

Birdsall Wealth Management Group Newsletter



Winter 2021



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For 2021: Continue to Look Forward

Amidst the ups and what seem like mostly downs of the past year, there is light shining from the North. Despite the difficult circumstances we have faced in 2020, there have been bright spots to build optimism for the year ahead.

Unlike previous recessions, the economic effects of the pandemic have been uneven and concentrated to certain sectors. This has resulted in a relatively weak multiplier effect for the overall economy. Sectors that have been able to thrive during the pandemic, such as technology, have helped to drive equity markets, as largely seen south of the border. Canadian equity markets, generally influenced by the energy and resources sectors, have been hindered by lower demand due to the slowdown. In response, many companies have reassessed their business models, cut costs and leaned operations.

After the spring shutdowns, Canada's economy rebounded better than expected as restrictions were relaxed. Employment levels grew faster than anticipated, as did consumer spending. The housing market continued to perform well. Unlike many developed nations, Canada's household incomes grew at a time when the economy contracted; savings rates also increased.¹ Many financial institutions that set aside significant amounts for loan loss provisions in anticipation of mortgage or credit defaults have recently seen reductions in those reserves.

These successes were, in part, due to significant stimulus measures. Canada has been more generous than most nations with its support and, as a result, will have the largest stimulus deficit globally in 2020 (as a percentage of GDP).² While there are likely to be future consequences, the good news is that the current cost of carrying this debt remains low due to near-zero interest rates.

South of the border, the U.S. has chosen a new path forward after a highly contested presidential election. Given considerable and continuing unrest, there is hope that change will temper tensions and bring a necessary stimulus package to support Americans throughout the winter.

Most notably, we've made remarkable progress in the race to find a vaccine. This is an exceptional feat, given the typical vaccine time-to-market is 10 to 15 years. The fastest ever has been the mumps vaccine, which took four years.³

Progress in combatting a pandemic takes time. Progress in investing may involve greater endurance. During 2020, while the many ups and downs of equity markets captured attention, they aren't the ones that matter for most longer-term investors. Assuming you can stay the course for long enough, the results can be significant. The *Rule of 72*⁴ provides a good reminder: at an annual rate of return of five percent, an investment will double in around 14 years. For those who may not think they have the benefit of time, consider that 90 percent of renowned investor Warren Buffett's wealth was made after the age of 65.5

Throughout the many challenges we faced in 2020, we have seen that equity markets don't wait on the sidelines for recovery to happen. They are, after all, forward looking in nature. Perhaps this is an admirable quality to uphold as we leave 2020 behind and bring in a new year. As we look forward, we would like to thank you for your trust and confidence in our services during what has been an unprecedented time.

1. <https://nationalpost.com/news/canadas-generous-covid-19-income-supports-vastly-outpaced-other-developed-nations-oecd-report> • 2. <https://financialpost.com/opinion/jack-m-mintz-in-government-spending-and-deficits-were-now-no-1-in-the-world> • 3. <http://nationalgeographic.com/science/health-and-human-body/human-diseases/coronavirus-vaccine-tracker-how-they-work-latest-developments-cvd/> • 4. Rule of 72: It takes approx. 72÷(rate of return) years for investment to double • 5. Based on shares of Berkshire Hathaway (BRK-A). 8/30/95: \$25,300; 10/30/20: \$302,500.



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RRSP Season is Here Again!

Registered Retirement Savings Plan (RRSP) season is here again. Here are some questions to ask as you consider using the RRSP to its fullest benefit:

Have you maximized your RRSP contribution? Don't overlook the opportunity to reduce personal tax liabilities or take advantage of tax-deferred growth. The last day to make contributions for the 2020 tax year is **March 1, 2021**. Contribution limits are 18 percent of your previous year's earned income, to a maximum of \$27,230 for the 2020 tax year, less any pension adjustment or past service pension adjustment, plus unused contribution room carried forward.

When was the last time you updated beneficiary designations?

The start of the year may be a good time to review your designations and ensure that they are updated in the plan documentation.* Understand that there may be tax consequences to your estate depending upon who has been named as beneficiary(ies). There may also be considerations to address when designating a minor child (depending on provincial/territorial laws), an individual with a disability, or non-residents.

Will you benefit from a spousal RRSP? Consider the opportunities to split income through the use of a spousal RRSP (or common-law partner). A spousal RRSP is a plan to which you contribute and for which you receive tax deductions based on your available contribution room, similar to a traditional RRSP.

