

The Death of Modern Monetary Theory

Simon Lack, Managing Partner of SL Advisors, LLC



February 20, 2022

The last two years have provided an empirical test of Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), the idea that a government can borrow indefinitely in its own currency with no fear of bankruptcy. Stephanie Kelton is the cheerleader for testing the limits of fiscal prudence – I reviewed her book in late 2020. MMT doesn't prescribe limitless spending. It is axiomatic that bankruptcy in one's domestic currency can always be avoided by printing money – having the central bank finance debt issuance – so there's nothing insightful about that. MMT holds that the economy's capacity to produce goods and services without generating inflation is the true limit.

Even MMT's most basic assertion, that non-inflationary consumption financed with debt is harmless, fails cursory scrutiny. Suppose Congress voted a giant July 4th party with the world's biggest ever fireworks display funded by issuing 30 year bonds. MMT doctrine would allow this consistent with the inflationary limit. Most would find this absurd. Borrowing to finance transfer payments such as Medicare and social security, as we do now, is an equally indefensible passing of a burden to later generations for no benefit to them.

Fiscal policy has looked very MMT-like since Covid struck, so Kelton and other supporters have been gamely trying to manage the message. A year ago, Kelton appeared on a Bloomberg podcast titled, "How M.M.T. Won the Fiscal Policy Debate." By last July, she was describing surging inflation as "temporary...growing pains." Now even the NYTimes is expressing mild skepticism.

More recently, Kelton is distancing MMT from current fiscal policy, arguing that the former can't be evaluated from the latter. She argues that deficit spending requires a CBO-like assessment to determine whether it will be inflationary, and that faithfully adhering to the economy's speed limit will allow a country to maximize its non-inflationary spending.

It's a bit like NAIRU (Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment). Central Bank utopia is keeping the economy close to NAIRU as much as possible. It doesn't happen – not just because economic surprises inconveniently intrude, but because central bankers never know exactly where NAIRU lies. It's only ever possible to identify it in hindsight, when the absence of inflation suggests more employment slack than anticipated, or rising wages demonstrate the opposite.

Wage increases that outstrip improvements in productivity are believed by most economists to be a necessary pre-requisite for inflation to become embedded and no longer "transitory" (to use Jay Powell's now discredited term). Without knowing where NAIRU is, it's impossible to know how close the economy is to running at full capacity, and therefore to gauge the inflation risk.

Government policy already aims to keep the economy moving at close to its speed limit. The Fed's mandate is to seek maximum employment consistent with stable prices.

MMT is no more than a statement of the obvious masquerading as a profound theory.

Kelton argues that the spending limits to fiscal policy should be set by the CBO scoring the budget based on whether it would generate inflation or not. We should keep borrowing and spending up until the inflationary point. Calculating the deficit impact of a budget is complicated, but forecasting the inflationary result is a giant step farther. Although the CBO isn't charged with the task Kelton would set them, the Federal Reserve is.

The Fed concluded that the March 2020 CARES Act (\$2.2TN), the December 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Bill (\$900BN) and the completely irresponsible March 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (\$1.9TN) were not going to cause inflation. The Biden White House also believed this last dollop of fiscal profligacy wouldn't be inflationary, even though Covid vaccines were already being administered to older Americans by the time it passed.

The Fed went even further and deemed the fiscal response inadequate to the economic challenge, because they maintained their own stimulus via rock-bottom interest rates and partial debt monetization.

It must be obvious to all that government forecasts of continued moderate inflation were dead wrong. Forecasting is hard, although prudent risk management would have seen the Fed curbing their ultra-accommodative stance a year ago, as we noted at the time. On February 23 last year, Jay Powell said, "At this point, the Federal Open Market Committee is seeking inflation running moderately above 2% for some time." Following the most recent CPI report showing inflation since then at 7.5%, and 6.0% excluding food and energy, it looks like job done.

Why does Kelton think a CBO inflation analysis would have reached a different conclusion than economists in the White House and the Fed?

In case it isn't already clear what a wealth-destroying philosophy Kelton promulgates, a recent blog post lists her favorite pre-emptive measures to smooth economic cyclicalities and includes the following gem: "Instead of allowing millions of people to fall into unemployment each time the economy falters, workers could transition into a public service job that replaces some or all of their lost income."

To what useful employment would such a Federal program direct former MMT economists, of which there is already a surplus?

Negative real interest rates have allowed the continued explosion of Federal indebtedness to occur with relatively little pain. MMT has nothing to say on this, but there are \$TNs dedicated to fixed income with no need of a return on capital, simply a return of capital. Central banks, sovereign wealth funds, pension funds and others are enabling hitherto unseen levels of US debt accumulation.

If there is an inefficiency to be exploited, it is this excessive supply of cheap financing. The case for testing spending limits rests with the low cost of debt, not some idea that if we could only forecast inflation accurately, we could reach our full economic potential.

