*Please note that the commentary is for the US dollar retail class of the fund. The feeder fund is 100% invested in the underlying US dollar fund. However, given small valuation, trading and translation differences for the two funds, investors should expect differences in returns in the short term. Over the long term, we aim to achieve the same outcome in US dollar terms for both funds.*

During the second quarter of 2019 (Q2-19), global financial markets continued to be dominated by a shift in investors' interest rate expectations and the unfolding trade war saga, primarily between the US and China. Markets are now discounting almost three cuts of 25 basis points (bps) each in the US before the end of the year, a stark contrast to only six months ago, when the expectation was for at least one rate increase during the calendar year. This shift occurred against the backdrop of a more benign inflationary outlook, including the outlook for wage pressures in the US where the economy is operating at an historically low unemployment rate, as well as a weakening global growth outlook that has spooked central banks around the globe into a more dovish viewpoint.

This weaker growth outlook was exacerbated, if not caused, by the uncertainty created by the increasingly hostile trade war rhetoric between the US and many of its major trading partners. The slightly more conciliatory tone from the US towards the end of the quarter also helped to settle investors' fears. Unrelated issues such as the continued uncertainty around Brexit, political turmoil in France and some self-inflicted headwinds in emerging economies such as Turkey also helped lower growth estimates. To contextualise this shift in sentiment, it is worth noting that the US 10-year Treasury now trades at around 2.00%, down from a high of around 3.35% in the fourth quarter of 2018. Central banks have responded to these changes in the macroeconomic outlook by signalling their willingness to come to the rescue with a more accommodative monetary policy, either through the lowering of interest rates or (in the case of the European Union) a resumption of quantitative easing.

Markets continued to take comfort from these dovish developments by bidding up risky assets, with the MSCI All County World Index returning 3.6% in Q2-19 on a net basis, bringing the year-to-date return to an unimaginable 16.2%. The rolling 12-month number is now positive again, with a return of 5.7%, and the three-year number is 11.6% p.a., a very respectable number given the uncertainties that faced investors over this period. Developed markets once again outperformed over the quarter, with the emerging market universe negatively impacted by the trade war developments, as well as some of the country-specific issues referred to above. The US was the star performer, with some help from stronger earnings growth than seen in the rest of the world and a further re-rating in the market.

The divergence in sector performance was quite muted, a classic case of a rising tide lifting most boats. Financials benefited from a steepening in the yield curve and healthcare was negatively impacted by some of the radical proposals being put forward by the US Democrats' presidential candidates. Energy also lagged, despite a stronger oil price, as investors remain concerned about capital discipline in an energy bull market. Since the beginning of the year, information technology remains the standout leader in terms of sector performance, with healthcare being the laggard.

The fund continued to recover some its poor performance in 2018 by outperforming the benchmark. Since the beginning of the year, the it has now outperformed by 6.0%. Since inception, the it still lags the benchmark.

Over the quarter, long-held positions such as Blackstone, Charter Communications, Adidas, and Carlyle contributed the most, with British American Tobacco (after a strong first quarter) and Intu Properties detracting the most. Some of the other notable contributors over the longer term include Altice US, Facebook, Airbus, and Pershing Square. Other detractors were Aspen, L Brands and Imperial Brands.

We previously shared in detail our enthusiasm about the prospects for the alternative asset managers, a sector which at some point made up over 15% of the total portfolio. Our thesis that these best-in-class operators will continue to raise assets for their new fund offerings have played out, probably stronger than we anticipated. That was despite more volatile markets and scepticism about their abilities to continue generating superior returns for the investors in their funds. As their share prices recovered over the last few years, we have reduced our overall exposure by selling out of KKR and Fortress, and significantly reduced the Apollo position.

Over the last few months, all of our remaining holdings announced plans to convert from limited partnerships (that benefited the main principals or original founders from a tax perspective) to public corporations that will pay slightly more tax but make the shares more investable to all investors (inclusion in indices, no tax uncertainty). The share prices reacted very positively to this news, and post quarter end Carlyle was the last to make their decision known. The reason for highlighting these developments to our investors is again to point out the advantages of taking a longer-term view when considering investment positions. We remind each other of these learnings all the time when patience starts wearing thin with regards to a position that doesn't perform according to expectations! However, there will be cases where we have to admit that we were wrong, in which case the best action is to cut that position despite crystallising a loss. Active investment management remains an art as much as it is a science!

Portfolio managers
Louis Stassen and Neil Padoa
as at 30 June 2019