However, the difference is that your spouse is the annuitant, so any funds withdrawn are considered that spouse's income and must be included in his/her income tax return. Thus, withdrawn funds will be taxed at a lower rate should your spouse pay tax at a lower rate than you.

Are you turning 71 in 2021? You must convert your RRSP before the end of the calendar year in which you turn 71 years of age. The most common choice is to open a Registered Retirement Income Fund (RRIF), but there are other options to consider, including purchasing an annuity or distributing funds as income. Please call to discuss.

Do you have (grand)children who may benefit from a RRSP? If you have (grand)children who have a part-time job, they may benefit by holding a RRSP. Often, when earned income is less than the basic personal tax amount, an income tax return is not filed. However, by not reporting this income, the opportunity to generate RRSP contribution room is foregone. As such, the chance to compound savings for additional years on a tax-deferred basis or reduce future personal income tax liabilities through annual tax deductions is also lost. Even if a child does not contribute in the current year, the unused RRSP contribution room carries forward.

Some of these actions may benefit from the support of a tax advisor. Please call for assistance with any RRSP matters.

* Note: in Quebec, this designation must be made in your will.

Interest Rates, Inflation & the Risk of Doing Nothing

For those old enough to remember, the late 1970s and early 1980s were periods rife with high inflation and interest rates. In 1981, inflation rates reached over 12 percent and the now defunct Canada Savings Bond returned 19.5 percent interest.¹ While high interest rates meant great returns on low-risk assets like guaranteed investment certificates, it also meant unaffordable mortgages!

Since that time, it has been widely recognized that the central banks are responsible for keeping inflation in check as part of their policy objectives. For many years, the Bank of Canada and U.S. Federal Reserve (Fed) have targeted a two percent core inflation rate. Over the last decade, inflation has generally hovered close to this target, due to monetary policy actions as well as persistently low price and wage increases. It should be noted that the measure of core inflation doesn't include some of the more volatile components of our goods and services, such as food and gas – everyday costs incurred by most individuals. Many Canadians would argue that food costs have largely outpaced core inflation rates!

Today's Realities: Low Interest Rates, Low Inflation

Of course, it is unlikely that we will see the return of the inflation rates experienced in the 1970s. However, even moderate inflation can have a significant impact over time. The chart shows the erosion of purchasing power of \$100 with just moderate inflation rates.

Chart: Even Moderate Inflation Can Erode Purchasing Power

| Year | Inflation Rate | | |
|------|----------------|---------|---------|
| | 1% | 2% | 3% |
| 0 | \$100 | \$100 | \$100 |
| 10 | \$90.53 | \$82.03 | \$74.41 |
| 20 | \$81.95 | \$67.30 | \$55.37 |
| 30 | \$74.19 | \$55.21 | \$41.20 |

This should also remind us of the value in investing funds for the future. With interest rates at near-zero levels, many savings accounts yield paltry returns. Add in the subtle effects of inflation and doing nothing with your money can have its own risks.

While the effects of the pandemic may have created short-term deflationary pressures, there are differing views on the longer-term path for inflation. With central banks pledging to keep interest rates low for the foreseeable future, there is the potential for rising inflation – traditional economics suggests that when rates are low and the economy grows, inflation generally increases. As well, in 2020 the Fed signaled a major shift in its approach to managing inflation, now allowing it to run above the previous two percent target. This significant change in policy stance was undertaken to try and stimulate growth and tackle unemployment as a result of the pandemic.

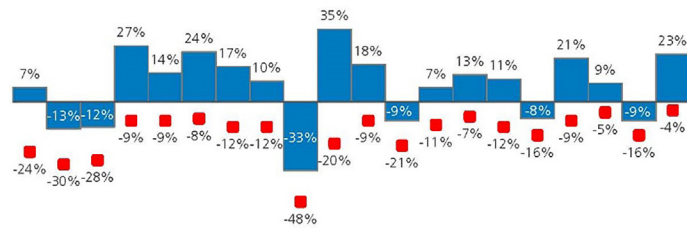
1. Bank of Canada monthly historical CSB rates and CPI. www.bankofcanada.ca

Reminders for the New Year: Building Wealth Takes Time

It may be easy to lose sight of the importance of time in building wealth. Today, the reasons are many: heightened market volatility, an increasing focus on immediacy and the influence of media in the digital age. Yet, in investing, having a longer time horizon takes advantage of compounding, which can have profound effects over time. This involves the difficult task of enduring inevitable and unpleasant short-term events like recessions and even an unexpected pandemic. The following may help to provide perspective:

Volatility is a Common Market Feature — The chart below shows the biggest peak-to-trough drawdowns each year for the S&P/TSX Composite Total Return Index and annual returns since 2000. In 12 of the last 20 years, there has been a double-digit, intra-year correction. Significant volatility is no stranger to the markets. Yet, in half of those years, the index finished in positive territory.