MMT was bunk when it was still just a theory. Now that it's received a full empirical test, savers are left to deal with the consequences.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

This report uses rigorous security protocols for selected data sourced from Chase credit and debit card transactions to ensure all information is kept confidential and secure. All selected data is highly aggregated and all unique identifiable information, including names, account numbers, addresses, dates of birth, and Social Security Numbers, is removed from the data before the report's author receives it. The data in this report is not representative of Chase's overall credit and debit cardholder population.

The views expressed herein are those of Simon Lack, Managing Partner of SL Advisors as of February 2022 and are subject to change without notice. This article is being redistributed with permission from Mr. Lack. Neither J.P. Morgan nor any of its affiliates can attest that we share these views or that they will materialize.

The views contained herein are not to be taken as advice or a recommendation to buy or sell any investment in any jurisdiction, nor is it a commitment from J.P. Morgan or any of its subsidiaries to participate in any of the transactions mentioned herein. Any forecasts, figures, opinions or investment techniques and strategies set out are for informational purposes only, based on certain assumptions and current market conditions and are subject to change without prior notice. All information presented herein is considered to be accurate at the time of production. This material does not contain sufficient information to support an investment decision and it should not be relied upon by you in evaluating the merits of investing in any securities or products. In addition, users should make an independent assessment of the legal, regulatory, tax, credit and accounting implications and determine, together with their own professional advisers, if any investment mentioned herein is believed to be suitable to their personal goals. Investors should ensure that they obtain all available relevant information before making any investment. It should be noted that investment involves risks, the value of investments and the income from them may fluctuate in accordance with market conditions and taxation agreements and investors may not get back the full amount invested. Both past performance and yields are not reliable indicators of current and future results.

Non-affiliated entities mentioned are for informational purposes only and should not be construed as an endorsement or sponsorship of J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. or its affiliates.

For J.P. Morgan Asset Management Clients:

J.P. Morgan Asset Management is the brand for the asset management business of JPMorgan Chase & Co. and its affiliates worldwide.

To the extent permitted by applicable law, we may record telephone calls and monitor electronic communications to comply with our legal and regulatory obligations and internal policies. Personal data will be collected, stored and processed by J.P. Morgan Asset Management in accordance with our privacy policies at <https://am.jpmorgan.com/global/privacy>.

ACCESSIBILITY

For U.S. only: If you are a person with a disability and need additional support in viewing the material, please call us at 1-800-343-1113 for assistance.

This communication is issued by the following entities:

In the United States, by J.P. Morgan Investment Management Inc. or J.P. Morgan Alternative Asset Management, Inc., both regulated by the Securities and Exchange Commission; in Latin America, for intended recipients' use only, by local J.P. Morgan entities, as the case may be.; in Canada, for institutional clients' use only, by JPMorgan Asset Management (Canada) Inc., which is a registered Portfolio Manager and Exempt Market Dealer in all Canadian provinces and territories except the Yukon and is also registered as an Investment Fund Manager in British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. In the United Kingdom, by JPMorgan Asset Management (UK) Limited, which is authorized and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority; in other European jurisdictions, by JPMorgan Asset Management (Europe) S.à r.l. In Asia Pacific ("APAC"), by the following issuing entities and in the respective jurisdictions in which they are primarily regulated: JPMorgan Asset Management (Asia Pacific) Limited, or JPMorgan Funds (Asia) Limited, or JPMorgan Asset Management Real Assets (Asia) Limited, each of which is regulated by the Securities and Futures Commission of Hong Kong; JPMorgan Asset Management (Singapore) Limited (Co. Reg. No. 197601586K), which this advertisement or publication has not been reviewed by the Monetary Authority of Singapore; JPMorgan Asset Management (Taiwan) Limited; JPMorgan Asset Management (Japan) Limited, which is a member of the Investment Trusts Association, Japan, the Japan Investment Advisers Association, Type II Financial Instruments Firms Association and the Japan Securities Dealers Association and is regulated by the Financial Services Agency (registration number "Kanto Local Finance Bureau (Financial Instruments Firm) No. 330"); in Australia, to wholesale clients only as defined in section 761A and 761G of the Corporations Act 2001 (Commonwealth), by JPMorgan Asset Management (Australia) Limited (ABN 55143832080) (AFSL 376919). For all other markets in APAC, to intended recipients only.

For J.P. Morgan Private Bank Clients:

ACCESSIBILITY

J.P. Morgan is committed to making our products and services accessible to meet the financial services needs of all our clients. Please direct any accessibility issues to the Private Bank Client Service Center at 1-866-265-1727.

LEGAL ENTITY, BRAND & REGULATORY INFORMATION

In the **United States**, bank deposit accounts and related services, such as checking, savings and bank lending, are offered by **JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A.** Member FDIC.

JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A. and its affiliates (collectively "**JPMCB**") offer investment products, which may include bank-managed investment accounts and custody, as part of its trust and fiduciary services. Other investment products and services, such as brokerage and advisory accounts, are offered through **J.P. Morgan Securities LLC ("JPMS")**, a member of [FINRA](#) and [SIPC](#). Annuities are made available through Chase Insurance Agency, Inc. (CIA), a licensed insurance agency, doing business as Chase Insurance Agency Services, Inc. in Florida. JPMCB, JPMS and CIA are affiliated companies under the common control of JPM. Products not available in all states.

In **Germany**, this material is issued by **J.P. Morgan SE**, with its registered office at Taunustor 1 (TaunusTurm), 60310 Frankfurt am Main, Germany, authorized by the Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht (BaFin) and jointly supervised by the BaFin, the German Central Bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) and the European Central Bank (ECB). In **Luxembourg**, this material is issued by **J.P. Morgan SE – Luxembourg Branch**, with registered office at European Bank and Business Centre, 6 route de Treves, L-2633, Senningerberg, Luxembourg, authorized by the Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht (BaFin) and jointly supervised by the BaFin, the German Central Bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) and the European Central Bank (ECB); J.P. Morgan SE – Luxembourg Branch is also supervised by the Commission de Surveillance du Secteur Financier (CSSF); registered under R.C.S Luxembourg B255938. In the **United Kingdom**, this material is issued by **J.P. Morgan SE – London Branch**, registered office at 25 Bank Street, Canary Wharf, London E14 5JP, authorized by the Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht (BaFin) and jointly supervised by the BaFin, the German Central Bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) and the European Central Bank (ECB); J.P. Morgan SE – London Branch is also supervised by the Financial Conduct Authority and Prudential Regulation Authority. In **Spain**, this material is distributed by **J.P. Morgan SE, Sucursal en España**, with registered office at Paseo de la Castellana, 31, 28046 Madrid, Spain, authorized by the Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht (BaFin) and jointly supervised by the BaFin, the German Central Bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) and the European Central Bank (ECB); J.P. Morgan SE, Sucursal en España is also supervised by the Spanish Securities Market Commission (CNMV); registered with Bank of Spain as a branch of J.P. Morgan SE under code 1567. In **Italy**, this material is distributed by **J.P. Morgan SE – Milan Branch**, with its registered office at Via Cordusio, n.3, Milan 20123,

Italy, authorized by the Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht (BaFin) and jointly supervised by the BaFin, the German Central Bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) and the European Central Bank (ECB); J.P. Morgan SE – Milan Branch is also supervised by Bank of Italy and the Commissione Nazionale per le Società e la Borsa (CONSOB); registered with Bank of Italy as a branch of J.P. Morgan SE under code 8076; Milan Chamber of Commerce Registered Number: REA MI 2536325. In the **Netherlands**, this material is distributed by **J.P. Morgan SE – Amsterdam Branch**, with registered office at World Trade Centre, Tower B, Strawinskylaan 1135, 1077 XX, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, authorized by the Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht (BaFin) and jointly supervised by the BaFin, the German Central Bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) and the European Central Bank (ECB); J.P. Morgan SE – Amsterdam Branch is also supervised by De Nederlandsche Bank (DNB) and the Autoriteit Financiële Markten (AFM) in the Netherlands. Registered with the Kamer van Koophandel as a branch of J.P. Morgan SE under registration number 72610220. In **Denmark**, this material is distributed by **J.P. Morgan SE – Copenhagen Branch, filial af J.P. Morgan SE, Tyskland**, with registered office at Kalvebod Brygge 39-41, 1560 København V, Denmark, authorized by the Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht (BaFin) and jointly supervised by the BaFin, the German Central Bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) and the European Central Bank (ECB); J.P. Morgan SE – Copenhagen Branch, filial af J.P. Morgan SE, Tyskland is also supervised by Finanstilsynet (Danish FSA) and is registered with Finanstilsynet as a branch of J.P. Morgan SE under code 29010. In **Sweden**, this material is distributed by **J.P. Morgan SE – Stockholm Bankfilial**, with registered office at Hamngatan 15, Stockholm, 11147, Sweden, authorized by the Bundesanstalt für Finanzdienstleistungsaufsicht (BaFin) and jointly supervised by the BaFin, the German Central Bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) and the European Central Bank (ECB); J.P. Morgan SE – Stockholm Bankfilial is also supervised by Finansinspektionen (Swedish FSA); registered with Finansinspektionen as a branch of J.P. Morgan SE. In **France**, this material is distributed by **JPMCB, Paris branch**, which is regulated by the French banking authorities Autorité de Contrôle Prudentiel et de Résolution and Autorité des Marchés Financiers. In **Switzerland**, this material is distributed by **J.P. Morgan (Suisse) SA**, with registered address at rue de la Confédération, 8, 1211, Geneva, Switzerland, which is authorised and supervised by the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority (FINMA), as a bank and a securities dealer in Switzerland. Please consult the following link to obtain information regarding J.P. Morgan's EMEA data protection policy: <https://www.jpmorgan.com/privacy>.

