose confidence in the financial viability of one or more countries and in the ability of the ECB and Eurozone governments to deal with the potential size of the crisis.
- The potential for a significant increase in negative reactions of populaces in Eurozone countries against austerity programmes, especially in countries with very high unemployment rates, e.g., Greece and Spain, which face huge challenges in engineering economic growth to correct their budget deficits on a sustainable basis.
- The Italian political situation is frail and unstable; this will cause major difficulties in implementing austerity measures and a programme of overdue reforms. Italy has the third highest government debt mountain in the world.
- Problems in other Eurozone heavily indebted countries, e.g., Cyprus and Portugal, which could also generate safe haven flows into UK gilts, especially if it looks likely that one or more countries will need to leave the Eurozone.
- Monetary policy action failing to stimulate sustainable growth in western economies, especially the Eurozone and Japan.
- Geopolitical risks, e.g., Syria, Iran, North Korea, which could trigger safe haven flows back into bonds.

B.3.22. The potential for upside risks to UK gilt yields and PWLB rates include:

- A sharp upturn in investor confidence that sustainable robust world economic growth is firmly expected, causing a surge in the flow of funds out of bonds into equities.
- A reversal of Sterling's safe haven status on a sustainable improvement in financial stresses in the Eurozone.
- UK inflation being significantly higher than in the wider EU and US, causing an increase in the inflation premium inherent to gilt yields.
- In the longer term, an earlier than currently expected reversal of QE in the UK; this could initially be implemented by allowing gilts held by the Bank to mature without reinvesting in new purchases, followed later by outright sale of gilts currently held.

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