S&P/TSX Composite Total Return Index: Peak-to-Trough Drawdowns 2000 to 2019



Markets Are Cyclical: Nothing Lasts Forever — Equity and financial markets are cyclical. History shows that markets spend more time in positive than negative territory. Since 1956, there have been 13 bull and 13 bear markets. The average bull market has lasted 54 months, with an average gain of 131 percent, whereas the average bear market has lasted only 9 months, with an average loss of -27 percent.¹ Business cycles are also cyclical, typically lasting around seven years. While Canada has had seven recessions over the past 50 years, they have lasted an average of only 11 months.

Your Time Horizon May Be Longer Than You Think — The pandemic has put pressure on many incomes, which may require some to make adjustments to retirement options or timing. But don't overlook the opportunity to make up for lost time. Just as increasing longevity requires planning, it may also allow time for recovery. Consider that an investment with a five percent compounded annual return will double in approximately 14 years. As such, a 70-year-old may still have the potential for investments to double within their lifetime,² and possibly even twice if they become a centenarian.

The Impact of Time in Investing Can Be Significant — Time can be one of the investor's greatest allies. The chart below shows the impact of time in generating retirement savings: with a longer time horizon, an investor would require a significantly lower monthly investment to yield \$1,000,000.

Monthly Investment Amount Required to Reach \$1M Over Time*

| Year | At Average Annual Rate of Return of... | | |
|------|--|---------|---------|
| | 4% | 5% | 6% |
| 20 | \$2,726 | \$2,433 | \$2,164 |
| 30 | \$1,441 | \$1,202 | \$996 |
| 40 | \$846 | \$655 | \$502 |

* Assuming monthly compounding at annual rates of return shown. Effect of taxes, fees or inflation ignored.

Stay focused on your own investing time horizon and remember to keep time on your side.

1. S&P/TSX Composite 1/1/56 to 9/30/20 • 2. Assumes average life expectancy of 83 years old.

In Short: Upcoming Changes That May Affect You

As always, change is imminent! In brief, here are some of the notable changes that have occurred in the last quarter or are upcoming:



Tax-Free Savings Account — The Tax-Free Savings Account (TFSA) dollar amount for 2021 is \$6,000. This makes the total lifetime TFSA contribution room amount at \$75,500 (since 2009, for those eligible).



Income-Splitting Opportunities — The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) prescribed interest rate for spousal loans remains at one percent: the lowest possible rate. Making a bona-fide loan to a spouse for investment purposes is one way to split income and lower taxes, by putting family investments in the hands of a lower-income spouse. In October, the CRA confirmed that refinancing an existing prescribed rate loan at a lower rate may be done with part of the proceeds from the original loan without triggering the attribution rules.¹



Working from Home — The CRA has added home office furniture to the list of expenses that employers can reimburse tax free (up to \$500) if related to Covid-19. This was previously limited to personal computer equipment expenses. A new short-form T2200 is in the works, which is required to be completed by the employer in order for employees to deduct home office expenses.²



Covid-19 Benefits — New Federal government pandemic-related benefits began in the fall, including for those who become ill or miss work to care for a sick family member. A withholding tax of 10 percent will be deducted. U.S. citizens in Canada who received U.S. Covid-related government assistance will not have to include payments on Canadian tax returns. For detailed information, see: <https://canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/ceib-application/transition.html>



Legal Tender — Bid farewell to \$1, \$2, \$25, \$500 and \$1,000 bills in circulation. As of January 1, 2021, they no longer have the official legal tender status as an approved payment of debt.

For more information on any of these changes, please call the office.

1. https://investmentexecutive.com/news/industry-news/cra-offers-flexibility-on-prescribed-rate-loans/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN-All-afternoon • 2. <https://advisor.ca/tax/tax-news/cra-employers-can-now-reimburse-home-office-furniture-tax-free/>

For the Year Ahead: Words of Wisdom from the Investing Wise

As we brace for a long winter, continue to look forward to the better times ahead. Here are some thoughts from the world's greatest investors on persevering through difficult times:

"To be an investor, you must be a believer in a better tomorrow." — Benjamin Graham

History reminds us that, in the short run, life is full of setbacks. The pandemic has been no exception. History also shows that over the long run, we have continued to advance and progress. Even the worst periods of retrenchment have been followed by new growth, economic expansion and progressing equity values.