In **Hong Kong**, this material is distributed by **JPMCB, Hong Kong branch**. JPMCB, Hong Kong branch is regulated by the Hong Kong Monetary Authority and the Securities and Futures Commission of Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, we will cease to use your personal data for our marketing purposes without charge if you so request. In **Singapore**, this material is distributed by **JPMCB, Singapore branch**. JPMCB, Singapore branch is regulated by the Monetary Authority of Singapore. Dealing and advisory services and discretionary investment management services are provided to you by JPMCB, Hong Kong/Singapore branch (as notified to you). Banking and custody services are provided to you by JPMCB Singapore Branch. The contents of this document have not been reviewed by any regulatory authority in Hong Kong, Singapore or any other jurisdictions. You are advised to exercise caution in relation to this document. If you are in any doubt about any of the contents of this document, you should obtain independent professional advice. For materials which constitute product advertisement under the Securities and Futures Act and the Financial Advisers Act, this advertisement has not been reviewed by the Monetary Authority of Singapore. JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A. is a national banking association chartered under the laws of the United States, and as a body corporate, its shareholder's liability is limited.

With respect to countries in **Latin America**, the distribution of this material may be restricted in certain jurisdictions. We may offer and/or sell to you securities or other financial instruments which may not be registered under, and are not the subject of a public offering under, the securities or other financial regulatory laws of your home country. Such securities or instruments are offered and/or sold to you on a private basis only. Any communication by us to you regarding such securities or instruments, including without limitation the delivery of a prospectus, term sheet or other offering document, is not intended by us as an offer to sell or a solicitation of an offer to buy any securities or instruments in any jurisdiction in which such an offer or a solicitation is unlawful. Furthermore, such securities or instruments may be subject to certain regulatory and/or contractual restrictions on subsequent transfer by you, and you are solely responsible for ascertaining and complying with such restrictions. To the extent this content makes reference to a fund, the Fund may not be publicly offered in any Latin American country, without previous registration of such fund's securities in compliance with the laws of the corresponding jurisdiction. Public offering of any security, including the shares of the Fund, without previous registration at Brazilian Securities and Exchange Commission— CVM is completely prohibited. Some products or services contained in the materials might not be currently provided by the Brazilian and Mexican platforms.

JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A. (JPMCBNA) (ABN 43 074 112 011/AFS Licence No: 238367) is regulated by the Australian Securities and Investment Commission and the Australian Prudential Regulation

Authority. Material provided by JPMCBNA in Australia is to "wholesale clients" only. For the purposes of this paragraph the term "wholesale client" has the meaning given in section 761G of the Corporations Act 2001 (Cth). Please inform us if you are not a Wholesale Client now or if you cease to be a Wholesale Client at any time in the future.

JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A. (JPMCBNA) (ABN 43 074 112 011/AFS Licence No: 238367) is regulated by the Australian Securities and Investment Commission and the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority. Material provided by JPMCBNA in Australia is to "wholesale clients" only. For the purposes of this paragraph the term "wholesale client" has the meaning given in section 761G of the Corporations Act 2001 (Cth). Please inform us if you are not a Wholesale Client now or if you cease to be a Wholesale Client at any time in the future.

JPMS is a registered foreign company (overseas) (ARBN 109293610) incorporated in Delaware, U.S.A. Under Australian financial services licensing requirements, carrying on a financial services business in Australia requires a financial service provider, such as J.P. Morgan Securities LLC (JPMS), to hold an Australian Financial Services Licence (AFSL), unless an exemption applies. **JPMS is exempt from the requirement to hold an AFSL under the Corporations Act 2001 (Cth) (Act) in respect of financial services it provides to you, and is regulated by the SEC, FINRA and CFTC under U.S. laws, which differ from Australian laws.** Material provided by JPMS in Australia is to "wholesale clients" only. The information provided in this material is not intended to be, and must not be, distributed or passed on, directly or indirectly, to any other class of persons in Australia. For the purposes of this paragraph the term "wholesale client" has the meaning given in section 761G of the Act. Please inform us immediately if you are not a Wholesale Client now or if you cease to be a Wholesale Client at any time in the future.

This material has not been prepared specifically for Australian investors. It:

- May contain references to dollar amounts which are not Australian dollars;
- May contain financial information which is not prepared in accordance with Australian law or practices;
- May not address risks associated with investment in foreign currency denominated investments; and
- Does not address Australian tax issues.