Insights, Tacit Thought | Weekly Investment Insights

“…And After Many a Summer Dies the Swan.”

Published on: 5 July, 2024 | Author: Investment Team

Aldous Huxley’s satire on ageing becomes more prescient with literally every passing year. The world is getting older and whilst a small coterie of “tech bro’s” in Silicon Valley regard age as a “sickness” amenable to cure, in the real world, there is not much evidence that the seven ages of man has changed much since homo sapiens displaced homo neanderthalensis. Even in antiquity a well-fed aristocrat with access to clean water could expect to live into his or her mid-eighties, albeit the “hoi polloi” were lucky to reach 30.

What has changed since the time of Julius Caesar is the absolute size of the world’s population. At the time of his murder in 44 BC, there were estimated to be less than 190 million people on the planet; today there are more than 8 billion. More than that, advances in sanitation, food production and medicine have raised average lifespans today to more than double that experienced in earlier periods.

Work undertaken by the United Nations Population Division suggests that this long expansion in human population is set to slow and may even go into reverse by the end of the century. There are two convergent trends: firstly, it has been observed that in wealthy societies reproduction rates tend to slow (many Western birth rates are now below the replacement rate) and secondly, the impact of the Chinese “one-child” policy is set to eviscerate the population of China where the UN’s median forecast suggests China will lose up to 40% (600M) of its population by the end of this century.

Since much of economic growth is a function of population growth – more people generate demand for more stuff – there are long-term policy implications for governments and firms to consider. At the same time, there is little evidence to work on in respect of the economic impact of an outright declining population in an advanced economy.

In this respect, Japan is likely to provide a blue-print. In 2022, the population of Japan was 123 million but by 2050, this is forecast to fall to 103 million, almost a fifth lower. Equally today there are 135,000 centenarians in Japan but by 2050 this number rises to 435,000. In fact, in 2050 fully 37% of the population is forecast to be over, what used to be the standard retirement age, of 65.

In Japan the dependency ratio is rising fast. The response to the problem, so far, appears to be in technology rather than immigration. Advances in robotics and “artificial intelligence” are moving at a rapid pace. Older people tend to respond positively to “AI” companions and for those who use the ubiquitous “Alexa” or the new DJ feature on Spotify, it is eerily possible to form a human-like relationship with these early human-robotic interfaces remarkably quickly.

Unlike Japan and China, the population of the United States is expected to grow; between now and 2050 by 0.37% per year. The US is home to 340 million today which is expected to rise to 378 million in 2050. But, again as in Japan, this is an ageing society. In 2050 23% of the population will be over the age of 65 and America will be home to 391,000 centenarians, up from 96,000 today.

In summary, the theoretical span of a human life hasn’t changed much since the Ides of March in 44BC but on average we are lasting longer and reproducing less, leading to a slowly increasing average age: the age of the gerontocrat.

Or not, as Joe Biden may be about to find out as, “his big manly voice, turns again to childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound.” This note has steered away from elections, of which we are sure you have had more than enough, but, in many ways, the US election is a watershed. Both protagonists represent a claim on the young from the old. Since the problems, risks and opportunities are likely to be very different in the future from the past, perhaps, it is time for the young

to stake their claim on their future.

Important Information: Any views, insights, or commentary are for general information only, do not constitute personal investment advice or research, and are intended for UK residents. They may not be appropriate in all jurisdictions. While sourced from information we believe to be reliable, we make no guarantee as to accuracy or completeness. Past performance is not a guide to future results, and the value of investments can go down as well as up.

Regulatory Disclaimer: Tacit Investment Management is the trading name of TIML Limited (No. 9228395), part of Tacit Holdings Limited (No. 10611211). Both companies are incorporated in England and Wales, with the registered office at 14 Hanover Square, London W1S 1HN. TIML Limited is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA ref. 670184) and approves and issues this communication under Section 21 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. Please note, tax and estate planning services are not regulated by the FCA.