CNCL Quarterly Commentary

Q4 2023

Horizons Enhanced Canadian Large Cap Equity Covered Call ETF (CNCL)

Market Review

Canadian equities, as measured by the S&P/TSX Capped Composite Index, experienced a return of 12.05% in 2023. The significant positive performing sectors were Information Technology and Real Estate, while the only negative contributing sectors were Communication Services and Materials.

The Bank of Canada ("BoC") raised the interest rate by 25 basis points (bps) in three out of eight meetings in 2023, leaving the overnight rate at 5% by the end of the year. In their meeting in December, the BoC decided to hold the overnight rate as they highlighted a cooling labour market where job creation has been slower; the unemployment rate slightly increased to 5.5% as of September 2023. The BoC also commented on the improvement in inflation, stating that the slowdown in the Canadian economy was reducing inflationary pressures. However, the BoC was still concerned about the risks of the inflation outlook and was willing to raise the policy rate further if necessary.

The Canadian Consumer Price Index rose 3.1% year-over-year. This was a volatile year for oil, which was driven by geopolitical turmoil and uncertainties about the oil output levels by producers around the world. The price of oil, as measured by West Texas Intermediate, experienced a return of -6.7% for the year finishing at US$72 per barrel; it reached a low of US$67 and peaked at US$93 per barrel.

Gold prices rose by 12% breaking the US$2,100 level this year and ending the year at $US2,065 per ounce. This was largely driven by increased gold buying from central banks, which collectively bought approximately 800 tonnes of gold over the first three quarters of the year.

Canadian bank stocks trended lower for the majority of the first three quarters of the year largely due to higher interest rates, which led to lower trading activity, increased costs for the banks, and increased provisions for bad loans. However, towards the end of the year, equity markets rallied resulting in positive year-to-date returns for all six banks held in the ETF.

Portfolio Review

CNCL holds the Horizons Canadian Large Cap Equity Covered Call ETF (CNCC) in its portfolio. In Q4, the top three performing stocks in CNCC were Shopify, Kinross Gold, and Brookfield with total returns of 39.14%, 30.23%, and 25.39% respectively. The bottom three performers were First Quantum Minerals, Cenovus Energy, and First National Financial with total returns of -66.19%, -21.44%, -18.80% respectively. The top three performing sectors were Information Technology, Financials, and Consumer Staples with total returns of 26.07%, 12.82%, and 8.95% respectively. The bottom three performing sectors were Materials, Energy, and Communication Services with total returns of -1.32%, 0.29%, and 7.64% respectively.

Outlook and Positioning

With the BoC holding its target for the overnight rate at 5%, with the bank rate at 5.25% and the deposit rate at 5% during the December 2023 meeting, the BoC's Governing Council is continuing its policy of quantitative tightening.

As economic growth stalled in the middle quarters of 2023 and Real GDP contracted by 1.1% in the third quarter, initial indicators for Q4 suggest economic growth may remain weak as higher interest rates continued to hold back spending potentially leading into an early 2024 recession.

However, having led the developed markets in pausing its interest rate hiking cycle, it is possible that the BoC could lead the world and be the first developed nation to cut rates in 2024. These projected interest rate cuts, combined with a continuation in the easing of core inflation from the 3.1% level in October 2023, may lead to a rebound in stocks (notably financials and utilities), bonds, and the economy starting mid-to-late 2024.

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Into 2024, the covered call strategy is favourably positioned to potentially provide value from a yield, hedging and upside capture perspective in the current environment. The fund invests in CNCC, therefore CNCL inherits an option writing strategy. CNCC dynamically writes options on the iShares S&P/TSX 60 Index ETF. Option yields for the TSX 60 trended lower in 2023 versus the prior year. The monthly premiums generated for the year showed consistency in the second half of the year and may remain stable into 2024.