"You need to be able to look at the facts about a business, about an industry, and evaluate a business unaffected by what other people think. That is very difficult for most people...Don't do anything in life where the answer is, 'everybody else is doing it.' If you cancel that as a rationale for doing an activity in life, you'll live a better life whether it's in the stock market or any place else." — Warren Buffett

Success in investing often means having the confidence to make decisions independently and not based on what everyone else may be saying or doing.

"More money has been lost trying to anticipate and protect from corrections than actually in them." — Peter Lynch

During times of downward volatility, there may be an urge to act to protect the value of investments. However, the rapid fall of equity markets in the spring of 2020 and the quick rebound should remind us that equity markets can quickly change direction, often with little or no notice. Timing the markets is a difficult, if not impossible, task.

"Any sound long-range investment program requires patience and perseverance. Perhaps that is why so few investors follow any plan. Investment success is the purpose of investment planning; but a by-product of a good plan is peace of mind." — John Templeton

A well-constructed wealth plan includes techniques that have been put in place to help to weather difficult periods. These include holding quality investments, maintaining appropriate diversification and strategic asset allocation, and focusing on individual risk tolerance levels. Having the discipline to stick to the objectives set out in your plan, especially during more challenging times, can be one of the hallmarks of successful investing.

Income-Splitting Opportunities: The Spousal Loan Strategy

As you look ahead to 2021, consider the opportunity to save taxes through income splitting. Making a bona-fide loan to a spouse for investment purposes is one way to put family investments in the hands of a lower-income spouse. With the prescribed rate currently at its lowest level possible, this may be an opportune time to split income with a spouse by use of a loan.

Why is a spousal loan required? Generally, you achieve no tax advantage if you were to simply give funds to a lower-income spouse to invest. This is because the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) attributes any investment income earned on these funds back to the higher-income spouse, as if earned by that spouse, and it is taxable at the spouse's higher marginal tax rate. This is known as the "attribution rules."

A spousal loan must be documented and interest must be paid by the borrowing spouse at the CRA prescribed rate. Any interest for the year must be paid no later than January 30 after the year-end. Failure to do so means the attribution rules will apply, and any returns on the investment will be taxable in the hands of the higher-income spouse. Interest costs will be taxable income to the spouse loaning the money and may be deductible to the lower-income spouse.

The lower the prescribed rate relative to the return on investments, the greater the opportunity to benefit from such a strategy. This quarter, the current prescribed interest rate is one percent, the lowest possible rate (please see CRA website for quarterly changes¹).

1. <https://canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/tax/prescribed-interest-rates.html>



U.S. Election: The Changing Guard

After a highly contested election complicated by civil unrest and a heated campaign, the American people have decided on a change in leadership. As a Canadian, you may be wondering what impact this change may have on your investments.

We can observe that regardless of the political party that occupies the White House, there is no distinct pattern or outcome for the equity markets. In fact, respected author and investor Ben Carlson wrote in a recent Fortune magazine article that politicians often have less of an impact on equity market performance than most people would like to believe. Carlson has shown that the long-term trend of the stock market has been up no matter who the president is. It should also be noted that no president in modern history has been able to prevent the stock market from experiencing a large drawdown, either.

What We Know: Biden's Policies, In Short

Throughout the campaign process, much focus was given to Biden's pledge to increase taxes for corporations and higher-income individuals, reversing some of the tax cuts enacted by the Trump administration. These increases have been proposed to help fund trillions of dollars in stimulus measures, social services, manufacturing, green tech and infrastructure projects. A new fiscal stimulus plan has been called "crucial" and was largely stalled by the election.

Biden has supported a clean energy agenda, which has concerned many in the oil and gas sector. He has also supported greater regulation of the communications sector, and his proposed tax regime would likely affect the banking sector. From a global policy perspective, it is expected that the Democrats will deal with trade policy more diplomatically, which may help temper escalating global trade tensions over the past four years.

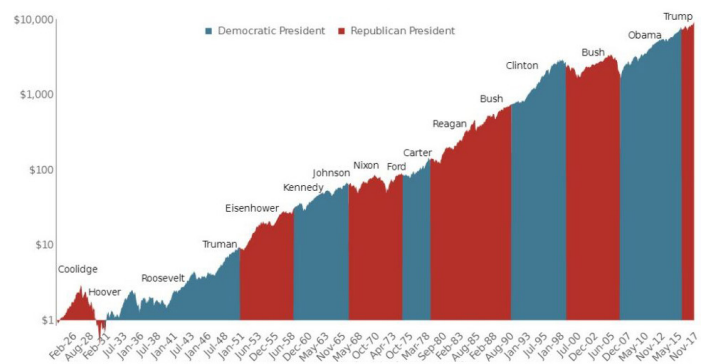
However, it should be noted that success in passing new measures may be difficult as it is largely dependent on Congress, and the Senate continues to be controlled by the Republicans.* This split in power is often welcomed by investors. Carlson has shown that when a Democrat is president and Republicans control Congress, average annual returns of the S&P 500 since 1933 have been 13.0 percent.¹

The Bottom Line

Basing an investment strategy on the outcome of an election is not a prudent exercise. Nobody can be certain that campaign promises will lead to policy changes or even impact future economic outcomes once Biden takes office on January 20, 2021. For example, Trump's 2016 promises of deregulation suggested that the energy sector would have fared well during his time in office; in hindsight, many other factors negatively impacted the sector. Regardless of what lies ahead, the private sector will continue to produce jobs, invest in innovation and drive growth over the longer term. Often, the winners will be those companies that can best position themselves to adapt to changes in the competitive and regulatory landscape over time.

As advisors, we structure portfolios using diversification to prepare for inevitable changes and ensure that we are not exposed to any single adverse event. We make course adjustments when required and are constantly monitoring investments given that operating landscapes and competitive conditions are always changing. What we shouldn't lose sight of is that the long-term trend of the stock market has been up, regardless of who is in power.

Growth of a Dollar Invested in the S&P 500: Jan. 1926 to Dec. 2019



* At the time of writing.

1. <https://fortune.com/2020/10/10/2020-election-investing-trump-biden-stock-market-predictions/>

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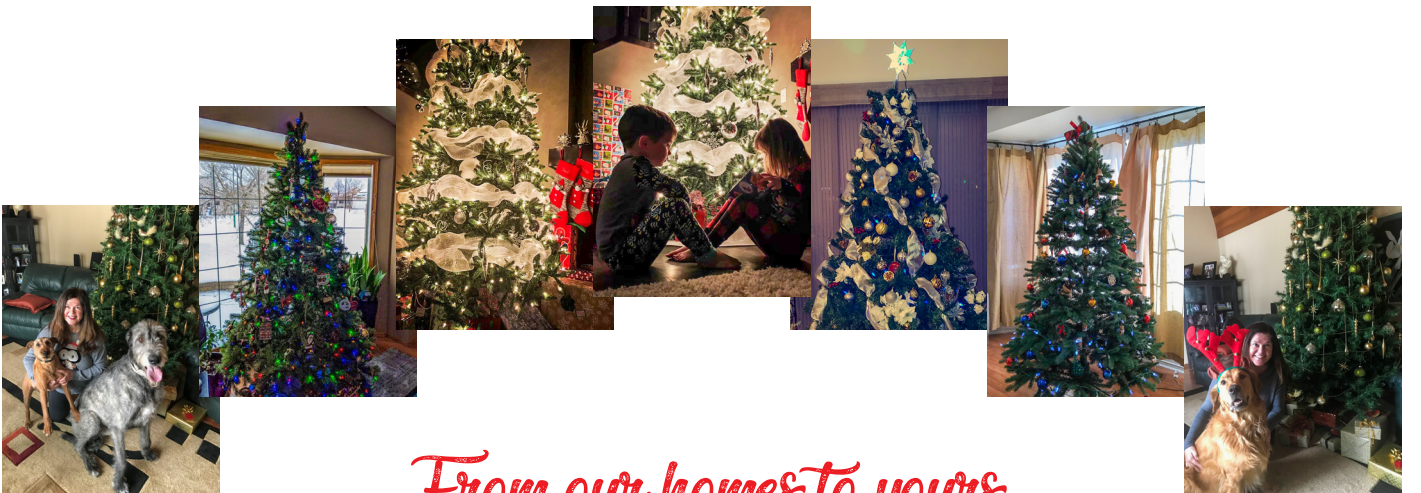
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Charlene's Corner

The Birdsell Wealth Management Group has donated hampers to 10 families through the Christmas Cheer Board Feed-A-Family program. See the progress we have made for deliveries this week. All we have to do is add turkeys.



*From our homes to yours
we wish you a safe
happy holiday season*